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# The Last Waltz?: Foreign Policy Attitudes in the 1992 Presidential Election

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## ABSTRACT

*Despite the fact that presidential candidates devote considerable attention to international issues, the conventional wisdom for many years has been that the American electorate lacks the information and attitudes necessary to form meaningful opinions on foreign policy, to distinguish between the candidates' positions on such issues, or to vote on the basis of such issues. In this study, NES data are used to assess public attitudes toward the major party candidates in the 1992 presidential election and to determine whether the conditions for issue voting were present in that election. Our findings indicate that while the electorate in 1992 did in fact perceive differences between the candidates on foreign policy issues, such concerns had seemingly lost salience among voters following the conclusion of the Cold War.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

For many years the popular scholarly presumption was that while presidential candidates devoted considerable energies and attention to the discussion and elaboration of foreign policy issues, the electorate as a whole lacked the information and the attitudes necessary for these issues to significantly affect voting behavior. As a result, most studies of public opinion and voting tended to focus on domestic issues, dismissing the fact that presidential candidates typically devote considerable attention to foreign policy issues and positions in their campaigns. Subsequent research, however, has found that in recent elections a significant portion of the voting public in fact does display consistent attitudes on foreign and defense policies and that many voters do perceive clear differences between the candidates on these types of issues, at least in some elections.

There is cause to believe, however, that for a number of reasons these findings might not have held true in the 1992 presidential election between the major party candidates George Bush and Bill Clinton. Although Bush was widely hailed as a competent and effective foreign policy leader, popular discontent and general concern over the state of the sluggish economy seemed to overshadow the foreign

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policy successes of the president's first term, while Governor Clinton effectively precluded a campaign fought on international issues by largely adopting the same foreign policy positions as his opponent. Perhaps most importantly, with the stunning success of the Persian Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union the previous year, foreign policy issues simply may not have had the salience among the electorate that they had had in prior elections.

Was foreign policy a salient issue in the 1992 election, were there perceived differences among the electorate between the two major candidates, a quintessential cold warrior and a baby boomer that had avoided service in Vietnam? Or, as was the case in 1976, were foreign policy considerations muted by the similarities between the candidates' foreign policy positions and the apparent primacy of domestic and economic policy concerns in 1992? This paper will attempt to address these concerns, employing the 1992 National Election Survey data to ascertain the extent and importance of foreign policy attitudes among the American electorate in the 1990s.

## II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Prior to the 1980s, most research on the role of issues in presidential elections had tended to discount the importance of foreign policy. One study in 1949 concluded that approximately thirty percent of the electorate was unaware of foreign policy issues, while forty-five percent were aware but unable to formulate their own opinions on these issues and twenty-five percent were reasonably conversant with the issues in question (Almond 1950). A later study estimated the size of these categories more pessimistically, at seventy-five percent, fifteen to twenty percent, and five to ten percent respectively (Rosenau 1961). Kagay and Caldeira (1975) concluded that foreign policy had a significant effect in the election of 1972, minor effects in 1952 and 1956, and virtually no impact between 1960 and 1972, while Hess and Nelson (1985) determined that only in the elections of 1952, 1972, and 1980 did foreign policy issues play a significant role in electoral outcomes. Page and Brody (1972) noted that the electorate was quite capable of voting on the basis of foreign policy issues provided that the candidates take clear and divergent positions, a requirement they determined had not been met in 1968.

Hess and Nelson (1985) also found, however, that in virtually all recent elections, the candidates have devoted considerable energies to elucidating their foreign policy positions despite the electorate's apparent lack of interest, suggesting that presidential candidates either misunderstand the concerns of voters or that previous research has underestimated the degree of public interest in foreign affairs. Indeed, some research has suggested that the voting public is in fact quite interested in foreign policy and that these issues do indeed affect the outcomes of elections (Pomper 1972; Petrocik 1976; Miller and Wattenberg 1981; Miller and Shanks 1982; Page and Shapiro 1983; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Kessel 1988). Nevertheless, the prevailing scholarly wisdom in recent years has remained that foreign policy issues



are rarely consequential in the voting booth given that the voting public possessed little information and few attitudes about foreign affairs, and that such issues rarely affected their daily lives.

In order to re-address this issue and to ascertain whether or not foreign policy attitudes played a role in presidential elections, Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida (1989) analyzed data from the 1980 and 1984 National Election Surveys, as well as a 1984 Gallup survey. Using Angus Campbell's (1961) preconditions for issue voting - that the issue must (1) be cognized, (2) arouse some affect, and (3) be accompanied by the perception that one party or candidate best represents the respondent's position - Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida (1989) used a seven-point issue scale and demonstrated that, for a substantial portion of the electorate, foreign policy attitudes were as available and accessible as domestic policy attitudes, and that these attitudes affected voting behavior in the 1980 and 1984 elections.

Given then that foreign policy attitudes do exist among the general electorate, Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida (1989) sought to ascertain whether such attitudes are accessible or salient during presidential election campaigns; are foreign policy issues stressed by the media and the campaigns themselves? Toward this end, Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida (1989) presented data from the 1980 and 1984 NES survey and the 1984 Gallup surveys that asked respondents what they thought was "the most important problem facing the country today" or "the most important political problem facing them personally." More than a third of respondents in both surveys selected foreign or defense issues as the most important problems facing the country in 1980 and 1984, suggesting a degree of salience that previous scholarship had overlooked. Furthermore, similar findings in other election years seem to indicate that, except for the 1973-1979 period, foreign affairs have been a major concern of much of the electorate since World War II. Campbell's final precondition for issue-voting - a perception of a difference between the candidates or the parties - was satisfied through an examination of the median perceptions on the candidates' positions on foreign/defense issues and on domestic issues. To varying degrees, the authors did find that respondents perceived greater differences between the candidates on foreign/defense issues than on domestic issues in the 1980 and 1984 issues.

With Campbell's preconditions satisfied, the authors used probit analysis to ascertain the impact of four independent variables - domestic policy issues, foreign policy issues, party identification, and candidate evaluation - on the dependent variable, whether the respondent voted for the Republican or Democratic candidate for president. Strong relationships were found for all four independent variables, further suggesting that the electorate does indeed consider foreign policy issues during elections. The authors then presented a fourfold election typology based on two dimensions: the degree of emphasis on foreign and defense policies, and the differences between the candidates on these issues. The importance of foreign policy issues in particular elections then would be determined by the degree to which foreign policy issues were emphasized by the candidates, and the distinctiveness of

the candidates' positions on these issues. Based on this typology, Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida (1989) found that foreign policy issues played an important role in the elections of 1972, 1980, and 1984, while they had little importance in the 1976 election.

### III. ATTITUDES IN THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Again, there are reasons to believe that the election of 1992 more closely resembled that of 1976 in the generally low degree of salience afforded to foreign policy issues. Despite President Bush's foreign policy successes, the Clinton campaign avoided competing with the incumbent on this front and instead capitalized on public disaffection with the state of the economy and other domestic concerns; except for minor differences over foreign policy toward Haiti, China, and the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, the Clinton and Bush campaigns differed little in regard to the major foreign policy issues of the day. In addition, the quixotic campaign of Texas billionaire Ross Perot focused primarily on public concerns over the federal budget deficit and served to further distract the electorate from foreign issues. Because the candidates displayed few substantive differences on the foreign policy issues of the day and campaigned primarily on domestic issues, and because there were no major "intermestic" issues - foreign issues with major domestic components, such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Iran hostage crisis, or the Cold War - foreign policy issues were likely to be relatively muted and inaccessible to the general electorate.

To assess the degree to which these conditions held true in 1992, data were analyzed from the 1992 National Election Survey in order to establish whether foreign policy attitudes were as available as attitudes on domestic issues, as they had been in Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida's examination of the 1980, 1984, and 1988 elections. Campbell's (1961) preconditions for issue voting were tested for foreign and domestic policy issues through the use of seven-point scales; unfortunately, only one such foreign policy issue question, on defense spending, was included in the 1992 NES data, while two domestic issue questions, on social welfare spending and whether or not the government should provide all citizens with jobs, were included. Although our initial results then are unlikely to be conclusive given the scarcity of information on foreign and domestic issue attitudes available in the NES data, they should provide us with at least preliminary indicators as to the importance of foreign policy issues and attitudes in 1992.

Campbell's (1961) conditions for issue voting in 1992 then were measured cumulatively using these three NES issue scales. First, the percentage of respondents able to place themselves on each issue scale was determined, then the percentage able to place both major party nominees on the same scale and the percentage able to differentiate between the positions of the two candidates. The final condition was measured by examining the percentage of respondents able to place the Democratic candidate at a more liberal position on the issue scale than the



Republican candidate. Taken together, these four indices suggest that the issues measured have salience within the electorate, while the final two measures satisfy the issue voting condition that the respondents must believe that one of the two candidates better represents his or her position on the issue in question.

Table 1: Average Percentages Meeting Issue Voting Criteria

Issue Scale	Placed Self On Scale	Placed Self & Both Candidates	Placed Self & Saw Difference Between Candidates	Placed Self & Saw Democrat as more liberal
<b>1992</b>				
Foreign (1)	86.9%	69.2%	59.6%	51.8%
Domestic (2)	84.5%	68.7%	57.9%	49.8%
Avg. Difference	2.4%	0.5%	1.7%	2%
<b>1988</b>				
Foreign (2)	84.6%	65.2%	52.9%	42.9%
Domestic (5)	85.6%	63.2%	49.6%	34%
Avg. Difference	-1%	2%	3.3%	8.9%
<b>1984</b>				
Foreign (3)	83.7%	72.0%	62.8%	54.5%
Domestic (4)	86.4%	75.7%	63.3%	53.2%
Avg. Difference	-2.7%	-3.7%	-0.5%	1.3%
<b>1980</b>				
Foreign (2)	84.8%	70.2%	61.2%	52.6%
Domestic (5)	80.9%	64.1%	53.7%	44.4%
Avg. Difference	3.9%	6.1%	7.5%	8.2%

Table 1 presents these findings for both foreign and domestic policy issues for the 1992 presidential election. As in the 1980, 1984, and 1988 elections, there is no substantial difference between the percentages of respondents able to place themselves on foreign and domestic issues; well over eighty percent were able to do so. However, unlike previous elections in which respondents were in fact more able to satisfy the cumulative conditions in regard to foreign as opposed to domestic

issues, in 1992 there was no appreciable difference between the cumulative percentages of respondents able to place themselves and both candidates, perceive differences between the candidates, and see the Democratic candidate as more liberal, suggesting that foreign policy issue information was as readily available in 1992 as was domestic policy information. However, while the evidence seems to indicate that the electorate was as well informed on foreign issues as they were on domestic issues in 1992, what remains problematic is the extent to which those concerns were salient and important in arriving at voting decisions.

Having established that the electorate did in fact display an awareness of foreign policy issues, as well as differences between the candidates on these issues, during the 1992 campaign, it remains to be seen whether the differences perceived were as great on foreign issues as they were on domestic issues. Such a distinction is obviously a prerequisite for issue voting; not only must attitudes be accessible, but there must also be clear choices between the candidates in order for voters to make voting decisions based on those attitudes.

**Table 2: Average of Median Perceptions of Candidates on Seven-Point Scales**

Issue Scale	Republican Candidate	Democratic Candidate	Difference
<b>1992 (Bush v. Clinton)</b>			
Foreign (1)	5.00	3.00	2.00
Domestic (2)	4.00	3.00	1.00
Difference			1.00
<b>1988 (Bush v. Dukakis)</b>			
Foreign (2)	4.50	3.00	1.50
Domestic (5)	4.40	3.60	1.20
Difference			0.30
<b>1984 (Reagan v. Mondale)</b>			
Foreign (3)	5.56	3.39	2.17
Domestic (4)	4.94	3.05	1.89
Difference			0.28
<b>1980 (Reagan v. Carter)</b>			
Foreign (2)	5.19	3.09	2.10
Domestic (5)	4.67	3.07	1.60
Difference			0.50

Table 2 presents median perceptions of candidate positions on foreign aid and domestic issue scales for the 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992 NES studies. Although our initial hypothesis had been that the electorate would have been unable to perceive significant foreign policy differences between the candidates, the NES



data presented in Table 2 suggests otherwise. As in 1980, 1984, and 1988, the electorate perceived greater differences between the candidates on foreign and defense issues than on domestic issues, and by similar margins; despite Governor Clinton's efforts to present himself as a "New Democrat," the median public perceptions of the foreign and domestic policy differences between Bush and Clinton were virtually identical to the differences perceived between Reagan and Carter in 1980, between Reagan and Mondale in 1984, and between Bush and Dukakis in 1988. Furthermore, in 1992 the electorate perceived greater differences between the two candidates on foreign policy than on domestic policy issues, despite the Clinton campaign's efforts to present a "clear choice" on domestic and economic concerns.

**Table 3: Public's View of Most Important Problem Facing the Nation**

<b>Foreign and Defense</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>Social Issue</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1992</b>
Foreign	24%	26%	4.9%	1.6%	Social Welf	3%	9%	13.9%	13%
Defense	8%	17%	2.7%	0.7%	Public Order	1%	4%	15.5%	7.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>7.6%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	Other	3%	0%	4.8%	2.3%
					<b>Total</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>34.2%</b>	<b>23.2%</b>
<b>Govt. &amp; Econo</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>Govt. Func</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1992</b>
Unemployment	10%	16%	4.1%	18%	All	2%	2%	0.9%	1.7%
Recession					<b>Total</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>
Inflation/ Prices	33%	5%	1.1	0.3%					
Deficit/ Govt. Spending	3%	19%	23.3%	12.4%					
Other	10%	0%	5.9%	18.8%					
<b>Total</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>34.4%</b>	<b>49.5%</b>					

The salience of foreign policy concerns as compared to domestic issues was assessed through the 1992 NES's data on "the most important problem facing the country today," presented in Table 3. Here the contrast between the 1992 election and previous elections is considerably more stark. Whereas in 1980 and 1984 the percentage of respondents citing foreign and defense issues as "most important" was thirty-two percent and thirty-four percent respectively, in 1992 just over two percent of the electorate cited similar concerns, presumably a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Governmental and economic issues were paramount, while concern over social issues appears to have supplanted foreign affairs in 1992, increasing from just seven percent and thirteen percent in 1980 and 1984 respectively to more than forty percent in 1992. For whatever reason, in 1992 concern over foreign affairs appeared to have lost the immediacy that had elevated its importance in previous elections so that, despite the fact that the electorate could



perceive differences between the candidates on foreign policy matters, those issues remained nevertheless tangential to most of the electorate's voting decisions.

These findings are comparable to those of the 1976 election, in which only four percent of the electorate cited a foreign or defense issue as the most important national problem (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1987), raising questions as to the significance of the 1992 election in historical perspective. From the mid-1940s through the mid-1970s, the smallest proportion of the electorate citing foreign and defense issues as the most important problem facing the nation never fell lower than twenty-two percent, suggesting that foreign affairs was a major concern for a substantial proportion of the electorate through the end of the Vietnam War, and only somewhat less so in the 1980s. Was 1992 an atypical outlier, as Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde posited about the 1976 election? Or did the 1992 results portend a break with the past, a return to the isolationist sentiments among the American electorate in the wake of the Cold War that henceforth would preclude the likelihood of future elections being waged on foreign policy grounds? Given the intractable and frustrating nature of the foreign policy issues that the nation has faced since the 1992 election - Somalia, Haiti, the former Yugoslavia - it is conceivable that foreign policy issues may play a relatively less important role in the formulation of voting decisions for the foreseeable future.

#### IV. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE VOTE

Our findings thus far have been mixed. Although, as expected, foreign concerns evidently had little salience among the electorate in 1992, voters apparently were aware of such issues and did perceive significant differences between the candidates' positions on them. In order to further assess the importance of foreign policy issues relative to domestic policy in 1992, regression analyses were conducted employing the three major influences on voting behavior most often cited in previous research; party identification, candidate leadership assessment, and issues. The party identification variable was measured based simply on the standard party identification question included in every NES study, while the candidate leadership assessment was determined by measuring the difference between the perceptions of the two candidates' leadership qualities. Each of the three issue policy questions (defense spending, social spending, and government provision of jobs) was then included in the equation separately. Although Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida (1989) employed as the dependent variable whether the respondent reported voting for the Republican or Democratic candidate, such a dichotomous variable would allow only for the possibility of probit analysis. Instead, so that more precise regression techniques might be employed, a new dependent variable was created by subtracting respondents' thermometer scale assessments of Bush from the same assessments for Clinton; this new continuous variable was then substituted for the vote variable. The following equation can now be estimated:

CANDIDATE EVALUATION = PARTY ID + LEADERSHIP + EVALUATION +  
 DEFENSE SPENDING + SOCIAL SPENDING + GOVT JOBS

Table 4: Regression Estimated Vote Equations, 1992 Presidential Campaign  
 (Dependent Variable = Candidate Evaluation)

Independent Variable	B	Beta	Sig T
Providing Jobs	0.847	0.033	.0000
Defense Spending	2.338	0.072	.0000
Leadership Assessment	63.757	0.442	.0000
Social Spending	-1.270	-0.045	.0000
Party Identification	8.798	0.411	.0000
(Constant)	-33.728		.0000
			.0000
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.661			
Standard Error = 25.803			

The results are reported in Table 4. The overall fit of the model is reasonably impressive with an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.66, and all of the independent variables are significant. However, while comparative evaluations and party identification, as expected, are strongly related to the vote, domestic and foreign issues are less significant, a surprising finding given the prevailing scholarly presumption that the 1992 campaign was heavily issue-oriented; the results were substantially the same even when the domestic policy variables were combined into one variable. Nevertheless, the impact of the foreign policy measure is stronger than that of either of the domestic policy measures, suggesting that foreign policy issues were at least as important as any other issue in the eyes of the voters, although candidate evaluations and party identification were the predominant influence in the voting booth. Of course, the significance of these findings must be weighed against the nature of the NES polling questions employed; none dealt directly with specific foreign policy issues such as Haitian refugees or the civil war in Bosnia, nor did they deal with economic issues *per se*, the primary focus of the Clinton campaign strategy.

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of the Cold War and the results of the 1992 presidential election have fostered considerable media speculation as to the degree of foreign policy salience among the electorate in the 1990s. In announcing his presidential candidacy, Bill Clinton appeared to tap into the concerns of an increasingly isolationist electorate in noting that "the Soviet Union was not defeated on the battlefield...but crumbled from within," and on all but a handful of foreign policy issues the Bush and Clinton positions were almost identical. Although the Bush



White House attempted continually to redirect the focus of the campaign to the president's skill and competence as a diplomatic and military leader, the Clinton campaign effectively resisted such efforts, focusing instead on "the economy, stupid."

Our initial hypothesis, however, has only been partially validated. The 1992 electorate did indeed perceive clear differences between George Bush and Bill Clinton on foreign policy issues; strong majorities of the electorate reported opinions on our foreign policy measure, and a slight majority was able to assess the two candidates' positions correctly as well. In fact, these perceived differences were greater than the perceived differences between the candidates on domestic issues, and were as great as those perceived in the much more ideological campaigns of 1980 and 1984. Clearly then the hypothesis that the 1992 electorate was unable to perceive a difference between the major party candidates would seem to be untrue, although this determination could be more effectively assessed had the 1992 NES data included questions on more specific foreign policy issues such as Haitian refugees and China trade policy.

Nevertheless, although Campbell's first two prerequisites for issue voting were apparently realized in 1992, the third, issue salience, was not. Little more than two percent of the population reported foreign and defense issues as the most important problem facing the nation, totals considerably lower than those reported in the 1980s and the lowest since the 1976 election. Apparently, although the public was aware of the disparate foreign policy positions of the two major party candidates, these differences were not salient in 1992; more than ninety percent of respondents cited economic or social policy concerns as the most important issues facing the nation.

The implications of these findings are unclear. As Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida note, the period from 1973 to 1979 was characterized by generally low levels of foreign policy salience as the electorate withdrew from international concerns in the wake of the unpleasantness of the Vietnam debacle; nevertheless, foreign policy emerged again as an important electoral concern in the 1980 election and remained significant for the remainder of that decade. Are the results of the 1992 election analogous to those of 1976, or have the conclusion of the Cold War and the absence of any major foreign threats to American interests provoked a fundamental change in American voting behavior. It may be that the combination of the frustrating intractability of the foreign policy issues that have replaced the U.S.-Soviet confrontation - Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo - along with their seeming irrelevance to U.S. security concerns will permanently relegate foreign policy concerns to the lower tier of voting criteria, at least until a new foreign threat emerges sufficiently demanding of voters' attentions.

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