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Foreign Affairs and the 2008 Election

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Foreign Affairs and the 2008 Election*

Robert P. Saldin

Abstract

Much of the commentary in the wake of last month's presidential election has focused on the magnitude and historic aspects of Barack Obama's victory and the deteriorating economic environment in which it played out. Little thought has been given to the influence of foreign affairs in the election. Yet even in this year's contest, which appears to lend considerable support to economic-based theories of elections, international events clearly played an important role by shaping the nomination process for both major parties and in Obama's selection of Joseph Biden as his running mate.

KEYWORDS: election, parties, war, foreign policy

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Much of the commentary in the wake of last month's presidential election has focused on the historic aspects of the victory by Democrat Barack Obama over Republican John McCain, the magnitude of this victory, and the deteriorating economic environment in which the election played out. Little thought has been given to the role of foreign affairs. This oversight is not unexpected because, by and large, the literature on American politics assigns to foreign affairs a minimal role in influencing election outcomes. Instead, long-term factors such as party identification or social characteristics are frequently cited as vote determinants. The only *issue* that is consistently said to be relevant in the voting booth is the domestic economy.

Given this body of scholarly knowledge, it is quite a surprise that politicians seeking federal office, especially presidential candidates, spend so much time talking about foreign affairs. An approach more firmly rooted in the academic literature might involve dispensing with non-economic issues altogether—especially international issues. The political scientist-cum-campaign advisor might suggest doing only three things: manipulating data to paint an appropriately dire or robust picture of the nation's economic health, rallying the candidate's fellow partisans, and mobilizing voters possessing certain demographic attributes. Alas, few political scientists manage campaigns, so we cannot directly test their theories. While politicians certainly do engage in the activities scholars might recommend, they also spend an inordinate amount of time discussing all kinds of issues, including foreign affairs, as if these things mattered. Perhaps there is an explanation for this behavior.

I argue here that the elections literature is incomplete because it does not take foreign affairs seriously. Much of this oversight is due to the purpose of this flagship political science subfield. While the elections literature comprises some of the best political science research, its effort to identify the consistent and on-going patterns that can routinely be expected to explain electoral outcomes has obscured the important role that international events frequently play. I demonstrate the importance of foreign policy by tracing its role in the 2008 election. Even in this campaign, which on its surface appears to lend considerable support to the economic-based theories of elections, international events clearly played an important role.

Traditional Assessments of Campaigns and Elections in America

While there is significant disagreement over what factors shape voter choice, the overwhelming academic consensus is that foreign affairs have little or no influence on elections. The public is thought to possess scant information, hold few opinions, and be generally indifferent to international issues. One major strand of election studies maintains that timely issues of any sort are relatively unimportant. The "Michigan School" holds that voters have long-standing

judgments about the parties based on issues, events, and candidates from previous elections and that these long term factors—as opposed to issues specific to a campaign—determine voters’ partisan identification and decisions in the voting booth.¹ The rival “Columbia School” contends that social characteristics, including race, class, religion, and gender, are the most reliable determinants of the vote.² Incumbency is also often cited as an important factor in voter choice, particularly in congressional elections.³

A second major strand within the elections literature argues that voter assessments regarding the state of the economy determine election outcomes.⁴ While the economy as an issue dominates this branch of the literature, other domestic issues like abortion or gays in the military occasionally receive some attention.⁵ Richard G. Niemi and Herbert F. Weisberg summarize this body of work as follows: “many economic voting models include little else in the way of candidate or noneconomic issue factors, as if they were of little importance. When other variables...are included, it is sometimes pointed out that those ‘control’ variables are themselves influenced by economic factors.”⁶ This elections literature has only occasionally acknowledged foreign affairs, usually with

¹ See, for example: Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960). Larry M. Bartels, “Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952-1996,” *American Journal of Political Science* (2000) 44: 35-50. Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

² See, for instance: Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954). Barbara Norrander, “The Evolution of the Gender Gap,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1990) 54: 566-576. Geoffrey C. Layman, “Religion and Political Behavior in the United States: The Impact of Beliefs, Affiliations, and Commitment from 1980 to 1994,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1997) 61: 288-316. Herbert F. Weisberg, “The Demographics of a New Voting Gap: Marital Differences in American Voting,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1987) 51: 335-343.

³ Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 4th ed. (Boston: Longman, 1997). David R. Mayhew, “Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Presidential Elections: The Historical Record,” *Political Science Quarterly* 123:2 (2008), 201-28.

⁴ For example: Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). Richard Nadeau and Michael Lewis-Beck, “National Economic Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections,” *Journal of Politics* (2001) 63: 159-181.

⁵ For instance: Alan I. Abramowitz, “It’s Abortion, Stupid: Policy Voting in the 1992 Presidential Election,” *Journal of Politics* (1995) 57: 176-186. Alvarez and Nagler, “Economics, Entitlements, and Social Issues: Voter Choice in the 1996 Presidential Election,” *American Journal of Political Science* (1998) 42: 1349-1363. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁶ Richard G. Niemi and Herbert F. Weisberg, “What Determines the Vote,” *Controversies in Voting Behavior*, Niemi and Weisberg, eds. (Washington: CQ Press, 2001), 185.

reference to the Korean or Vietnam wars.⁷ But even in these rare instances, foreign affairs play a minor and idiosyncratic role and do not challenge the general consensus that the international realm is unimportant in the voting booth.⁸

Yet foreign affairs have frequently had significant ramifications on Election Day. International issues were consistently important from 1940 until the end of the Cold War. Their influence could be seen not only in campaign discourse and issue polling, but also in the emphasis voters placed on character traits like leadership and firmness, which served as proxies for assessments of how candidates would handle hostile foreign leaders.⁹

In addition, the electoral importance of foreign affairs has been especially evident during and immediately after America's major wars. Throughout U.S. history, wars have always been contentious and part of partisan rancor. The Spanish-American War was a major force in the 1898 and 1900 elections. In 1898, the GOP rode a wave of patriotism and, bolstered by the victory tour of President William McKinley, made a strong showing in that year's midterm election in what otherwise would almost certainly have been a rough political climate. Two years later, the war-spurred issue of imperialism played a central role in the campaign. Similarly, World War I was the primary issue in the 1918 and 1920 elections. In the first of those contests, the ruling Democrats lost both houses of Congress. The Midwest, home to most of the German-Americans who were heavily repressed during the war, experienced a dramatic swing towards the

⁷ Steven J. Rosenstone, *Forecasting Presidential Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). C.W. Ostrom, Jr. and D.M. Simon, "Promise and Performance: A Dynamic Model of Presidential Popularity," *American Political Science Review* (1985) 79: 334-358. Stephen Hess and Michael Nelson, "Foreign Policy: Dominance and Decisiveness in Presidential Elections," *The Elections of 1984*, Nelson, ed. (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1985). Miller and Shanks, "Policy Directions and Presidential Leadership: Alternative Interpretations of the 1980 Presidential Elections," *British Journal of Political Science* 12 (1982): 266-356. Norman H. Nie, Sydney Verba, and John R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy," *American Political Science Review* 77 (1983): 175-90. Gerald M. Pomper, "From Confusion to Clarity: Issues and American Voters, 1956-1968," *American Political Science Review* 66 (1972): 415-28. Campbell, et.al, 49-50, 75, 135, and 546.

⁸ A small group of dissenters have challenged these views. The best overall counterargument is: John H. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida, "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates 'Waltz Before a Blind Audience?'," *American Political Science Review* 83:1 (1989): 123-141. For similar findings about the 2000 presidential election, see: Sowmya Anand and Jon A. Krosnick, "The Impact of Attitudes toward Foreign Policy Goals on Public Preferences among Presidential Candidates: A Study of Issue Publics and the Attentive Public in the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33:1 (2003): 31-71. For 1980 and 1984: Miroslav Nincic and Barbara Hinckley, "Foreign Policy and the Evaluation of Presidential Candidates," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35:2 (1991): 333-355.

⁹ James W. Ceaser and Andrew E. Busch, *Red Over Blue: The 2004 Elections and American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 14.

GOP. In the 1920 election, the war and its lingering effects gave the Republicans unified control of government in one of the biggest landslides in history.¹⁰ Likewise, World War II factored heavily in the 1940 and 1944 elections by, among other things, encouraging Franklin Roosevelt to break the two-term tradition.¹¹

The Cold War conflicts in Korea and Vietnam also had a demonstrable electoral influence. In the 1952 election, pitting Dwight Eisenhower against Adlai Stevenson, the war was the campaign's primary issue, and public opinion polling indicates that Ike benefited at those points in the campaign when other issues were obscured. In 1968, the Vietnam War played a major role in forcing President Lyndon Johnson to abandon his hopes for reelection and in weakening the eventual Democratic nominee, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who was seen as an opponent of what by then had become a substantial anti-war wing of the party. In a political season overshadowed by Vietnam, Republican Richard Nixon won a general election that saw Democrats take a massive plunge in their popular support (relative to the previous presidential election) that can only be compared to the GOP's 1912 and 1932 debacles. Four years later, in the first nomination contest under the new primary system, Democrats, then under the control of the anti-war New Politics faction, selected the ideologically extreme George McGovern.¹²

In sum, these cases suggest that foreign affairs can play a pivotal role in elections. Many political scientists are wary of exploring contingent events like wars, preferring instead to focus on underlying or long-term factors. This approach is, of course, perfectly appropriate to address many questions. Yet as David Mayhew argues, it can also lead to "blinker[ed] explanation[s]... We pay a considerable price as would-be explainers of politics by ignoring... events as causes... [and] contingency. Many events are contingent, and in the real world unexpected happenings are powerful engines of political change."¹³ This hesitancy to deal with contingent events, along with the focus on understanding election outcomes by way of consistent, long-term factors, explains the relative

¹⁰ Robert P. Saldin, *War and American Political Development: Parties, State Building, and Democratic Rights Policy*, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Politics, University of Virginia, 2008.

¹¹ Mayhew, "Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Presidential Elections: The Historical Record," 226-8.

¹² Saldin. Many argue that Humphrey might have won in 1968 if he had forcefully broken with Johnson's Vietnam policy. See, for instance: Lee Sigelman and Emmett Buell, *Attack Politics: Negativity in Presidential Campaigns Since 1960* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1968), 97-101.

¹³ Mayhew, "Events as Causes: The Case of American Politics," *Political Contingency: Studying the Unexpected, the Accidental, and the Unforeseen*, Ian Shapiro and Sonu Bedi, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 100, 120.

lack of attention that these major wars, and foreign affairs in general, have received in the political science elections literature. The 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington—a contingent event, if ever there was one—and the resulting military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with changes in national security policy at home, are deserving of more attention than current election models and forecasts afford.

Campaigns and Elections in Post-9/11 America

To understand fully the 2008 election, some context is helpful. Four national elections—two midterms and two presidential—have been held since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. While it may be an overstatement to claim, as some have, that 9/11 “changed everything,” it is undeniable that the events of that day profoundly influenced each federal election held since.¹⁴ Following the Cold War, foreign policy and national security concerns decreased in importance. While foreign affairs received routine attention in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 elections, it was generally an afterthought for the American public. Not surprisingly, Democrats fared better in an electoral arena in which national security, a traditional Republican strong suit, was minimized and economic and welfare issues, Democratic strengths, were elevated. These domestically oriented elections saw Bill Clinton win two relatively easy victories and Al Gore carry the popular vote even while being denied the White House. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, brought foreign affairs and national security back to the forefront of American electoral politics.

If House Speaker “Tip” O’Neill was correct that “all politics is local,” the American public forgot that lesson in 2002, 2004, and 2006, when all politics was international. The only two post-9/11 midterms were effectively nationalized and focused on foreign policy. In the first instance, Republicans successfully used national security concerns, a popular president, and anticipation of a war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq to pick up eight House seats and two Senate seats. These gains marked only the second time since 1894 that the party controlling the White House gained seats in both congressional chambers.¹⁵

Similarly, the 2006 midterms were successfully nationalized, this time by the Democrats, and featured a relentless focus on what at the time appeared to be an inevitable failure in Iraq and what quite obviously was an unpopular president.

¹⁴ George W. Bush, “President Bush and Prime Minister Allawi Press Conference,” *The White House*, 23 Sept. 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/09/20040923-8.html>. Richard Cheney, “Remarks by the Vice President,” *The White House* 23 Dec. 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/12/20031223-1.html>.

¹⁵ The other was 1932. In 1998 President Clinton’s Democrats gained five House seats but there was no change in the Senate’s partisan composition.

Shortly before the election, one poll found that when voters were asked which issues were “extremely important,” “the situation in Iraq” ranked first with 49%, followed by “terrorism” at 46%, the economy with 33%, illegal immigration at 29%, and moral issues with 20%.¹⁶ More than anything else, Democratic gains of 31 seats in the House and six seats in the Senate—sufficient to claim control of both chambers for the first time in 12 years—were owed to Democratic promises to end the war in Iraq.¹⁷

The first presidential election after 9/11 was also dominated by foreign affairs and national security. Both candidates structured their campaigns around these issues. Lacking what was then considered to be President George W. Bush’s credibility on foreign affairs, Democrat John Kerry, in “reporting for duty,” spent much of his time emphasizing his strong leadership credentials, rooted in his Vietnam service.¹⁸ In arguing that Iraq was “the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time,” as well as a distraction from the more important War on Terror, Kerry hoped to establish himself as a tough, viable alternative to the sitting wartime president.¹⁹ The Republican campaign was similarly focused on defending what it saw as the inseparable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kerry’s “flip-flopping” positions on national security, and his lack of commitment to fighting terrorism.²⁰

Exit polls also demonstrated the importance of national security and foreign affairs. 34% of voters cited national security issues as most important, compared to 25% for economic issues, 20% for moral issues, and 12% for welfare issues. While some Democrats argued that moral issues were the most important factor, this claim failed to hold up under close inspection and had, in the analysis of James W. Ceaser and Andrew E. Busch, more to do with “the psychological wish many had to believe that the election was determined by millions upon millions of evangelical voters who had turned out in a fit of primitive prejudice.”²¹

¹⁶ “Issues,” *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/special/issues/>.

¹⁷ Ceaser and Daniel DiSalvo, “Midterm Elections, Partisan Context, and Political Leadership: The 2006 Elections and Party Alignment,” *The Forum* 4:3 (2006), <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol14/iss3/art11>, 8.

¹⁸ John Kerry, “Acceptance Speech at the Democratic National Convention,” *Washington Post*, 29 July 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A25678-2004Jul29.html>.

¹⁹ David M. Halbfinger and David F. Sanger, “Bush and Kerry Clash Over Iraq and a Timetable,” *New York Times*, 7 Sept. 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/07/politics/campaign/07campaign.html>.

²⁰ Ceaser and Busch, 7-8.

²¹ Ceaser and Busch, 15. See also: Paul Freedman, “The Gay Marriage Myth: Terrorism, Not Values, Drove Bush’s Re-election,” *Slate* 5 Nov. 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2109275/>. For an alternative view, see: Garry Wills, “The Day the Enlightenment Went Out,” *New York Times*, 4 Nov. 2004,

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE2DA173CF937A35752C1A9629C8B63>.

In sum, the first three post-9/11 elections were nationalized around foreign affairs and national security. It is clear that these issues had forcefully returned to American elections after more than a decade's hiatus. In 2002 and 2004, this issue frame favored Republicans. Yet by 2006, the failure to find weapons of mass destruction and the appearance of a quagmire in Iraq provoked a sharp rebuke to Bush and the GOP.

The 2008 Campaign and Election

On election night in 2006, many anticipated a quick end to the Iraq War under the new Democratic Congress. It would have been a shock to hear a time traveler's report that, despite a continuing conflict involving an even larger American troop commitment, the final weeks of the 2008 election would be waged on something other than the same foreign affairs turf that had dominated the other post-9/11 campaigns. However, the 2008 general election will likely be remembered primarily (in addition to the demographic barriers that Obama's victory shattered) for the economic context in which it was held. Two factors contributed to this situation.

The most important of these was the stunning success of the troop "surge" that only President Bush could have anticipated. Effectively nullifying the Democrats' election victory and their mandate for withdrawal, Bush adopted the opposite strategy by sending additional troops to Iraq. The new approach engineered by General David Petraeus proved effective, and violence subsided dramatically. This newfound stability, in turn, allowed for a political process to take root and for the development of the Iraqi Security Forces. It also took Iraq largely out of the equation for the 2008 election. The second factor was the U.S. economy's rapid decline. The full extent of the problem was not apparent until Lehman Brothers collapsed on September 15, and a panic ensued. No previous American presidential election had been held amidst such conditions.

Yet, even as the downturn in Iraqi violence allowed the American public to turn its attention to the downturn in the domestic economy, foreign affairs and national security still played a significant, though often overlooked, role in the campaign. Indeed, the nominations of Obama and McCain are difficult to imagine in an Iraq-free context. In addition, Obama's selection of Joseph Biden as his vice presidential running mate was predicated largely on the Delaware Senator's extensive background in foreign affairs and national security. Finally, despite all the economic upheaval and baggage from the unpopular Bush presidency, McCain, running largely on his foreign policy credentials, kept the election close and was actually ahead in September's polls, until the nation's economic situation became extremely dire.

Obama's Nomination

As many commentators noted during the fall campaign, Obama almost certainly would not have received the Democratic presidential nomination without his unique position on the Iraq War.²² Among the top-tier candidates, only Obama could claim consistent opposition to the conflict. Biden, Hillary Clinton, Christopher Dodd, and John Edwards had all cast Senate votes authorizing the use of force against Iraq in 2002, and Bill Richardson had vocally supported it. At the time, the American public was strongly supportive of Bush's policy, too, but by 2008 scarcely any Democratic primary voters approved of the war. This shift in public opinion put all the credible candidates except Obama in the awkward position of having to justify their initial support for an unpopular war. Quick to anticipate this problem and adept at changing positions to reflect current trends, Edwards toured the country to apologize for his vote, while less malleable candidates like Clinton and Biden focused instead on determining a practical policy to bring the war to a satisfactory and speedy conclusion.²³

Only Obama had the credibility of having opposed the war from the start. Among other things, this distinction helped him garner significant attention early in the process, raise money amongst his party's liberal base, and argue that he alone had had the good judgment to oppose the war.²⁴ This argument was especially critical to his candidacy because it was an effective way to undercut his primary weakness: a lack of experience. The Obama campaign contrasted his good judgment with the other candidates' extensive experience in making bad decisions, a comparison that complimented the campaign's themes of "Hope" and "Change." The war issue was also critical in the Iowa Caucus, the most important contest for Obama. Despite signs of the surge's success and a noticeably sagging economy, caucus goers in the Hawkeye State ranked Iraq and the economy as equally important in exit polls, far exceeding other issues.²⁵

Clearly, other factors were also at work in the Democratic nomination process. Obama's ability to inspire voters is rare, and he put together an outstanding campaign staff and fund-raising operation. In addition, Clinton's campaign failed to prepare for caucuses or a long nomination fight and was

²² See, for instance: Chuck Todd, *Meet the Press* 14 Sept. 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26702299/>.

²³ John Edwards, "The Right Way in Iraq," *Washington Post* 13 Nov. 2005, B7. Alexander Bolton, "Edwards Sees Apologies as Effective Strategy but Experts say Tactic Risky," *The Hill* 6 Dec. 2007, http://thehill.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=70138. Joseph Biden and Leslie H. Gelb, "Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq," *New York Times* 1 May 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/01/opinion/01biden.html>.

²⁴ "Obama: Early Opposition to War Shows Better Judgment," *CNN* 2 Oct. 2007, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/10/02/obama.iraq/index.html>.

²⁵ "Exit Polls: Iowa – Democrats," *MSNBC*, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21225980/>.

plagued by infighting.²⁶ But it is unlikely that any of this would have made a difference in an Iraq-free context. Clinton herself has cited Iraq as the reason for her failure to win the Democratic nomination.²⁷ In sum, the war provided Obama with what every non-front-runner needs: an opening that allowed his or her talents to be noticed.

McCain's Nomination

With President Bush ineligible to run for reelection, Vice President Dick Cheney uninterested, and conservative golden boy George Allen defeated and disgraced in his Senate reelection campaign of 2006, the Republican party's nomination was wide open with no clear favorite. Former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani held the lead in early polling, but his socially liberal views were anathema to much of the GOP's base. Former governors Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney were popular in some quarters, but had their own liabilities. An evangelical, Huckabee was a favorite amongst social conservatives but his economic populism seemed to place him closer in proximity to Rust Belt Democrats than supply-side economists. Romney, meanwhile, appeared presidential but had a well-earned reputation for changing his positions for political expediency and was subject to anti-Mormon sentiment.

McCain had plenty of name recognition but also faced intra-party misgivings. A self-styled "maverick" and media favorite, the Arizona Senator was not considered trustworthy by conservatives for, among other things, his role in campaign finance reform, his opposition to some of Bush's tax cuts, and his advocacy for a significantly less stringent reform package on immigration than many conservatives preferred. Moreover, McCain's campaign almost ended before it began. In July 2007, key staffers departed after dismal fund-raising and lavish spending had left the campaign nearly bankrupt.

While many factors contributed to the eventual nominee's success, McCain would not have won without the Iraq issue. Most importantly, McCain's steadfast support of the troop surge during the war's most demoralizing period, gave him immense credibility amongst an otherwise wary Republican base. Aside from the largely discredited Bush administration, McCain was—perhaps along with his Democratic ally Joseph Lieberman—the most prominent and vocal supporter of the surge. His repeated assertion that he would "rather lose an election than lose a war" cast McCain as a determined and principled champion of

²⁶ Joshua Green, "The Front-Runner's Fall," *The Atlantic* (Sept. 2008), <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200809/hillary-clinton-campaign>.

²⁷ Robert Novak, "In Iraq and Under the Spotlight," *Washington Post* 21 July 2008, A15.

what was an initially widely disparaged but ultimately successful strategy.²⁸ Many observers and Republican commentators cited this single issue as the explanation for McCain's primary triumph.²⁹ In the words of conservative columnist and former Bush speech writer Michael Gerson, "McCain's come-from-behind nomination victory would have been inconceivable without this prophetic achievement.... [He] won the nomination of his party, in large part, as a vindicated prophet."³⁰

Biden's Selection

The importance of foreign affairs was also evident in Obama's selection of Delaware Senator and primary rival Joseph Biden as his vice-presidential nominee. Running mates generally fall into one of two categories, both of which are designed to increase the chances of electoral success. Occasionally, presidential nominees choose someone similar to themselves in an effort to highlight perceived strengths. Bill Clinton, for instance, employed this strategy when he picked Al Gore, another young Southern moderate. But most of the time, presidential nominees look to balance their ticket by selecting a running mate who shores up a perceived weakness. Thus the relatively inexperienced, Catholic Northerner, John Kennedy selected the long-serving, Protestant Southerner, Lyndon Johnson; similarly Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis chose Texan and Capitol Hill insider Lloyd Bentsen.

From this balancing perspective, Lee Sigelman and Paul J. Wahlbeck found that the main considerations in selecting running mates include: region, demographics, religion, age, political experience, ideology, status as a former primary rival, and home-state size.³¹ The importance of each factor varies based on the characteristics of potential running mates and on the presidential nominee's strengths and weaknesses. In any case, Biden filled many of these balancing criteria. As a white male, Biden was considered a safe choice because of a widespread concern among liberals that America "wasn't ready" simultaneously

²⁸ Jonathan Martin, "Win the Battle, Lose the Election?," *Politico* 10 April 2007, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0407/3473.html>.

²⁹ See, for instance: Fred Barnes, "A McCain Surge? Defending the Iraq War is his Best Shot," *The Weekly Standard* 23 April 2007, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/013/521wqdnq.asp>.
"McCain's Surge: Why He's Making a Primary Comeback," *Wall Street Journal* (editorial) 18 Dec. 2007, <http://www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110011007>.
Rich Lowry, "McCain Surge," *National Review* 4 Jan. 2008, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=MTkyZTQ5NmNIMDA2MTA1ZWwNGRINjllZDnkN2JkNWY=>.

³⁰ Michael Gerson, "Casualty of the Surge," *Washington Post* 24 Oct. 2008, A19.

³¹ Sigelman and Paul J. Wahlbeck, "The 'Veepstakes': Strategic Choice in Presidential Running Mate Selection," *American Political Science Review* 91:4 (1997), 855-64.

to elect a black male president and another racial minority or a woman vice president. Biden had also been a primary rival, represented a small state compared to Obama's Illinois, and was generally perceived as more of a centrist. But, by far, his most obvious strength as a ticket-balancer lay in his political knowledge of foreign policy and national security.

Biden's 35-year tenure on Capitol Hill, foreign affairs expertise, and longtime service as chair and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee stood in stark contrast to Obama's short stint in Washington and near total lack of foreign policy credentials. Obama's inexperience in this realm was thought to be a particular liability because of the on-going wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the broader War on Terror, and McCain's vast experience in this area. Biden's selection was viewed almost completely through this lens by the media and various commentators.³² Like Obama's summer visit to Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, Biden's selection helped the Democratic nominee surpass the foreign policy threshold that presidential candidates frequently have to meet in times of international turmoil.

Conclusion

It is worth remembering that John McCain was actually ahead in the national polls prior to the bottom dropping out of the economy on September 15. Following the Republican National Convention on September 1-4, McCain took a ten-day lead in polling. On September 2, Obama held a 6.4% advantage. But on September 7, McCain gained the upper hand and held it—topping out at a 2.9% edge—until Obama regained the lead on September 17 and never looked back.³³ It is remarkable that McCain was so competitive in a political environment in which 75% of voters thought the country was going in the wrong direction.³⁴ Once the economy crashed so precipitously, McCain was clearly at a severe disadvantage.

For a candidate whose strengths lay in foreign affairs, who—months before the economic meltdown materialized—publicly said that “I am not an expert” on the economy, and whose party controlled the White House, the turn of events was, to say the least, unfortunate. In addition, McCain's greatest argument,

³² For example: Adam Nagourney and Jeff Zeleny, “Obama's Pick Adds Foreign Expertise to Ticket,” *New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2008, A1. Michael Kranish, “Foreign Policy got Biden the VP Nod,” *The Boston Globe*, 24 Aug. 2008, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/08/24/foreign_policy_got_biden_the_vp_nod/?page=full.

³³ “RCP Poll Average: General Election: McCain vs. Obama,” *Real Clear Politics*, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2008/president/us/general_election_mccain_vs_obama-225.html.

³⁴ “Exit Polls: President, National Exit Poll,” *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#val=USP00p6>.

that he had been honorably right about the surge while Obama (and nearly everyone else) had been wrong, fell victim to its own success. As soon as the public realized that Iraq had stabilized, foreign policy subsided as an electoral issue. The only lingering effect was President Bush's historically low approval rating (owed considerably to his Iraq policy), which constituted an unwelcome association for McCain and a perpetual drag on his candidacy.

The extent to which the economy had come to dominate the campaign in its final weeks was evident when much of the first presidential debate on September 26, which was slated to be focused on foreign affairs, was spent discussing the economic panic.³⁵ Exit polls indicate that, not surprisingly, the economy was the most important issue to 63% of voters and that, among this cohort, 53% supported Obama while 44% backed McCain. In the midst of an economic freefall and short of a national security crisis, it could hardly have been otherwise. Nonetheless, the exit polls still indicate that Iraq ranked as the second most important issue (10%) to voters, while terrorism tied with health care for third (9%). Those citing Iraq as the most important issue favored Obama 59% to 39%, while McCain carried voters most concerned about terrorism 86% to 13%.³⁶

Nonetheless, foreign affairs still played a significant role in the 2008 election. It was arguably the most important factor in determining the major party nominees. Without their stances on the Iraq War, it is unlikely that either Obama or McCain would have carried their party banners in the fall. In addition, foreign policy considerations were central to Obama's selection of Biden. Like his summer visit to the Middle East, the Biden choice lent Obama foreign policy credibility, helping him to pass that critical litmus test presidential candidates face in times of international unrest.

Thus, like the elections of 2002, 2004, 2006—and numerous pre-September 11th elections—2008's contest was influenced by foreign affairs. However, unlike many of these previous cases, the most important issue in the 2008 general election was clearly the economy, particularly once the ugly specter of the economic crisis fully emerged in mid-September. This election, then, largely conforms to some of the expectations established in the classic political science literature on elections. Yet to categorize the 2008 contest exclusively in this manner obscures not only the role foreign affairs played in the campaign, but also the way in which most Americans experienced it. Although the general election's final stages focused on the economy, foreign affairs set the agenda and played a pivotal role early in the campaign.

³⁵ "The First McCain-Obama Presidential Debate: Debate Transcript," *Commission on Presidential Debates* 26 Sept. 2008, <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2008a.html>.

³⁶ "Exit Polls: President, National Exit Poll," *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#val=USP00p6>.