

Andrew Johnstone, Andrew Priest, eds.. *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy: Candidates, Campaigns, and Global Politics from FDR to Bill Clinton*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017. 374 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-6905-7.

Reviewed by Andrew Z. Katz

Published on H-Diplo (October, 2017)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

One of the most memorable election year slogans of recent years was James Carville's 1992 admonition to the Bill Clinton campaign: "It's the economy, stupid." Pithy as it was, the credo could just as well be used to characterize the conventional political science wisdom on what motivates American voters in typical presidential election contests. Though campaigns spend enormous sums of money on candidate messaging, with swing state voters deluged with political advertising, perceptions of the condition of the economy are generally seen as key to the outcome of the quadrennial national vote. Consequently, little scholarly attention is paid to how foreign policy plays in presidential contests, so *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy* is a welcome addition to a sparsely populated literature.

Overall, the volume under review provides a competent and cogent survey of the interaction of US presidential elections and foreign policy from 1940 to 1992. With straightforward organization--each chapter covers one campaign--the book makes an illuminating foray into how US domestic politics may inform its foreign policy, as well as how events abroad may sometimes shape election outcomes. Each chapter considers campaign rhetoric and domestic political conditions rele-

vant to foreign affairs leading up to the election day of interest.

Among other sources of inspiration for this effort, Andrew Johnstone and Andrew Priest quote in the introduction the 2008 Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations presidential address by Thomas Alan Schwartz, sharing his declaration that efforts to understand "the history of American foreign relations without carefully examining public opinion and domestic politics was a bit like explaining the functioning of a car without discussing the internal combustion engine" (p. 3). Brought together by the editors first at an April 2013 workshop at the London Institute for the Study of the Americas, the authors are mostly British-based historians of American foreign policy. The combined product thus brings a rich, well-presented, narrative history, but one that is devoid of the analytic and theoretical contributions expected by those of us with a political science bent.

Rather than proceed sequentially through the chapters, I take a thematic approach in this review, considering first from the perspective of a political scientist the contribution of the diplomatic history explored in its pages to our understanding of the interaction of presidential elections and foreign policy. I then turn to how the insights pro-

vided by the various authors confirm the central role of framing in US foreign policy. Last, I offer an assessment of what we might generalize from the individual observations of these fourteen presidential elections.

Political scientists dedicated to the study of the domestic side of US foreign policy formulation pursue their study from a number of different angles, three of which are especially relevant to this review. First, what insights do political scientists offer on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy? Second, how does research on the connection between media coverage and foreign policy formulation contribute to our understanding of how presidential campaigns may present the candidate's foreign policy views? Last, does political science provide a means for exploring the connection between foreign policy and identity that can help untangle the rhetoric of political campaigns when it comes to US foreign policy?

Ole Holsti offers an especially useful, three-part taxonomy of the public opinion-foreign policy link.[1] The first question Holsti considers is whether public opinion on foreign policy is stable, and reacts to real-world events. The assembled contributions to this volume do not directly address this concern.

Second, Holsti considers whether the foreign policy opinions of the public are structured—that is, are opinions based on a set of defined beliefs? There is no shortage of work among political scientists to categorize public attitudes on international issues along some pattern of dispositions. For example, through the latter decades of the Cold War, Eugene Wittkopf found public attitudes clustered among belief systems he labeled internationalist, hardliner, accommodationist, and isolationist.[2] Of course, historians usually do not use this form of analysis. Still, some cross-fertilization across disciplines would be mutually beneficial. Does the historical record reveal candidates tailoring their message to clusters of voters

holding similar foreign policy attitudes? While political scientists may argue over the details of the public's foreign policy dispositions, historians might offer evidence that candidates appealed to voters according to identified patterns.

This volume contributes best to the third tier of Holsti's inventory of the public opinion foreign policy link, that is, the crucial question of whether political leaders take public opinion seriously in their decision making. Certainly, the targets of the investigations in this collection, if not solicitous of constituent opinion, almost uniformly appear to be concerned with how voters perceive their foreign policy positions. Not all presidential candidates, of course, care equally about the views of the public on international issues. In *Counting the Public In* (1999), Doug Foyle classifies presidents according to their perception of the legitimacy of public input into foreign affairs. Alone among the contributors to *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy*, Scott Lucas incorporates Foyle's framework, arguing that Foyle's placement of Dwight Eisenhower in the "pragmatist" category does not quite fit with the president's insistence during the Suez and Hungarian crises just prior to the 1956 election that, unlike the "pragmatist" who believes in the need for public support, he would do what he thought was right given the national interest, regardless of political considerations. By utilizing a political science framework to evaluate Eisenhower's sensitivity to public input, Lucas demonstrates a path of integrating disciplinary practices which others should emulate.

Another area of inquiry frequently addressed in political science research relevant to *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy* concerns the relationship between media coverage and foreign policy. With its emphasis on large-*n* studies, political science research largely eschews the type of in-depth case analysis conducted here. It is precisely this type of investigation, however, that can help us better locate the causal factors that shape foreign policy. Many of the contributions to this

volume reveal the potency of effective framing, though lack the framework to highlight its centrality to US foreign policy. Robert Entman provides a widely used definition of framing: “*selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.*”[3] How candidates present their approach to an international situation, therefore, may be helpful or damaging to their political standing, depending on how the action (or inaction) is characterized. Throughout *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy*, we find evidence of just how consequential effective (or ineffective) framing can be. As J. Simon Rofe illustrates, when the GOP accused Franklin Roosevelt of using the resources of the navy to transport his dog, Roosevelt turned the charge against his opponents for being opportunists by changing their tune on military preparedness now that it was popular. In contrast, Gerald Ford could not re-frame his 1976 debate gaffe that the Soviet Union did not dominate Eastern Europe.

During the last few decades a group of political scientists known as constructivists has placed increased attention on the role of identity in international affairs. There is much evidence scattered across the pages of *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy* to support the constructivist claim that identity shapes perception and policy. Most directly, Sandra Scanlon, in her examination of the 1968 election, concludes that each of the three contestants in the campaign “constructed his policies with quite distinctive interpretations of American identity and American purpose in the Cold War” (p. 181).

What can we learn about the role of foreign policy in presidential elections from reading this book? Or, as a political scientist might ask, are there generalizable findings here? There are essentially three broad themes that emerge from the combined contributions to this volume. First, foreign policy may play a greater role during the

contest for nominations than in the general election. Second, in foreign policy as with other areas of political debate, contention may be politically efficacious; skillful candidates exercise the power of political preemption to defuse vulnerabilities in their foreign policy portfolios. Finally, regardless of disciplinary background, it is difficult to assess causality.

In none of the fourteen cases examined in this book did an author conclude that foreign policy determined the outcome of a particular election. Nevertheless, foreign policy often set the confines of the contest. Given the nature of the American electoral system, the principals who will contend on the first Tuesday following the first Monday every fourth November are determined by party nominating processes where the emergent nominee may have been selected as a result of a foreign policy concern. For example, Steven Casey notes that Eisenhower was largely motivated to run in the Republican race to forestall the emergence of a brand of foreign policy to which he strongly objected. Casey poses a counterfactual to consider how foreign policy would have factored had the 1952 campaign pitted Harry Truman against Robert A. Taft instead.

When it comes to presidential campaigns, contention is more politically efficacious than promoting consensus, though drawing a strong contrast often has limits. Michael F. Hopkins relates that to fend off attacks from his Republican rival, Truman embraced a hard line against domestic communism. Sylvia Ellis points out that Richard Nixon seized on John F. Kennedy’s nuanced debate response regarding Quemoy and Matsu. She invokes Arthur Schlesinger’s observation that from this Kennedy “learned a harsh lesson: the complexities of foreign policy are not easy to explain to the electorate, especially if your opponent reduces the debate to slogans; a sophisticated analysis of international issues can often be exploited ruthlessly in a presidential campaign” (p. 146).

With the economy in poor shape, and his domestic agenda not a source of political benefit, Jimmy Carter tried to use foreign policy as his route to reelection. Robert Mason makes clear how, despite some stumbles, Ronald Reagan was able to parry Carter's assault on the former California governor's fitness to be commander-in-chief, and how the president could not get in front of the public's shift to the right on international concerns over the course of his term. Importantly, the gender gap first surfaces in public opinion surveys during this period; as in the aggregate, men and women had divergent preferences when it came to the foreign policy positions of the two candidates.

The power of political preemption allows presidents to adjust their stance during a campaign to deflect criticism or highlight an opponent's vulnerabilities, as Thomas Tunstall Allcock indicates Lyndon Johnson was able to do by moderating his approach to Vietnam to magnify Barry Goldwater's hawkishness.

The difficulty of establishing a causal connection between domestic politics and foreign policy for political scientists and historians alike is no better demonstrated than with the case of the Vietnam War and the 1968 presidential election. Sandra Scanlon contends that the Vietnam War did not determine the outcome, but would Lyndon Johnson have been a likely contender for reelection had he not had to cope with the situation in Southeast Asia?

David Ryan provides a rather disjointed treatment of Reagan's foreign policy positioning leading up to the 1984 contest. Several important foreign policy themes of that period are not well developed or explained. A key controversy of Reagan's foreign policy record involves his approach toward the Soviet Union. Did Reagan turn from a tough approach to a conciliatory one in response to Mikhail Gorbachev? Alternatively, did a shift in advisors and the increasing influence of Nancy Reagan lead to a softening of the president's

stance toward the Soviet Union? Or, did his arms buildup and harsh rhetoric produce concessions from the Soviet Union that Reagan now was prepared to exploit? This relates to the 1984 presidential campaign owing to the rise of the nuclear freeze movement, along with concerns leveled by Reagan's opponents that he was a warmonger. Reagan's assertive policy toward the Sandinista government in Nicaragua fit that narrative, and the Democrats tried to paint his efforts as leading the United States into another Vietnam-like quagmire. More broadly, Reagan endeavored to persuade disparate US allies to forge a "strategic consensus" on the central danger posed by the Soviet Union. The intervention in Lebanon showed the limitations of this perspective, as Israel and its Arab adversaries did not see the hand of Moscow as the chief perpetrator of their respective concerns. Those not well versed on these issues, and their place in the 1984 presidential campaign, will not gain clarity from this chapter.

The culpability of leadership for the vapid content of political discourse on foreign policy during election campaigns is well illustrated by Robert Strong's portrait of the 1988 contest. Despite the revolutionary changes then underway in the international realm, neither George H. W. Bush nor Michael Dukakis provided substantive discussion of how they proposed to deal with the Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, or to reconcile the challenges of the domestic budget deficit in light of both candidates' endorsement of the need for a strong defense. Interestingly, Strong points out that the only common concern raised by both in their key campaign speeches was Manuel Noriega. In an indication of how domestic concerns sometimes flow from the bottom up, Bush and Dukakis emphasized the threat posed by illegal drugs.

The three-candidate contest between President Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot is the final presidential campaign covered in this volume. John Dumbrell does a nice job of covering the for-

eign policy content of an election that Carville sought to keep focused on economic concerns. In this, Dumbrell perhaps inadvertently reveals the role foreign policy most often plays in US presidential elections—not as a sideshow per se, but as the qualifying hurdle a challenger must surmount to advance to the Oval Office.

As Johnstone and Priest referred to Schwartz's 2008 SHAFR presidential address in the introductory chapter, Robert David Johnson bookends the volume by quoting his "plea for recognizing the ongoing importance of politics in our work and perhaps acknowledging that more traditional political explanation may explain more about American foreign relations than some of the more recent and trendier undertakings in our field" (p. 345). Study of the interaction of the domestic and international realms has not been a priority in political science scholarship over the years, either. Tending to these issues, and bringing the perspectives of historians and political scientists together in this endeavor, would be of great benefit in this quest. *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy* makes a good start.

Notes

[1]. Ole R. Holsti, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus," *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1992): 439-466.

[2]. Eugene Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990). For a more recent example, see Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[3]. Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5 (emphasis in orig.).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Andrew Z. Katz. Review of Johnstone, Andrew; Priest, Andrew, eds. *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy: Candidates, Campaigns, and Global Politics from FDR to Bill Clinton*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49640>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.