# The 1940 Election and US Foreign Policy

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**The Impact of the 1940 Election on US Foreign Policy**

The 1940 election in America raises a number of important questions on the international leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II, as well as the influence of foreign policy on elections in the United States in general. Looking at the speeches of both candidates during the campaign, foreign policy was clearly the major issue at the time and had a huge bearing on the outcome. However, this essay will attempt to assess the other side of this relationship. What impact, if any, did the election itself have on foreign policy? Did the public, at least temporarily, reel in a war-primed president through the democratic process or did they flock to the flag and carry the administration to victory and America closer to war? The real answer of course is much more complicated. The election of 1940 had minimal impact on US foreign policy, both during the campaign and in its immediate aftermath. This was in a large part due to the sensitivity of the Roosevelt administration to public opinion and its overall cautiousness in policy. This delicate approach to domestic constraints was deep-rooted, enduring and more that just the result of electoral considerations. To demonstrate this I will investigate FDR's personal view of the international situation and his relationship to public opinion. I will then look at his policies leading up to the election, such as the destroyers-for-bases deal with Britain and the selective service act. Finally, I will assess the degree of continuity between this approach and his policies in the aftermath of the election. FDR took carefully calculated risks with public opinion throughout the international crisis, including during the election. He was greatly aided in this by his own political skill, by the sequence of events and by the approach of his electoral opposition. However, with minor exceptions, the substance of US foreign policy did not alter on account of the elections.

Some background to the election itself and the events that framed it is crucial to understanding how it related to foreign policy. The international situation was moving at a ferocious pace throughout the election year. In Europe the Nazi blitzkrieg launched itself first on Scandinavia and then France. By June most of mainland Europe was under German control and Italy had decided to back what it believed to be the winner. Britain was an isolated bastion of democracy, facing the German threat alone and subject to heavy bombing. The need to provide Britain with the supplies to survive appeared increasingly urgent. Meanwhile, Japan was continuing its war in China and had become emboldened by German success in Europe. It would sign the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy in September.[1] This was the urgent international environment in which Wendell Willkie conducted his presidential campaign. Willkie was a former Democrat turned liberal Republican, and perhaps most notably also an interventionist in foreign policy. Ultimately, he was comprehensively defeated, although not by the landslide margin with which FDR had won previous elections. While the all-encompassing nature of international events and lingering isolationism ensured national defence dominated the agenda, it was of course not the only issue. Closely related was the very fact that FDR was running for an unprecedented third term, heightening fears of the overextension of executive power under the veil of international crisis.[2] Aside from these lofty issues, for many the election remained simply a referendum on the New Deal and other domestic policies that had characterised the FDR years so far. These were the issues and constraints, at home and abroad, to which the administration was reacting during the campaign.

How Roosevelt responded to such events must be assessed in light of what we know about his own personal views and his sensitivity to public opinion. There has been much historical debate about Roosevelt's intentions in the build up to war and the degree to which he led, or was led by, public opinion. On one side historians have argued that FDR took a back seat, allowing his foreign policy to be dominated by strong isolationist sentiment at home.[3] Others see

him as acting within the constraints, shaping policy but at the same time careful not to push too far ahead.[4] Close inspection reveals that, prior to the elections, the president developed very clear views of the serious nature of the German threat and was willing to at least consider the possibility of joining the conflict directly. Roosevelt was naturally concerned about the character of the Nazi state from the beginning and, after the Munich crisis of 1938, he was under no illusions as to its intentions. In January 1939 he told the Senate Military Affairs Committee that the available information made it quite clear Hitler's goal was "world domination".[5] Although Roosevelt's favoured method for facing this threat was to supply those combating it with the materials of war, he felt it necessary to at least consider the possibility of joining the conflict should circumstance demand it.[6] However, this was very much a last resort in case of national emergency and aiding the allies remained his prime objective. These were in general terms Roosevelt's personal convictions and preferred policies in the months surrounding the 1940 election.

However, if the prospect of eventual war was a scenario Roosevelt seriously entertained, it was not something he voiced publicly. While pursuing his own objectives, Roosevelt made sure to stay tuned into public opinion and generally knew the limits of what was acceptable to the vast majority of Americans. For this purpose he was largely reliant on tracking the attitudes of leading opinion makers in the media and political elite, as well as soaking up whatever he could from his own contact with the public. Additionally, after 1939, he began to take more faith in the new, "scientific" opinion polls available, particularly those of Hadley Cantril at Princeton.[7] Whatever means he used, it was clear that FDR tried to harness all available information in order to stay up to date with the public mood. Indeed, his sensitivity to public opinion is borne out by the cautious nature of his policy and rhetoric in the years before the war, a time when isolationism was at its peak. The revision of the Neutrality Act was representative of Roosevelt's struggle with public opinion and Congress in particular. Keen to maintain some degree of flexibility in foreign affairs and the ability to aid the allies, Roosevelt carefully campaigned for revision by emphasising the necessity of assuring peace at home over any possibility of entanglement. However, he was a realist and never pushed too far with Congress, lest it seem he was trying to drag the country slowly into war.[8] In a similar vein, his famous 1937 Quarantine Speech, purposefully delivered in isolationist Chicago, was not an announcement of a substantive new policy but an effort to test a more actively internationalist stance with the public. Notably, FDR worried that he had gone too far in the aftermath.[9] FDR's cautious but independent attitude towards public opinion would not change during the election campaign.

If anything, it could be argued that Roosevelt began to take more risks in the run-up to the election. The policy implemented during this period, most notably the destroyers-for-bases deal and the selective service act, showed that the administration was not paralysed by the campaign. Churchill had asked for destroyers to hold off German invasion in June 1940, calling it "a matter of life or death".[10] After initial reservations, FDR negotiated a deal with the British. In exchange for fifty destroyers the US would gain leases on six British bases and receive two more as a "gift". While in truth a very good deal, FDR worried what the public reaction would be to the possibly illegal surrender of much needed American military might. Moreover, the fact that he did so without congressional approval opened him up to further claims of despotism and the overextension of executive power. He felt the agreement would severely weaken his chances of re-election but that he had "no right to think of politics in the sense of being a candidate or desiring votes".[11] Ultimately opinion polls revealed the public to be in favour of the deal but Roosevelt was not to know this by the time he had committed to it.[12] The selective service act was a similar leap in the dark. While not initiated by the president, he worked quietly to promote it behind the scenes throughout the summer of 1940. When the idea began to gain momentum FDR came out publically in favour. While opinion polls showed a positive attitude to conscription, the first peacetime draft opened Roosevelt up to familiar accusations of warmongering at a sensitive time in the campaign.[13] In the end neither of these measures materialised into the risks they initially seemed, but they remain a clear sign that FDR was still doing what he wanted in terms of foreign policy and not just riding the election out.

A number of factors helped Roosevelt to traverse the minefield of elections without changing the substance of his policy. Chief among them was his own political skill and use of rhetoric to win the public over. This can be seen clearly in his speeches on the draft. While wholly unprecedented, FDR claimed it was in reality nothing new, that "we have merely reasserted an old and accepted principle of democratic governance". Likening it to the militia system of the eighteenth century he appealed to American's pride and sense of history to readopt a tradition "brought to this continent by our forefathers".[14] With the destroyer deal he emphasised the gains for the US, "the finest thing for the

nation…done in your lifetime or mine".[15] Generally he stressed the economic benefits of aid to Britain and tried to portray it as a matter of "hardheaded self-interest".[16] Appeals to national history and ongoing prosperity hit home with an audience not always certain of why it should have anything to do with Europe's war. With another sensitive matter, he managed to dodge the third term issue for the most part by ignoring it. As he made clear in his speech for the acceptance of the nomination, it was simply a matter of national emergency.[17] He maintained this aloof impression of a man concerned with more pressing matters than mere elections throughout the campaign. While no doubt the president was frequently preoccupied with other events, he was still very much playing the electoral game. For instance, he was careful in his speeches on foreign policy never to mention the aggressors he alluded to by name. This was no doubt an attempt not to alienate key urban ethnic groups from his base.[18] FDR's campaign experience and political sleight of hand was essential to selling his foreign policy without sacrificing its substance.

Two other factors also assisted in strengthening Roosevelt's position and helping foreign policy through the elections unscathed. The first was the way in which his opponent conducted his campaign. An internationalist by nature and with no election experience, Willkie failed to demonstrate any significant difference between himself and FDR on foreign policy. While he criticised the destroyers deal as an 'arbitrary and dictatorial action" it was clear that he tacitly approved of the substance of the trade.[19] Moreover, he stopped conscription from becoming an issue by openly supporting the President's policy up until late September. It was only after he found himself well behind in the polls that Willkie began to tell Americans that, thanks to FDR, their boys were "already almost on the transports". Tellingly, the new approach was highly successful and put Roosevelt on the defensive. Days before the election, he infamously told the public, "Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars".[20] However, without Willkie's earlier bi-partisanship on foreign affairs some of FDR's polices may not have even gotten that far. A more isolationist candidate would have pressed the issue harder and earlier, perhaps restricting FDR's ability to continue with his preferred policies as before.

The second factor to fortify Roosevelt's position was events themselves. The more the crisis deepened in Europe, the more the President was able to play the role of the solemn and experienced leader ready to direct the national defence efforts.[21] This is evidenced by Gallup polls conducted towards the end of October. They showed Roosevelt as having 54.5 percent of the popular vote. However, when asked if there were no war in Europe today whom would they vote for, 53 percent favoured Willkie.[22] FDR's popularity and the justification for a third term was very closely linked to the issue of the war. The bombing of Britain in particular was a boon to his popularity and the legitimacy of his policies. At the same time as the destroyers deal was being discussed, Americans heard radio reports emphasising the shared cultural heritage of both nations to a backdrop of explosions and air-raid sirens. Polls showed opinion shifting throughout the blitz in favour of aiding the allies over staying out of war.[23] Had events developed differently public opinion and policy might have been more at odds. As it transpired they complimented FDR's image and initiatives perfectly.

As we have seen, Roosevelt did not become any more cautious with the election nearing. Rather his approach to foreign policy and public opinion showed continuity in its sensitivity to public opinion and a willingness to test it. The substance of this approach would not be discarded after the election. While his rhetoric became bolder in an attempt to mould opinion he made sure his actions did not get too far ahead. He showed this continuing sensitivity when faced with the problem of what to do when Britain ran out of money for its war orders. He did not want to appear to be bringing the country any closer to war or simply giving away their defence supplies. Unwilling to test his mandate with Congress in repealing neutrality laws, he devised a plan whereby he could "lend" supplies in return for repayment in kind after the war. Convinced of a need for broad consensus, Roosevelt first primed public opinion for his Lend-Lease plan with a Fireside Chat and then put it before Congress. In an effort to ensure the bill passed, the President worked quietly behind the scenes, drafting, lobbying and agreeing to various amendments in the face of criticism. Just so it was clear to the public that the nation was not defending empire but democracy, he stressed that British victory would ensure "a world founded upon four essential human freedoms".[24] All these cautious steps show a man still very much concerned with perception. The substance of the policy and the cautious manner in which it was achieved was very much in line with FDR's previous policies, such as the destroyer deal and the selective service act. The Lend-Lease proposal emphasises two major aspects of FDR's concern with public opinion. To follow his policy of aiding Britain as much as possible he recognised that he needed whatever Congressional support he could get. Moreover, concerned from the outset about the possibility of war, he wanted to ensure national unity and

cohesion in case of this ultimate outcome. While electoral considerations no doubt played a part in Roosevelt's sensitivity to public opinion, his concern went deeper than that.

However, it should be noted that the election probably did have some degree of impact on foreign policy, albeit far from clear. For instance, it could be argued that one notable exception to the narrative outlined above was the decision to take a middle ground on sanctions with Japan in the run up to the election. Roosevelt imposed a limited embargo on the Japanese to deter them from further expansion in Asia. While FDR preferred strong action he knew that there was always the possibility it might provoke a response from the Japanese, compromising his chances of election on a platform of avoiding war. However, the situation in reality was far more complicated than this with the British and the State Department also urging caution. Meanwhile, public opinion was actually conflicted on the matter, preferring tough measures against Japan while wishing to avoid war above anything else.[25] It has also been suggested that FDR's campaign rhetoric may have acted as a lingering constraint in preventing him from entering the war in 1941. David Reynolds asserts his pledge to no foreign wars "would hang around his neck in the months to come".[26] It is true that his promises to the public may have "lulled them into a false sense of security".[27] However, it seems far more likely that other factors like uncertainty over military preparedness and an ongoing concern for absolute national unity in war were more decisive than an any inclination not to break an election promise.[28] Ultimately, it seems fair to say the 1940 election had very little impact on foreign policy.

It is often argued that, during an election, policy-making takes a back seat to self-preservation and pandering to the electorate. Others see it differently, claiming that affairs of national security are an exception. In other words, that "politics stops at the water's edge". As we have seen, in this case the latter seems the more persuasive argument. However, this is not to say that the gritty demands of the campaign did not apply. Nor is it to say that FDR was an exception, a visionary statesman risking his career and rising above petty politics for the greater good. He played the game but played it extremely well and was assisted by favourable circumstances, notably the course of events and Wendell Willkie's similar views on foreign affairs. There is limited space to assess the overall continuity of FDR's policy. However, based on the issues singled out for attention here it is clear that Roosevelt paid close attention to opinion for reasons of national unity and effective governance, but generally achieved his policy objectives one way or another. The election of 1940 did not change this. Of course, this was largely due to favourable circumstances and it should not be taken as a rule that foreign policy is immune to electoral politics.

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[1] Waldo Heinrichs, *The Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into WWII* (Oxford, 1988), p. 9.

[2] Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists* (Lincoln, 1983), pp.394-5.

[3] Robert Divine, *The Reluctant Belligerent: American Entry into World War II* (Baltimore, 1979).

[4] Robert Dallek. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York, 1995).

[5] Quoted in Steven Casey, *Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion and the War against Nazi Germany, 1941-45* (Oxford, 2001), p. 9.

[6] Ibid, pp. 13-15.

[7] Ibid, pp. 16-19.

[8] Dallek, *Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 199-202.

[9] Melvin Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy: The Impact of Domestic Politics on US Foreign Policy, 1789-1994* (Baltimore, 1996), p. 65.

[10] Quoted in Dallek, *Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 243.

[11] Ibid, pp. 245-6.

[12] Robert Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections* (New York, 1974), p. 46.

[13] Dallek, *Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 248-9.

[14] Franklin D. Roosevelt, Statement on Peacetime Universal Selective Service. September 16, 1940. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15859&st=&st1 Nov. 10, 12.

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[17] Harold Gosnell, *Champion Campaigner: Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York, 1952), p. 181.

[18] Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, pp. 37-40.

[19] Divine, *Foreign Policy and US Presidential Elections*, p. 53.

[20] Dallek, *Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 249.

[21] Casey, *Cautious Crusade*, p. 37.

[22] "Gallup and Fortune Polls" in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 1, March 1941, p. 143.

[23] David Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbour: Roosevelt's America and the Origins of the Second World War* (Chicago, 2001), pp. 95-8.

[24] Quoted in Dallek, *Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 253-260.

[25] Ibid, pp. 237-243, Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbour*, pp. 88-92.

[26] Reynolds, *From Munich to Pearl Harbour*, p.101.

[27] Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy*, p. 72.

[28] Dallek, *Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy*, p. 267.

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*Written by: Luke Devoy*
*Written at: London School of Economics*
*Written for: Matthew Hinds*
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