

The One Dimensional Voter: Foreign Policy Tops Voter Concerns

Lawrence R. Jacobs
Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota
(612) 625-3384

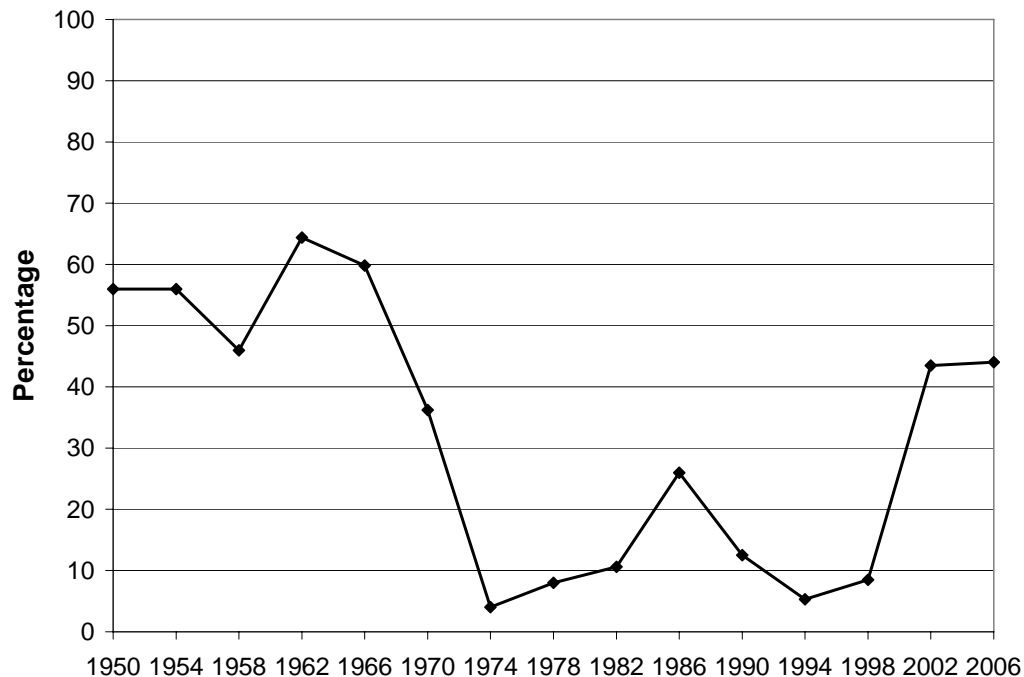
The 2006 elections are becoming one-dimensional and the dimension is very unusual – foreign policy.

The textbook American voter has a longstanding reputation for minding her “pocketbook.” Incumbents are rewarded when the economy is growing and punished when it is not and unemployment is a problem.

Voters in 2006 are replacing the snappy 1992 refrain, “It’s the Economy, Stupid,” with one word – “Iraq.” This is a rare and extraordinary development.

An analysis of the public’s ranking of what they see as the most important problem facing the country since 1950 demonstrates that 1966 was the last mid-term election in which foreign policy was as dominant as it is today. On average during 2006, a staggering 44 percent of Americans in Gallup polls have identified foreign policy and especially Iraq as the most important problem facing the country. In 17 of the 26 years after 1974, foreign affairs failed to register among even 10 percent of Americans.

Foreign Affairs as America's Most Important Problem in Midterm Election Years, 1950 – 2006 (Source: Gallup Organization)



The 2006 election is setting up as a referendum on conditions in Iraq. Unlike the 2002 mid-term elections when GOP campaigns rode a wave of support after the 9/11 attacks, Republican candidates for all levels of office are today fighting a powerful negative drag. Recent polls by different organizations show that about two thirds oppose the war and disapprove of President Bush's handling of it. When asked which part would do a better job with Iraq, Democrats hold more than a dozen point advantage over Republicans.

When public concern catapulted foreign policy and Vietnam to the top of the public's agenda during the 1966 mid-term elections, the Democrats, who controlled the White House and Congress, saw their large electoral gains in the 1964 elections reversed. They experienced a net loss of 48 seats in the House and 4 in the Senate. Redistricting and other factors may dull this kind of backlash in 2006 but the dominance of one unpopular foreign policy issue can be politically damaging to the incumbent party.

Even Republican candidates for state office that bear no direct responsibility for the Iraq War are being hurt. For instance, the incumbent Republican Governor of Minnesota – Tim Pawlenty – is popular and enjoys a notable advantage over his Democratic challenger for handling the economy. Yet, he finds himself trailing in part because of the Iraq War.

There is, however, an important caveat: the one dimensional focus on foreign policy can be disrupted by late breaking developments such as the national fracas over John Kerry's comments about lagging students ending up in the military. These kinds of late events can be significant in close races because undecided and swing voters often choose their candidate in the final days of the campaign and they tend to focus on the most recent developments.