

The One Thing You Need to Know About American Foreign Policy

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The one thing you need to know about American foreign policy is that it is unexceptional. It follows the same general principles that govern the foreign policy of every country. What, then, are those principles and how do they shape decisions regarding such foreign policies as waging war, intervening militarily in foreign disputes, devising trade policies and participating in international organizations? To address these principles, it is useful to begin by considering the incentives of all political leaders and how those incentives are shaped by the institutions of government and, in turn, how they lead to changes in those institutions.

Leadership Incentives

In thinking about foreign policy I prefer not to think about considerations such as the balance of power or even the national interest. We know, for instance, that the balance of power has little, if anything, to do with questions of war and peace (Kim and Morrow 1992; Niu and Ordeshook 1986; Powell 1999; Vasquez 1997). Therefore, rather than focus on these concepts, I think it is most useful to think about what leaders, rather than states, want and how they go about pursuing their interests. American political leaders, like all political leaders around the world, want, I believe, first and foremost to attain and maintain themselves in power for as long as possible (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003; Baturo 2007). Conditional on ensuring their political survival they, also like all leaders around the world, want to maximize the discretionary authority they have over how to spend the government's revenue. They are constrained, however, by their reliance on supporters and rules, such as term limits and voting rules, for choosing leaders. In the

American case (as in many democracies) these constraints mean that leaders have relatively little discretion over government revenue and they are limited in how long they can hold high office. How these support constraints operate, then, is I believe, fundamental to shaping foreign policy. To see how let us consider what these constraints are in their most basic, primitive form.

We can think of every government as being made up of four nested groups of people. The largest of these groups consists of the people who reside in a country. Some of them have no say in choosing leaders because they are disenfranchised for one reason or another¹, while others do have a say in choosing leaders. This latter group is referred to as the selectorate. The key feature of being in a society's selectorate is that it means having a chance to be in the winning coalition; that is, the portion of the selectorate whose support is essential to keep an incumbent leader in office (Riker 1962). Finally, there is the country's political leadership who rely on support from members of the winning coalition.

Leaders can be thought of as making three fundamental decisions. These are (1) to set a tax rate that generates government revenue; (2) to allocate some portion of the revenue they receive to public goods that benefit everyone in society; and (3) to allocate some portion of the revenue they receive as private rewards that are given to members of the winning coalition to help keep their loyalty. Public goods, loosely speaking, consist of such policies as national defense, government-supported health care, government supported education, infrastructure, and so forth. Private goods range from opportunities to be bribed or to engage in corrupt practices, as is common in many autocracies, to more subtle payoffs such as tax policies that favor the winning coalition's interests. For example, in the United States, Republican presidents tend to favor reducing the highest marginal tax rates and also favor cutting capital gains taxes and

¹ For example, they are not citizens; there are no elections; there are elections but property or age or gender or other criteria must be met to qualify to vote.

inheritance taxes. These tax policies are beneficial to wealthier people who disproportionately vote Republican. Democratic presidents tend to favor increased welfare spending and other redistributive government programs that benefit those with below average incomes. Those are the people who disproportionately tend to vote for the Democrats.

When coalitions are small, as in non-democratic regimes, the best way to stay in power is to focus on private rewards for the few who are essential supporters. Leaders who rely on large coalitions, as leaders in democracies do, find it too expensive to try to bribe millions of backers. Instead, such leaders rely on the provision of public goods such as effective public policies to stay in power. This means, then, that democratic leaders pursue their constituents' interests out of their own self-interest just as autocrats advance the welfare of their cronies again in their own best interest (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003).

Is Foreign Policy Nonpartisan?

Typically, American foreign policy is thought of as nonpartisan and as driven by efforts to advance the national interest. Rarely, however, is there much effort to be specific about what is meant by the national interest or to explain why partisanship should be expected to end at the water's edge; that is, why partisanship should not be as important in foreign policy decisions as it is in the routine domestic choices of political leaders. I shall contend here that American foreign policy is not nonpartisan or bipartisan and that the national interest is at best a vague concept and, except under extreme conditions, probably meaningless. These claims run counter to the way American foreign policy is generally understood. Understanding them will help us see why American foreign policy follows general principles of politics.

It is true that we infrequently observe deep divisions between the major American political parties when it comes to the “big” question in foreign policy, the question of war or peace. From this observation, casual observers leap to the inference that at least on the big questions, foreign policy is, indeed, bipartisan. But there is an alternative explanation for the observed cooperation of the major political parties during times of war or international crisis that is, I believe, far more compelling. It is an explanation that shows that the choice of such policies is endogenous; that is, decisions about war and peace are strategically determined by the threat or anticipation of partisan opposition. Here is how policies are shaped by expectations.

The American political system, being democratic, constrains leaders to rely on large voter coalitions for support. This means that elected officials are held accountable by their constituents for the policies they deliver. If they hope to be re-elected – and they, or their political party, almost always do – then they must pursue policies that satisfy their voters. But, their political opponents also hope to be elected. They want to depose the local Congressman or Senator or President and win that job for themselves. To do so, they need to persuade enough voters to switch from the incumbent to them in the next election. Similarly, those already in office (say in the House of Representatives or the Senate) but not in the majority must be concerned to back policies that their voters like enough to re-elect them. The President and his foreign policy advisors understand this very well. The members in the majority party in the House and the Senate likewise understand this very well.

If the incumbent party and its leaders select a foreign policy that is unpopular or that is believed will be unsuccessful, then they can anticipate that the other party’s leaders and candidates will see an opportunity to win votes by opposing the majority party’s foreign policy. When a foreign policy idea is discussed, the early trial balloons provide a useful means for the

incumbent party to discover whether there is likely to be significant opposition. Such opposition is a signal that the opposition party (or opposition parties in many proportional representation parliamentary systems) believes it can gain an electoral advantage by speaking out against the policy being contemplated. This early opposition does not occur if the party out-of-power believes the president's approach to a foreign problem is likely to be popular and successful. Thus, the president tries to choose foreign policies, especially when it comes to highly visible policies like war and peace, that are likely to succeed and that, therefore, are likely not to prompt a well-organized opposition by the minority party. That is, the president picks a policy that he has no electoral incentive to deviate from and the opposition does not oppose the policy because they believe that to do so will cost it votes. If the president miscalculates or the policy unexpectedly backfires, then there is opposition from the rival party. This is exactly what happened with the United States policy toward Iraq between 2003 – when it commanded the overwhelming support of Republican and Democratic members of Congress – and the run-up to the 2008 election. The bipartisan policy became distinctly partisan as the results in Iraq failed to match expectations. Most of the time, however, war policies prove fairly successful or war is avoided in anticipation that it will prove costlier politically than is justified by the expected benefits. The result of such selectivity in choosing policies is that we observe little partisanship on questions of war and peace, not because of nonpartisanship but because these policies are chosen to avoid opening the way to electoral success by the party not in power (Fearon 1994; Smith 1996; Schultz 2001).

Consider some of America's most unpopular wars, such as Vietnam and the Iraq War of 2003. In each case, at the time the president chose to engage in these wars, he enjoyed broad support in the Congress and among American voters. Strong Congressional opposition only

manifested itself after it became evident that these wars were not progressing as well as expected at the outset. Then intense partisan debate raged as the party out-of-power sought to separate itself from the very policy it had endorsed early on. For the president, with American troops on the ground overseas engaged in combat, a reversal in position generally proves more difficult and so, as with Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush, it is hard to regain the political advantage won by initiating the policy in the first place.

The existence of a competitive electoral system with more than one political party is essential for disciplining political leaders to choose foreign policies with enough caution that most of the time they calculate correctly and their policies prove successful. It is noteworthy, for example, that democracies win more than ninety percent of the wars they initiate, while non-democracies only win the wars they start about 60 percent of the time (Reiter and Stam 2002). Sixty percent probably is enough larger than fifty percent – the random chance of victory – to reflect a first-mover advantage. More than ninety percent is significantly larger, indicating that democratic leaders are highly selective about the wars they start (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003) and that, when they discover that a war is a tougher undertaking than expected, they generally increase their effort to achieve victory (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2004). Victory is vastly more important for democratically elected leaders than for autocrats for a simple reason. Democratic leaders are accountable to a large number of voters. If they fail, they tend not to get re-elected, while autocrats are beholden only to a few cronies in the military, bureaucracy, and in their family or clan. They tend to survive defeat in war as long as the foreign rival does not depose them (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Chiozza and Goemans 2003, 2004).

Is Foreign Policy Based on the National Interest?

The national interest is a ubiquitous concept in studies and public discussion of foreign affairs. Although it rarely is given a precise and explicit definition, it seems to refer to policies that most people in a democracy desire. Generally these policies are thought to be those that make the society secure and prosperous. It seems self-evident that every politician with the authority to make foreign policy choices must be attentive to the national interest. But we quickly run into a problem. If the national interest is what a clear majority wants, then it may be undefined or even self-contradictory.

Let us reflect on majority views and how easily contradictory majorities can be assembled to support a given policy and also its opposite. It is possible for a majority of voters or cronies, depending on the political system, to believe that they will be better off following a mix of policies on two dimensions, let us call the mix positions X and Y, and for an overlapping majority to think that they will be better off following some alternative policy mix such as Not X, Not Y, and for still another majority – drawn from the same set of citizens or voters, who favor some third policy mix such as X and Not Y. Indeed, there may be infinitely many ways to combine as few as two policies with as few as three voter or “selector” blocs so that any combination commands a majority (Niemi and Weisberg 1968; McKelvey 1976, 1979; Schofield 1978). But if there are multiple majorities supporting diametrically opposed policies, then how can we say that one majority represents the national interest and another does not?

To produce such mixes of policies in the way I suggested requires only that each voter bloc has a preference ordering over their choices that is transitive so that, for instance, if they like A better than B and B better than C, then they like A better than C, but for the group of voter blocs to have intransitive preferences so that they collectively like A better than B, for example, and B better than C, but they like C better than A. Let me illustrate this possibility using a

somewhat stylized example from the 1980 election in which Ronald Reagan defeated the incumbent Jimmy Carter to become the new president. Obviously this will be a simplification of an election that involved many other issues than the ones I discuss, but then my intention is to illustrate a general principle about the national interest and not to explain the 1980 campaign.

Ronald Reagan was generally regarded as a policy extremist before and during the 1980 campaign. While others, including the incumbent president, Jimmy Carter, thought that the country's high inflation rate could be brought under control only by increasing taxes, Ronald Reagan argued that taxes should be drastically reduced to stimulate economic growth and help rein in inflation. While some politicians, like independent candidate John Anderson, argued for a sharp reduction in defense spending, Jimmy Carter thought his administration was spending about the right amount but that a modest increase was justified by such developments as the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the 1979 seizure of American diplomats as hostages in Iran. Ronald Reagan believed that the United States needed to spend much more on defense. He thought that by doing so he could force the Soviet Union's government to face economic collapse if it tried to compete on defense or else force it to give up its competition with the United States by recognizing that it could not keep up. An important faction of the Democratic Party, the so-called Scoop Jackson wing, agreed with Reagan that we needed more defense spending but disagreed about a drastic reduction in taxes.

Although in the end Reagan won election in 1980 by a large margin, through most of the campaign, polls showed that Carter and Reagan were pretty evenly matched, while the third-party candidate, John Anderson, early on enjoyed support by about fifteen percent of the electorate. Let's consider the three-way race between Anderson, Carter and Reagan. Each of these candidates represented a bloc of voters: Reagan-loyalists, Carter-loyalists, and Anderson-

supporters (as his candidacy faded, it is difficult to call them loyalists). Carter's backers, like their candidate, supported a modest increase in defense spending and higher taxes. Reagan's endorsed a great reduction in tax rates and a vast increase in defense spending. Anderson, a liberal Republican, attracted voters mostly from Carter's bloc by favoring even higher taxes than Carter and significant reductions in defense spending. The three candidates, then, represented clearly distinct policy positions.

For illustrative purposes, let us suppose that early in the 1980 campaign Carter Democrats represented 45 percent of the electorate, Reagan backers 40 percent, and Anderson supporters 15. Tax policy and defense spending, as I have indicated, were two of the major issues debated during the 1980 campaign. Figure 1 locates the three factions: Carter Democrats, Reagan Republicans, and Anderson supporters, in terms of their most preferred policy regarding taxation and defense. Each voting bloc's most preferred approach to these issues is identified in the figure with a black dot next to the candidate's name. The figure also locates the prevailing policies regarding tax rates and defense spending and calls this the Status Quo, associated with a gray dot.

If we assume that any policy was preferred by a voting bloc if that policy was a shorter distance from its most preferred policies on defense and taxation than the status quo policies, then we can identify the policy mixes that could muster a majority to overturn the status quo. Presumably, in a democracy a policy or set of policies desired by a majority is about as good an approximation of the people's interests; that is, the national interest, as we can get. Therefore, a majority coalition in favor of this or that policy presumably can be said to reflect the national interest.

In figure 1 I have drawn arcs that are centered on the most desired policies of each of the three voting blocs and I have chosen the size of the radius of each arc so that it is equal to the distance between the voting bloc's most desired policy mix and the status quo point. This means that all policies on the circumference of these arcs (or the complete circles of which I have shown only arc fragments) are as good as the status quo from the point of view of the voting bloc on which it is centered. Furthermore, it follows that any tax and defense spending policy inside a voting bloc's arc (or circle) is better than the status quo from that bloc's point of view. We know it is better because these points are closer to the bloc's most desired policy than is the status quo policy.²

So what was the national interest, defined as the majority preference, regarding tax policy and defense policy in 1980? The figure reveals three majority coalitions. These are the areas of overlap between any two of the voting blocs since the sum of the votes for any two blocs is a majority (Carter + Anderson = 60 percent; Reagan + Anderson = 55 percent; Carter + Reagan = 75 percent). The horizontally hatched area in figure 1 shows the range of policies that both Carter and Anderson voters preferred to the status quo approach to defense spending and taxation. They favored higher tax rates and leaned in favor of reduced defense spending. The Carter-Reagan bloc, the checkerboard area in figure 1, liked the idea of greater spending on defense and not much change in tax rates. Finally, the Anderson-Reagan coalition could have supported reduced defense spending and a significant tax rate reduction. So we see that a majority of voters could have been assembled to support higher taxes or lower taxes. A majority of voters could also be assembled in favor of greater defense spending or reductions in defense spending. And everything in between was also possible with the right maneuvering or campaign

² A few technical, but generally straightforward assumptions not discussed here, such as single-peaked preferences, are required for the inferences I am drawing.

strategy. How, then, can we declare one defense policy or another or one tax policy or another as representing the national interest? Surely we cannot. Instead, we must say that the “national interest” was more likely to be defined however the winning candidate chose to define it and that, in turn, would depend on his skills in assembling one or another coalition (Riker 1996; Skinner et al 2007).

As it turned out, Reagan won handily, capturing a significant percentage of normally democratic voters. Carter’s early loyalists turned out not to be so loyal in the end. Reagan then went ahead, with Congressional support, and greatly increased defense spending, declaring this to be essential to national security and domestic safety and he slashed taxes to promote the economic policies he believed would lead to prosperity. The debate over defense spending and tax policy has not abated. Today as in past decades, these two policy areas represent important dimensions of campaign debate over foreign policy. Ultimately, these policies are shaped by circumstances, the political beliefs of candidates, and strategic maneuvering rather than a clear definition of the national interest.

Lesser Foreign Policies: Foreign Aid

One foreign policy arena in which many argue that the United States behaves differently from other countries is in the domain of foreign economic assistance. It is often argued, for example, that wealthy European countries, especially the Scandinavian countries, give foreign aid out of altruistic motives. They are thought to seek particularly to help the world’s poorest people residing in the most destitute countries (Lumsdaine 1993; Noel and Therien 1995). The United States, in contrast, is often seen as making more cynical foreign aid investments based on national security considerations with only limited focus on humanitarian goals. Substantial

bodies of evidence, however, call this inference into question (Schraeder, Hook and Taylor 1998; Hook and Zhang 1998; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2007).

There is general agreement that foreign aid has been relatively ineffective in promoting economic growth, improved education or health care or infrastructure or a host of other results that are thought to be the purpose behind economic assistance. Debate rages between those who think the problem is that too little money is spent on aiding the world's poor (Sachs 2005) and those who think the money is incorrectly targeted at recipient governments that too often divert it for corrupt purposes (Easterly 2002, 2006). There is a third view which follows from a political economy approach to aid. This third view suggests that donor governments surely are not so naïve as to fail to understand that much of their government-to-government aid will be diverted to the private uses of recipient elites. This view indicates that foreign aid is used effectively to promote its purpose, with that purpose being to trade money for policy concessions from recipient governments (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2007).

In the view that sees aid-for-policy deals we can understand why, for example, the United States gives so much aid to illiberal regimes. Leaders of such regimes rely on small coalitions. They remain loyal to the incumbent in exchange for private rewards. Foreign aid provides money for private rewards. It is given by rich democracies whose incumbents are more likely to be maintained in power at the margin by obtaining policy concessions from foreign powers. Autocrats can grant those concessions more easily than can democrats, making autocrats attractive foreign aid recipients. It turns out that even the Scandinavian countries disproportionately give aid to small coalition, petty dictatorships and seemingly acquire trade concessions in return. Thus, American foreign aid turns out to look much like foreign aid giving by other well-to-do governments. In each case, policy concessions are obtained at the lowest

price possible (this may be why foreign aid represents so little money). Poor autocracies with valuable policy concessions to offer are most likely to receive aid and, conditional on receiving aid, the more valuable the policy concession, the richer the recipient, and the larger the coalition on which the recipient relies, the more total aid it receives. Thus, countries like Egypt that have granted a major policy concession -- peace with Israel -- get a lot of aid while countries with less valuable policy concessions to offer, as is true for most of Africa today, receive relatively little aid whether from the United States or Japan or Scandinavia or other donors.

While many bemoan America's foreign aid approach, it is important to recognize that it represents an equilibrium strategy. That means that American foreign policy decision makers do not have an incentive to shift to some other basis for giving aid and neither do the governments that accept aid from the United States (or other democratic countries). Four constituencies are affected by foreign aid policies and three of the four benefit from it. Donor country constituents -- democratic voters -- benefit because they gain policy concessions that they like from recipient regimes (Milner and Tingley 2006). Leaders in donor countries likewise benefit because the policy concessions they extract in exchange for aid -- whether these concessions are related to national security, to trade, or to other policy arenas -- make their constituents somewhat more likely to vote for them (Milner and Tingley 2006). Recipient leaders benefit because they gain money with which to keep their coalition members loyal, thereby improving their own political survival prospects. The big losers tend to be the people who reside in the recipient countries. They lose in two ways from foreign aid. First, their leaders give up policies that their own people favor. That is why they can sell the policy concessions. If the people naturally wanted the policies being conceded then there would be no need for donors to pay for them. And the people

in the recipient countries are saddled with improved survival prospects for the very leaders who have sold them out.

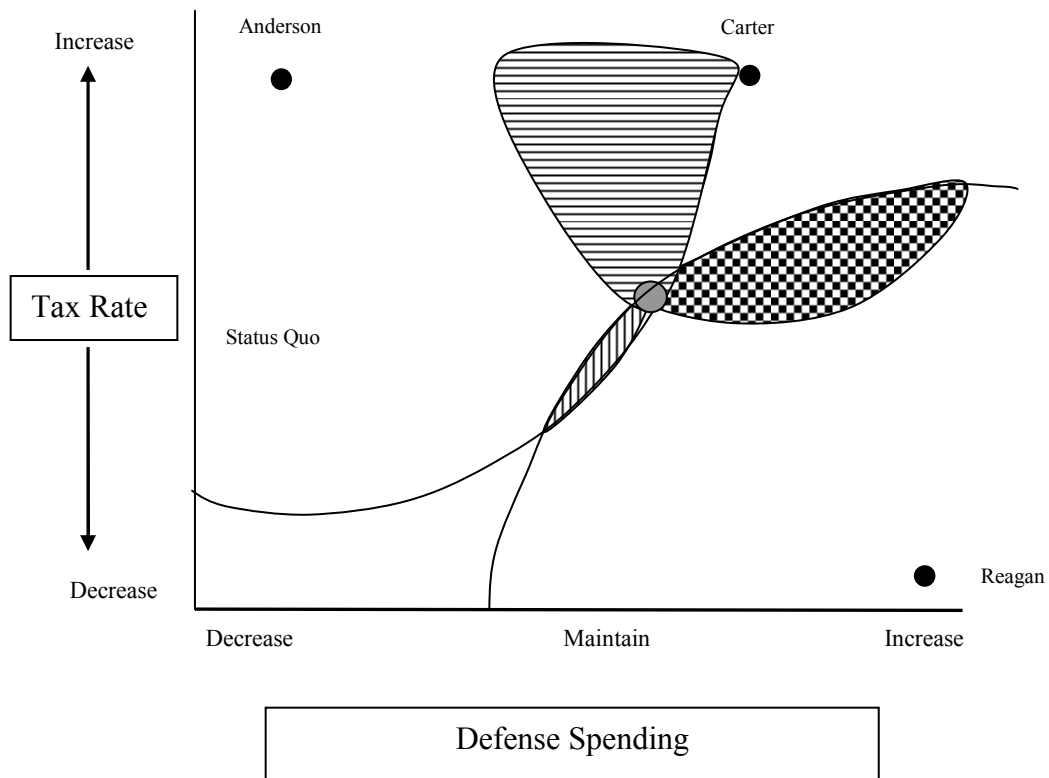
Evidence based on an examination of all bilateral foreign aid deals between prospective (and actual) recipient governments and all donors who belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (that is, the world's wealthy countries) bears out the contention that aid is better understood as money in exchange for policy concessions than as money to advance economic, social, or political development. Indeed, to the extent that foreign aid can be said to have an impact on political change, it is to strengthen the hand of dictators and to make regimes likely to become even more autocratic than would have been true if they did not receive economic assistance.

The same pattern of reinforcing petty dictators is found following military interventions by democracies either to shore up an existing regime or to impose regime change. In either case, democratic interveners tend to retard the prospects of democratic change, just as is true with foreign aid giving (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2005). As a statistical matter, this is true whether the intervener is the French government, the British government, the Dutch government, some other democracy, or the United States after controlling for selection effects regarding how difficult the target of intervention is. As with foreign aid receipts, democratization is retarded, not advanced, by the foreign policy choices of democracies and the principles governing that retardation of democratization apply across democracies rather than being peculiar to the United States.

Conclusions

American foreign policy follows patterns that seem to reflect how such policy choices are made elsewhere in the world at present and also in the past. Policies seem to be dictated by what helps leaders sustain themselves in power. When they rely on democratic means of selection they must deliver public policies – including foreign policies – that satisfy a broad constituency of voters. This means that such policies are disproportionately focused on providing public benefits that reflect voter preferences at home rather than private rewards or the interests of people in other countries. When leaders rely on a small coterie of backers to sustain them in power, then corruption, kleptocracy, and rent-seeking are the order of the day, not because autocrats are necessarily less civic minded than democrats, but because the institutional incentives reward them for corrupt practices and punish them for civic mindedness if it comes at the expense of private benefits to backers. Likewise, then, it follows that democrats are not necessarily inherently civic minded but rather that they must act as if they are because doing so serves their own narrow self-interest in surviving in power.

Figure 1: What is the National Interest?



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