

## **Foreign Policy in the Electoral and Governing Coalitions of Barack Obama**

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**Richard Eichenberg**  
**Department of Political Science**  
**Tufts University**

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"I don't oppose all wars. What I am opposed to is a dumb war." State Senator Barack Obama, October 2, 2002.

**Introduction**

The outcome of the presidential election of 2008 can be characterized by two contradictory assertions. The first is that Senator Barack Obama would not have won the presidency had he not opposed the Iraq War. The second is that the outcome of the voting on November 5, 2008 was largely unaffected by voters' opinions of the war. Of course, the statements are only apparently contradictory, and the resolution of the contradiction can be found in the sequential nature of the primary and general election process. That is, in addition to the widely discussed strategic and organizational advantages that the Obama organization brought to the primary campaign, it is entirely plausible that his opposition to the Iraq War helped secure the narrow margin by which he prevailed over Senator Clinton. As for the general election, the conventional wisdom is that the deterioration in economic conditions in the Fall of 2008 secured with finality the victory that election prognosticators had already foreseen for some time (Saldin 2008; Abramowitz 2008; Erikson and Wlezien 2008).

The accuracy of the conventional wisdom is something I will reevaluate in this article, but careful study of the sequential process of primary and general elections is important for an additional reason. Whatever the mix of partisanship, candidate qualities, and issue preferences that are ultimately identified as most important to the voting outcome, citizen preferences on foreign policy issues will be crucial to the level of support—or lack of it—that President Obama

will enjoy as he attempts to implement his foreign policy agenda. Indeed, the degree of consensus on these issues may influence the decisions that he makes. In this article, I therefore reconsider the extent to which issues of foreign and national security policy influenced the outcome of the primary and general elections of 2008, and I also describe citizen foreign policy preferences both before the election and after President Obama's first nine months in office.

I proceed as follows. In the immediately following section, I review the outcome of the 2004 presidential election as prologue to the 2008 election. The 2004 election is important not only because of the consensus view that the outcome was heavily influenced by foreign policy considerations—especially the issues of terrorism and war—but also because gender played a particularly important role in the outcome. Second, I illustrate the importance of the Iraq War to Obama's success in the primaries. Third, I compare the impact of important domestic and foreign policy issues as determinants of the vote in the 2008 election and ask if Obama's success can be attributed to the fact that women “came home” to the democratic candidate because of their views on the war. Finally, I review a variety of citizen foreign policy preferences and evaluate the degree of consensus that characterizes public opinion on important issues on the Obama foreign-policy agenda.

### **Prologue: Gender, Terrorism and the Elections of 2004 and 2006**

When President Bush declared on May 1, 2003 that major combat operations in Iraq had ended, his approval rating stood at approximately 70 percent (Eichenberg and Stoll 2004b).<sup>1</sup> Yet by the time the campaign for the presidency was seriously underway in the summer of 2004, the

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<sup>1</sup> All references to presidential approval during 2004 are drawn from Eichenberg and Stoll (2004b). Approval figures represent the average of ratings reported by CBS/NYT, Gallup/CNN/USA Today, ABC/Washington Post, and the Pew Center for the People and the Press.

President's re-election was in trouble. The Iraqi insurgency and accumulating American war deaths had combined to erode his approval and jeopardize his prospects for reelection. By one calculation, the President's job approval rating fell by 1.5 percentage points for each 100 American war casualties, even in the presence of statistical controls for the state of the economy and the impact of major rally events in Iraq and elsewhere (Eichenberg and Stoll 2004b). In July 2004, as the convention of the Democratic Party got underway, the President who had once enjoyed approval ratings of over 90 percent now found them at slightly under 50 percent, the threshold under which re-election is placed in serious jeopardy. Not surprisingly given these numbers, some polls in summer 2004 found the President essentially tied with his opponent, Senator John Kerry.

Kerry's favorable position in the summer polls could be traced to the preferences of female voters (Eichenberg 2004). Of course, scholars have long known that women are less supportive of the use of military force (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Crowder-Meyer 2007), and specific features of the Iraq war –its unilateral nature and accumulating casualties in particular—are especially unpopular with women (Eichenberg 2003). Thus, it is not surprising that in July 2004 only 39 percent of women approved of the President's handling of Iraq, while 59 percent disapproved (among men 48 percent approved and 50 percent disapproved). Also not surprising is the fact that, after almost one and a half years of war in Iraq, John Kerry led Bush among women in July 2004 by 52 to 41 percent –the same 11 percent margin that Vice President Gore had achieved against Bush in 2000.

As Figure 1 shows, it seems plausible that Kerry's early polling strength among women resulted from concern about Iraq. In July, the Iraq War was the second most important issue among women, after the economy (not shown in the graphic). Significantly, terrorism was a far

lesser concern among women in July. For men (not shown), the reverse was true: terrorism was more important than the Iraq War (Eichenberg 2004). In sum, during the summer, Bush appeared vulnerable, and that vulnerability could be ascribed to the impact of war on gender politics: women, always more critical of war than men, were more concerned about Iraq and formed the basis of Kerry's competitive position. On the basis of evolving trends in casualties and the president's correlative decline in job approval, it appeared that Kerry could unseat the President, and the war was the single most important reason.

How did Bush salvage his reelection in these circumstances? As the title to Figure 1 is meant to suggest, I would argue that the answer lies in the Bush campaign strategy of diverting attention from Iraq by emphasizing the threat of terrorism and also by redefining the Iraq War as the "central front" of the war on terrorism. This was the relentless theme of the Bush campaign during summer 2004, culminating in the Republican convention in September that included not only the celebration of Bush as the anti-terror commander in chief, but also a barrage of criticism of Kerry. Senator Kerry himself was famously silent or reticent about Iraq until a September speech at the University of Pennsylvania on the eve of the first debate on national security (Washington Post 2004). Nonetheless, as Figure 1 shows, the Bush campaign by late summer had succeeded in raising the salience of terrorism among female voters and reducing the salience of Iraq. Perhaps more surprising, the same polls showed that the percentage of women who disapproved of his handling of Iraq also declined during this period (Eichenberg 2004).

Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, on election day Bush polled strongly among female voters, reducing by 8 percentage points the margin by which Gore had bested him in 2000. Perhaps not surprisingly, during the final week of the campaign, Bush led Kerry by 8 percentage points among women on the question of which candidate was better trusted to handle the issue of

terrorism (the margin was 30 points among men). More surprising given his deficit on the Iraq issue during the summer, Bush also led Kerry by 3 percentage points on the question of which candidate could be better trusted to handle the Iraq War (Princeton Survey Research Associates [PSRA] 2004). In summary, as several analyses of the vote in 2004 have confirmed, Bush's victory –open to some question in July 2004—ultimately rested on the success of his campaign to make terrorism the defining issue of the election and to define Iraq as part of his war against terrorism. Bush was also widely seen as the leader best suited to handle these issues. Perhaps uniquely among American elections, the election of 2004 was largely determined by national security issues (Campbell 2005; Jacobson 2005; Abrahamson, Aldrich, Rickerhauser, and Rohde 2006).

Having secured re-election, President Bush famously declared: "I earned capital in this campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it"(Schneider 2005). That capital was soon depleted, and most of the erosion was due to the deterioration of the situation in Iraq. Especially in 2006, American casualties remained high as Iraq descended into civil war following the destruction of the Samarra mosque in February. The war in Afghanistan also continued to simmer. Not surprisingly, Bush's approval rating also plummeted, falling to 38 percent in November 2006, when midterm elections to Congress took place. The losses suffered by Republican candidates in 2006 have been widely attributed to the President's unpopularity and to the unpopularity of the war in Iraq –indeed, the war and the Bush Presidency had become near-synonymous at this point in time (Eichenberg and Stoll 2006). In Jacobson's view, the 2006 midterms were in effect a referendum on Bush and Iraq. Indeed, by Jacobson's estimate, had the economy been the only factor weighing on voters, the Republicans might have lost no seats at all (Jacobson 2007).

Not surprisingly given the importance of war to voters in 2006, gender polarization was a prominent feature of voting in the midterm election. We have already seen that President Bush had narrowed the Republican disadvantage among women in his 2004 victory. By 2006, the national exit polls in races for the US House of Representatives showed that Democrats had outpolled Republicans among women by 12 percentage points, exactly double the gap that had existed in the 2004 house races (CNN 2006). Gender polarization on war issues also increased. Figure 3 shows gender differences in support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (% men support - % women support). From 2001 through 2004, the differences were less than 10 percentage points, which is exactly the historical average (since 1980) of the gender difference in support for all uses of military force by the US (Eichenberg 2003). Beginning in 2005, however, gender differences increased as the violence in Iraq escalated and the war in Afghanistan continued (after 2005, the average gender difference is 18 percent for Afghanistan and 12 percent for Iraq).<sup>2</sup> For political purposes, the key year is 2007, for this was the year in which Senators Obama, Clinton, and McCain announced their candidacy for the 2008 election to the presidency. We have already noted that President Bush's job approval continued to decline during this period, and that disenchantment with the war was a major reason for his sagging fortunes. Figure 3 shows that disenchantment with the wars had also caused an increasing polarization of gender politics, with women much more critical of the wars than men. To the extent that this disenchantment should translate into votes for the Democrats, the prospects for any candidate who would contest the Republicans looked particularly bright. But first Democrats would have to choose a candidate, and presumably the same logic would hold –the

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<sup>2</sup> Between 2001 and 2007, support for the war declined from 84 percent to 58 percent among men and from 74 percent 39 percent among women.

candidate who could most convincingly offer an alternative position on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan stood a very good chance of success.

### **The Iraq War Issue in the Democratic Primaries**

Senator Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency on January 16, 2007, and Senator Clinton announced on January 20. As Figure 4 shows, for most of the ensuing year the candidates faced a political landscape that was dominated by the Iraq War. From January through October 2007, the Iraq War remained the “most important problem” listed by survey respondents nationwide (averaging over 20 percent of the electorate), and although concern for the economy began rising toward the end of the year, concern for Iraq remained fairly high and remained so through the Spring of 2008 (about 10 percent of the public considered Iraq the most important issue as late as April 2008). The same pattern held true in the early primary states. As late as November 2007, surveys in the early primary states of Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina revealed that Iraq remained by far the issue that voters would “most like to hear presidential candidates talk about” (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press [Pew] 2007). In fact, in November 2007 the margin by which Iraq received the first mention (before the economy) was almost three to one in Iowa and two to one in New Hampshire and South Carolina (Pew 2007).

The significance of this concern for Iraq throughout 2007 is that it came during the crucial period when the Democratic candidates were recruiting political allies, donors, and volunteers. Not surprisingly, Senator Obama (and the press) homed in on his differences with Senator Clinton on the Iraq War issue throughout this period. As two experienced chroniclers of the presidential campaign later argued with respect to Obama’s 2002 speech opposing the war:

“His speech didn’t attract national attention, didn’t affect the outcome of the debate over Iraq, and didn’t elevate Obama’s political stature. But it did attract the growing antiwar groups and passionately liberal activists who exercised great influence in the Democratic Party. Of all the candidates, Obama had staked out the earliest, clearest, and most eloquently expressed opposition to the war” (Balz and Johnson 2009, 22).

When the first voting was held in the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008, the national polls showed that the economy had become the most important issue to voters. However, an “entrance” poll in Iowa showed that Iraq and the economy were equally important to caucus voters, with health care a close third. The entrance poll also showed that Obama and Clinton had tied among those most concerned about the economy, and Obama led Clinton by 4 percentage points among those most concerned about healthcare. Most importantly, among Iowa voters who were most concerned about Iraq, Obama scored his largest margin: 9 percentage points.<sup>3</sup>

In effect, the Iraq War issue helped Obama to victory in Iowa, a result that substantially contributed to the credibility of his candidacy going forward. Five days later, a similar result occurred in Obama’s narrow loss to Clinton in New Hampshire, where the economy was now listed as most important to primary voters by the margin of 38 to 31 percent of voters. Among these, Clinton bested Obama by 9 percentage points (44 to 35). However, among the 31 percent of voters who listed the Iraq War as the most important issue, Obama led Clinton by precisely the same margin of 44 to 35 percent (CNN 2008). In effect, Clinton’s narrow victory in New Hampshire occurred because the percentage of voters that were concerned about the economy was slightly larger, but Obama’s close second (and a tie in the number of pledged New

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<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere, references to cross-tabulations of exit poll data (such as vote by issue concern) are taken from the compilation of the *Washington Post*, <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/2008-presidential-candidates/primaries/exit-polls/topics/most-important-issue/d/>

Hampshire delegates) can be traced to voters concerned about Iraq. Although it is difficult to separate the effects of ideology, gender, and other characteristics without multivariate analysis of the exit polls, it seems plausible at a minimum that in both Iowa and New Hampshire, Obama's strength among those concerned about Iraq offset Clinton's advantage among those concerned with the economy. The Iraq War kept Obama in the game.

As Figure 5, shows, this pattern held in several later primaries won by Senator Clinton. In California, Massachusetts, Arizona, Texas, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, Senator Clinton scored overall victories and dominated Obama among voters most concerned with the economy by an average of over 15 percentage points. Nonetheless, Obama actually defeated Clinton among the still substantial percentage of voters in these same states whose first priority was the war (in these six states, an average of 26 percent of voters listed Iraq as their most important issue).<sup>4</sup> *But the reverse is not true.* Specifically, there is only one state won by Obama in which Senator Clinton "clawed back" a leading percentage among any specific group of issue voters (the exception is Oregon, which Obama won but in which Clinton narrowly prevailed among voters most concerned about health care).

This pattern is crucial given the fact that the percentage of voters most concerned about Iraq remained high throughout the primary season (it averaged 26 percent versus 51 percent naming the economy as most important). Because the Democratic primary process was essentially a sequential national primary with proportional representation, and given the fact that Senator Obama won the nomination by securing a plurality of only 123 pledged (elected) delegates, his ability to draw votes from among those concerned about the war may very well

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<sup>4</sup> The same pattern held in Indiana, a state in which Clinton and Obama tied at 48 percent of the overall vote.

have been decisive. While it may be true that demographics were indeed destiny in the primary victories of the respective candidates, it is also true that Obama won on the Iraq issue even in states where Clinton prevailed.

### **War, the Economy, and the General Election of 2008**

We have seen that the Iraq War was critical to the sequential process that led up to the election of Barack Obama in November 2008. In 2004, concern for –and disapproval of—the war was high, but it was overcome by President Bush, who successfully diverted voter attention to the issue of terrorism, a tactic that also overcame women’s particularly strong disapproval of the Iraq war. Thereafter, the war and gender polarization on war issues reasserted themselves as influences on voters. The Democrats’ success in 2006 and the evolving advantage enjoyed by Democrats as the election season unfolded in 2007 can both be plausibly ascribed to voters’ rejection of policies in Iraq, a rejection that extended to the Republican Party generally.

Senator Clinton’s candidacy in the primaries complicated whatever advantage Obama might have gained in the primaries among women concerned about the war, but we have seen that the war itself did help him at the margins in a delegate competition in which marginal advantage was crucial. And as Figure 6 shows, the outcome of the contest with Senator McCain in November 2008 saw the reemergence of the gender advantage that Democrats had enjoyed before 2004. Indeed, Obama’s 13 point advantage among women was the largest for any Democratic candidate since Bill Clinton defeated Robert Dole among women by 16 percentage points in 1996 (*New York Times* 2008).

Could it be that the war explains—at least in part—the huge gender advantage that Obama achieved against Senator McCain? Figure 7 suggests not. Confirming what many have observed, the implosion of the economy in the fall of 2008 led to a truly prodigious increase in citizen concern for economic issues, dwarfing concern about Iraq or any other issue. The magnitude of the concern is difficult to overstate. According to exit polls, in no election in recent memory has concern for one single issue so dominated. For example, concern for the economy was 26 percent in the election of 2000 and 21 percent in 1996. Significantly, one has to go back to 1980 to find a comparable concern for the economy—a total of 58 percent of voters in that year were concerned about economic issues—which helps to explain why Ronald Reagan achieved a landslide result against President Carter (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research nd).<sup>5</sup>

Figure 8 displays Obama’s advantage over McCain in answer to the question “which presidential candidate do you think would do a better job handling each of the following issues as president?” (PSRA 2008). Clearly, economic and domestic issues conferred a far larger advantage on Senator Obama than did the Iraq War. Moreover, Figure 8 shows that Iraq did not particularly advantage Obama among women (as we might have expected), and the terrorism issue worked against him among both men and women. The figure shows that Obama’s largest advantage—among both men and women—occurred among the far more numerous voters who were most concerned about healthcare, the economy and jobs, and problems in the financial sector. Obama did enjoy disproportionate support among women concerned about three issues. Not surprisingly given previous research (Alvarez and McCaffery 2003; Crowder-Meyer 2007),

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<sup>5</sup> Comparable or higher levels of concern for the economy occurred in the recessions of 1974/1975 and 1981/1982 (Smith 1980; 1985)

these included the issue of taxes and spending, on which women are generally to the left of men, but it also included those concerned about gas prices and energy policy and this poll's strange agglomeration of issues labelled "abortion, guns and same-sex marriage." The election day exit polls showed the same thing, although Obama's margin on the economy was not as large as the pre-election poll shown in Figure 8 (CNN 2008). In summary, gender *did* play a role in the 2008 outcome, and Obama did secure a gender advantage on some issues. *But the Iraq War was not one of them.* Although the winding road that led Obama to his party's nomination can be plausibly ascribed to his stance on Iraq, ultimately his victory in the general election was assured by the advantage that Democrats traditionally enjoy on economic, budgetary, and social policy issues.

### **The Contours of Foreign Policy Coalitions**

It is important to remind ourselves that much of what we know about citizen opinion on foreign policy and national security policy is limited to survey questions that are administered during the electoral season. And paradoxically, although electoral campaigns produce a virtual torrent of polling, little about the texture of foreign policy choices is covered by these polls. Even scholarly election studies, which must cover a wide range of questions on personal background, ideology, candidate assessments, and domestic issues, usually confine their attention to only a few of the most pressing global issues. In 2008, this certainly included the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, but there was very little survey work on such important issues as alliance politics, multilateral diplomacy, the global economic crisis, climate change, the cost of national security, how to deal with Iran, US strategy in Afghanistan, and many other issues. As a result, we tend to view the politics of foreign policy through a narrow prism—in 2008 it was the prism of war—but there are other important foreign policy issues on which citizen opinion may prove important.

Indeed, as President Obama moved beyond the honeymoon period to the normal (polarized) state of partisan politics, the degree of consensus on these issues became an important factor as he faced important decisions on Iran, Afghanistan, climate change, and other issues.

Fortunately, the *Transatlantic Trends* survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) has explored foreign policy issues in some detail since 2002. Further, in 2008, *Transatlantic Trends* also ascertained citizens' vote intention in the Obama-McCain contest, and in 2009 the survey included voters' retrospective recall of their actual votes.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore possible to ascertain whether the Obama voter coalition and the McCain coalition had substantially different foreign policy views, and repeated questions allow us to evaluate the robustness of patterns in the data.

I begin with Table 1, which shows the GMF data for June 2008 on a question asking which issue "should be the top priority for the next American President and European leaders." Clearly, the voters supporting the two candidates had different sets of foreign policy priorities – so much so that one might speak of two different foreign policy coalitions. Intended Obama voters were most concerned about economic problems, but they also divided substantial concern among three additional issues (the Middle East, climate change, and terrorism). In contrast, McCain voters displayed a singular concern for terrorism, with much less concern than Obama voters for economics, the Middle East, and (especially) climate change. McCain voters were also more concerned about the spread of nuclear weapons. The difference in rank orderings is worth emphasizing. McCain voters ranked terrorism first by a wide margin, while Obama voters

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<sup>6</sup> It is true that retrospective questions on voting tend to produce inflated turnout percentages, so the data here should be interpreted to mean "those who claimed to have voted for Obama/McCain". As it turns out, the percentage who report voting for Obama (53 percent) and McCain (47) match the actual vote exactly.

ranked it fourth. Obama voters show visible concern for climate change (ranking it quite closely to other issues following the economy), while McCain voters registered very little concern for climate change at all. In summary, intended McCain voters in 2008 were concerned primarily with national security (terrorism and nuclear weapons). Obama voters displayed a more differentiated set of priorities, and in any case they were less concerned about the security issues and more concerned about nonmilitary issues –the economy and climate change in particular.

Table 2 shows that little had changed after 6 months of the Obama presidency, despite the continuation of a very severe economic downturn. True, the priority of economic concerns did increase, but the relative priorities of Obama and McCain voters –now recalling their vote choice—changed only little. Despite the condition of the economy, McCain voters remained more concerned about terrorism by a substantial margin, while the concerns of Obama voters remain more broadly distributed. The noticeable difference in attention to climate change also remains. Six months into the Obama presidency, then, the foreign policy coalitions that had characterized the election in 2008 were little changed: despite increasing attention to economic concerns, McCain voters remained concerned primarily with national security issues, while Obama voters continued to show a more distributed set of concerns, with comparatively greater attention to nonmilitary issues, such as the global economy and climate change.

The remaining question is whether these differing priorities translate into different views on specific policy choices on the foreign policy agenda. Tables 3 and 4 indicate that they do. In June 2008 (Table 3), there is some hint of cross-party consensus: on the question of US global leadership, use of combat troops in Afghanistan, and providing security assistance to Ukraine and Georgia, upwards of 60 to 90 percent of both Obama and McCain voters approve. On two

sets of issues, however, there are substantial differences. First, Obama voters are more warmly disposed to a close partnership and alliance with Europe. On the question of a closer partnership with Europe in particular, the parties are divided: a majority of Obama voters prefer a closer partnership, whereas McCain voters are divided between partnership and independence from Europe. Of course, this difference likely represents both a residue of the past (the Bush administration's acrimonious relations with European partners) and a resonance with the themes of the 2008 campaign, in which candidate Obama emphasized the rebuilding of alliances and consultation with Europe as cornerstones of his foreign policy approach (Obama 2007).

The second clear divide occurs in reaction to specific national security choices. For example, on the question of using military force to compel Iran to desist from developing nuclear weapons, there is a stark divide: a 62 percent majority of McCain voters preferred to maintain the option of using military force, whereas a narrow plurality of Obama voters prefer to rule out the use of force altogether. Obama voters were also more critical of the defense budget. The question on promoting democracy abroad suggests that Democrats may be applying an "Iraq War filter" to the question: 56 percent of McCain voters endorse a US role in promoting democracy, compared to only 30 percent of Obama voters.

Combining the data on foreign policy priorities in Tables 1 and 2 with these data on specific foreign policy choices, we see a pattern that is not unlike the opinion structure that has been described by scholars of US public opinion since the Vietnam war (Wittkopf 1990, 1996; Holsti 2004; Asmus, Everts, and Isernia 2004). Democrats and Republicans are polarized not so much by the question of *whether* to remain involved in the world (American global leadership is virtually unquestioned), but rather on *which interests to pursue and how to pursue them*.

Republicans are plainly more concerned with national security (terrorism) and more likely to support the use of military force. They are also less multilateralist than Democrats. Democrats, in contrast, exhibit a broader set of priorities; show more concern for nonmilitary issues; and demonstrate less support for military instruments of power. However, as has often been true in the post-Vietnam era, it is notable that there is also some evidence of division *within* the Democratic Party, particularly on the question of using military force. On the question of preserving a military option in dealing with Iran, for example, there is a robust majority of 62 percent of McCain voters, while Obama voters are evenly divided.

Table 4 shows that this pattern continued seven months into the Obama presidency, and the 2009 data add additional detail on three issues that preoccupied President Obama during this period: Afghanistan, the global economic crisis, and climate change. Once again, in 2009 US global leadership is not questioned by followers of either party. Not surprisingly, however, they are substantially polarized in the general assessment of Obama's job performance in international affairs: 93 percent of those who voted for Obama in 2008 approved of his handling of international affairs in June 2009, but only 23 percent of McCain voters did so. Beyond that, there is noticeable polarization on four sets of issues.

The first is the degree of warmth expressed toward the European allies and the institutional manifestation of Europe's role in the world –the European Union. Although McCain voters join Obama voters in endorsing the NATO Alliance, this may be an expression of national security concerns as much as a desire to work closely with Europe, since the same group of voters is noticeably less favorable toward the European Union, and in any case they are less supportive of a closer partnership with Europeans (and particularly unenthusiastic about a partnership in

economic affairs). Whether this is a residue of the Bush years or a manifestation of a deeper Republican inclination to remain aloof from the European allies is unclear, but there is no question that the desire to work closely with the European allies is stronger among Obama adherents than among those who preferred McCain.

Second, there is clear polarization on policy choices involving the use of military force, although it is complicated by divisions among Obama voters. At the philosophical level, majorities of both party endorse military force as an instrument of policy (“war is sometimes necessary...”), but the Democrats less so than the Republicans, and in any case Obama adherents are far more likely to endorse the greater utility of *nonmilitary* instruments (“economic power is more important...”). More concretely, McCain voters demonstrate a robust majority for maintaining the option of using military force against Iran, while Obama voters are perfectly divided on the question (a situation that is little changed from the 2008 survey shown in Table 3). This same division among Obama voters also appears on the question of what to do about troop levels in Afghanistan: Obama voters are divided (24 percent increase, 39 percent reduce or withdraw altogether), while McCain voters show a plurality for increasing troops. Ironically, then, McCain voters are actually more strongly in favor of Obama’s actual policy decisions regarding Afghanistan than are Obama’s own voters!

Third, reactions to the economic crisis reveal both familiar polarization and a few surprises. On the familiar, Obama and McCain adherents divide severely on whether government spending to deal with the crisis has been “just right” or “too much” (few of either party think that it has been too little, but Obama supporters are more likely to express this minority view). More surprising are the questions that were designed to test the inclination toward protectionism that

the crisis might have engendered. To some extent they are contradictory: majorities of both Obama and McCain voters believe that we should solve our own problems first and buy American goods in response to the crisis, but the same majority also believes that we should “remain open to trade”. Whatever the explanation for this apparent contradiction, the real surprise is that Obama adherents *are not more protectionist (or nationalist) than are McCain adherents*. Given the subsample sizes of the two groups, their views are close to identical on two of the three questions dealing with the economic crisis. Of course, the conventional wisdom is that Democrats lean more protectionist than Republicans, a view that found some resonance during the primary season (in states, for example, like Ohio). Nonetheless, while speculative, these results suggest either that Democrats on the whole are less protectionist than we might think (83 percent endorse keeping trade open) or –perhaps more likely—that the severity of the crisis has evoked a nationalist streak in a Republican Party that is known to have shrunk to its conservative base. This interpretation is strengthened by the aversion of McCain voters to “economic partnership” with Europe. While this interpretation is speculative, the responses to these questions suggest a fascinating avenue for additional research, and in political terms they might indicate that global policies to deal with the crisis may be less domestically divisive than one might have thought. At least in terms of general orientations to global economic problems, Obama and McCain voters agree.

The same is not true for a final global issue: climate change. On this issue Obama and McCain supporters are polar opposites. Obama supporters in robust majorities are greatly or somewhat concerned about climate change, versus a minority of Republicans, and a surprisingly large majority of Obama voters is willing to sacrifice some economic growth as the cost of dealing with climate change. Very few McCain supporters are willing to make that sacrifice.

Equally significant, a robust majority of Democrats believe that climate change must be addressed internationally (as the Obama administration plans), while Republicans reject that view. In summary, Democrats differ from Republicans in their degree of concern for climate change, their willingness to sacrifice, and their willingness to deal with it through international diplomacy. All of this has very clear implications as the Obama administration moves to enact climate change legislation and to negotiate a new international climate change treaty: it is likely to be a bruising and polarized debate.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

My examination of the role of foreign and national security policy in the election of President Barack Obama suggests three important conclusions.

The first is that foreign policy is not just one important factor in American presidential politics –it has become one of the *primary* factors. This was certainly true of elections in 2004 and 2006, and it was also true of the 2008 election process, in which Obama’s position on the Iraq war was arguably the determining factor in his primary success. Perhaps this is not surprising. Since September 11, 2001, the US has been engaged in an overt and covert global effort to prevent terrorist attacks, and it has been engaged in two overseas wars. The human and financial costs have been enormous, and the emotional and political energy invested in these conflicts has been intense. Under such circumstances, it would be surprising were voters *not* to judge their candidates on the basis of their positions on national security policy.

Second, a review of the foreign policy preferences of Obama and McCain voters demonstrates that elections serve their representative function. With the possible exception of

policy in Afghanistan, Obama's foreign policy initiatives reflect the priorities and preferences of his voter coalition: the priority of economic concerns; rebuilding alliances, especially with Europe; negotiating with Iran; maintaining an Iraq withdrawal; engaging internationally on climate change and committing the United States to some global agreement on emissions reductions. These are all policies favored by the voters who supported Obama, preferences that are distinct from those of the opposition. Even on Afghanistan, we might note that his policies do not obviously contradict voter preferences. After all, Obama ran on a pledge to shift resources to Afghanistan, and at best his voter base can be characterized as ambivalent – divided—on the issue. Indeed, reaction to the President's decisions to increase troops announced in February and December 2009 were both met with majority approval among both Obama partisans and others.<sup>7</sup> In summary, the 2008 election produced a President whose policies reflect the preferences of his voters. In foreign policy, democracy worked.

Third, the Afghanistan example in particular reveals that foreign policy, in addition to having been crucial to Obama's election, has also been a major factor in the preservation of his governing capital and effectiveness. It is of course well-known that part of Obama's original appeal to voters arose from the expectation that he would not only change policies but also improve the country's global image. Not surprisingly, therefore, his general approval ratings on foreign policy have always been higher than those for domestic issues, and this is also true on particular issues, such as Afghanistan and terrorism. Indeed, in early 2010, when approval of Obama's approach to healthcare or the budget were as low as 30 to 35 percent, approval of his general approach to foreign policy and his handling of Afghanistan and terrorism ranged from 40 to over 50 percent (Pew Center for the People and the Press 2010). Thus, not only was foreign

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<sup>7</sup> Pollingreport

policy a key factor in Obama's emergence as a competitive candidate for president, it appears to be a factor helping to preserve his ability to govern at a time of severe partisan polarization.

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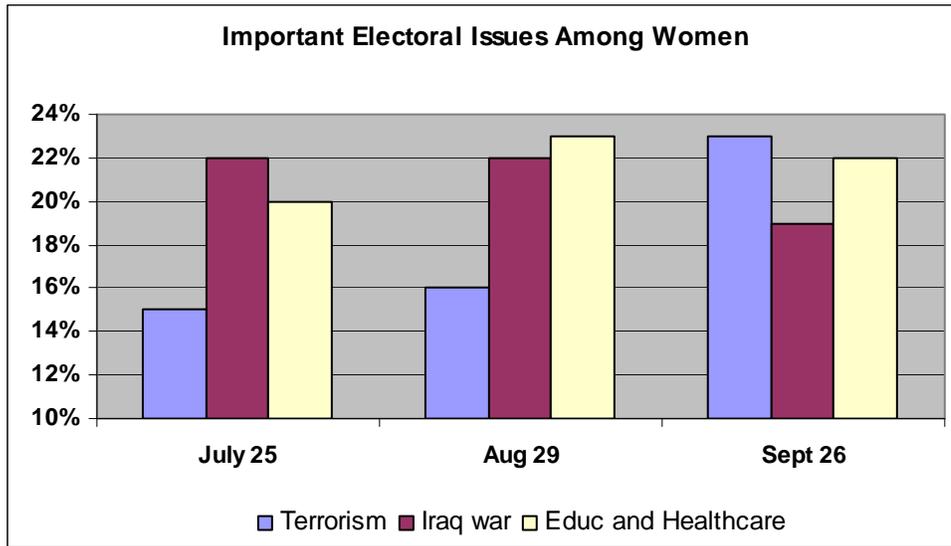
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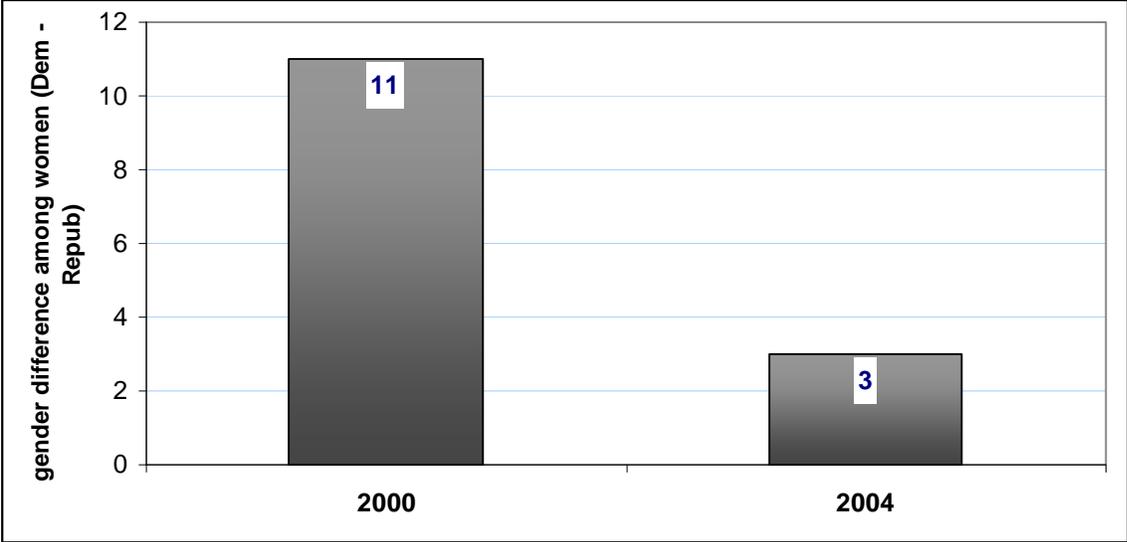
Figure 1. Campaigns matter: the most important issues among women in 2004



**Source:** Surveys by *ABC/Washington Post*, as reported in Richard C. Eichenberg, "Gender, National Security, and the Election of 2004", unpublished working paper,

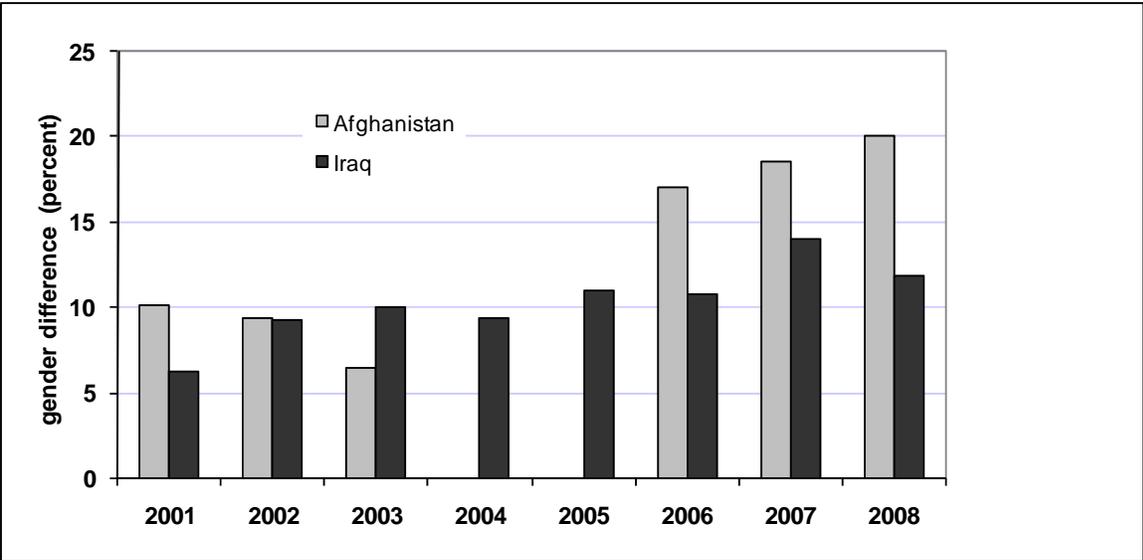
<http://ase.tufts.edu/polsci/faculty/eichenberg/election2004.htm>

Figure 2. Democrats' advantage in women's support for presidential candidates in 2000 and 2004



Source: Election day exit polls, as summarized in the *New York Times*, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/national-exit-polls.html>

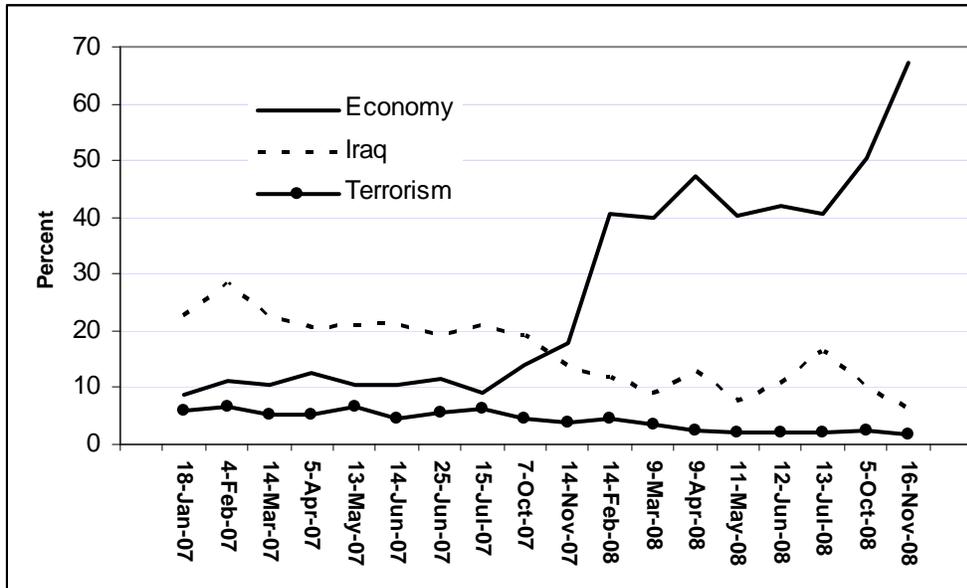
Figure 3. Average gender difference in support for military action in Afghanistan and Iraq



Source: Eichenberg (2009, under revision); this revises Eichenberg (2003).

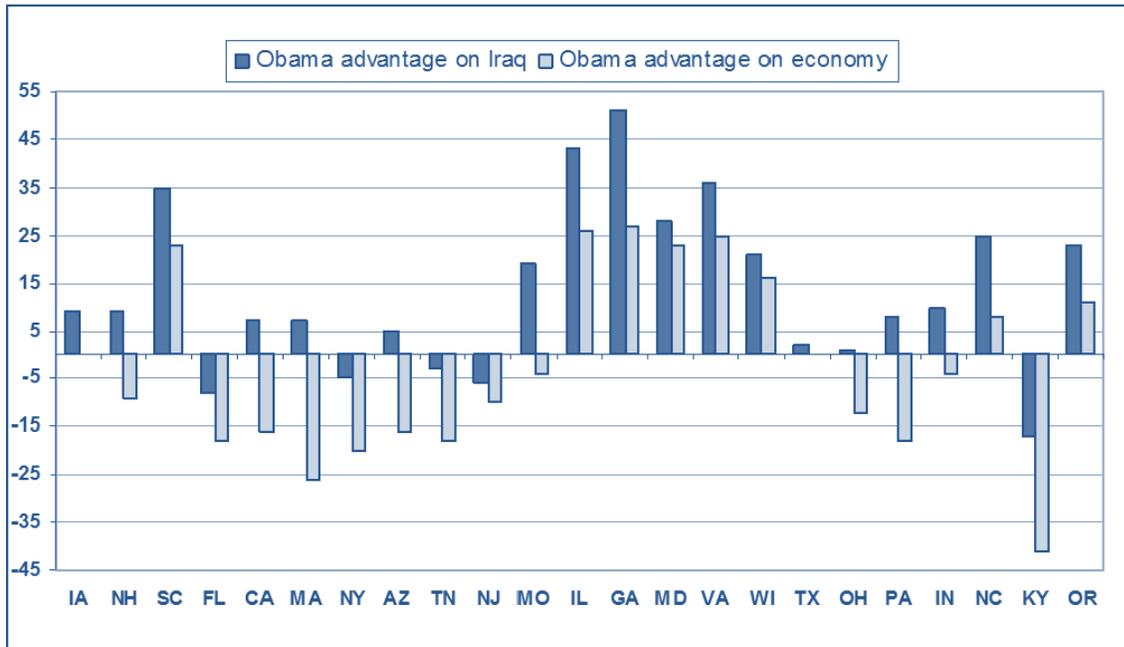
Note: The figure summarizes gender differences on all questions that query support for military action of all types in Afghanistan or Iraq (or approval, or agreement). Gender difference is male support% – female support%.

Figure 4. Most important problem facing the nation, 2007-2008



Source: The Gallup Poll, as constructed from *Gallup Brain* (subscription), accessed February 21, 2009.

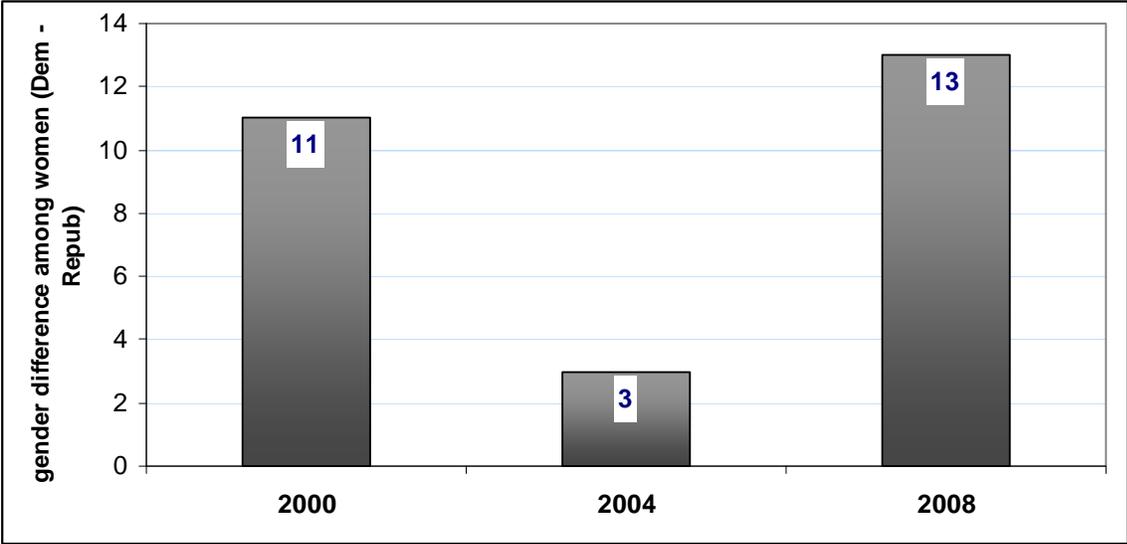
**Figure 5. Obama vote advantage or disadvantage on two issues in 23 Democratic primaries, as reported in exit polls**



**Source:** Exit polls reports, as summarized by the *Washington Post*, <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/2008-presidential-candidates/primaries/exit-polls/>

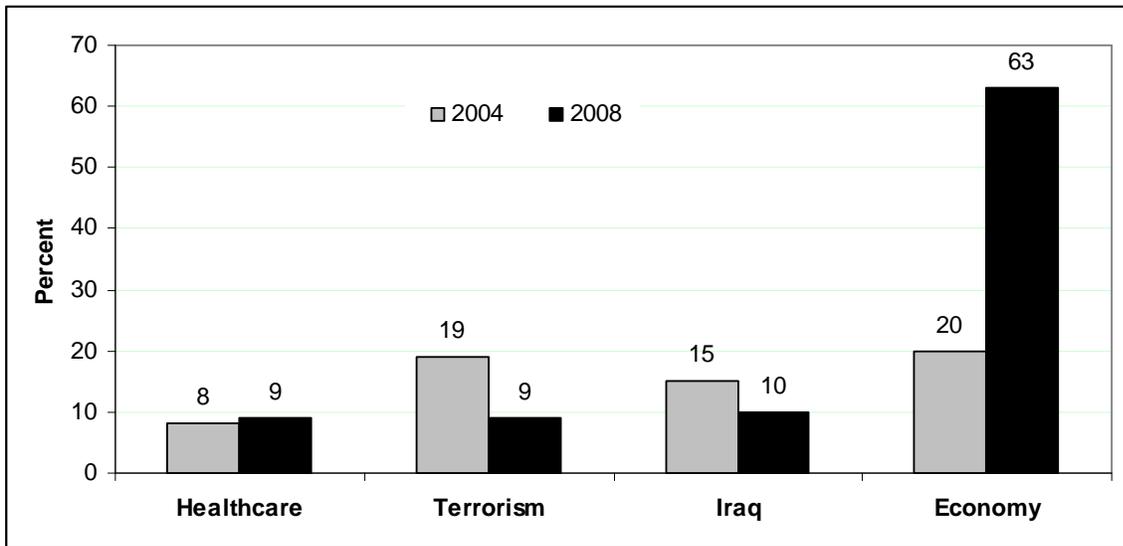
**Note:** The graphic shows the Obama vote advantage among voters who chose Iraq or the economy as the most important issue. Vote advantage is calculated on the basis of the “two candidate vote” (Obama and Clinton). Thus, the graphic shows the Obama percentage vote advantage versus Clinton among voters who chose Iraq and the economy as the most important issue.

Figure 6. Democrats' advantage in women's support for presidential candidates in 2000, 2004, and 2008



Source: Election day exit polls, as summarized in the *New York Times*, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/national-exit-polls.html>

Figure 7. Most important issues to voters in two general elections



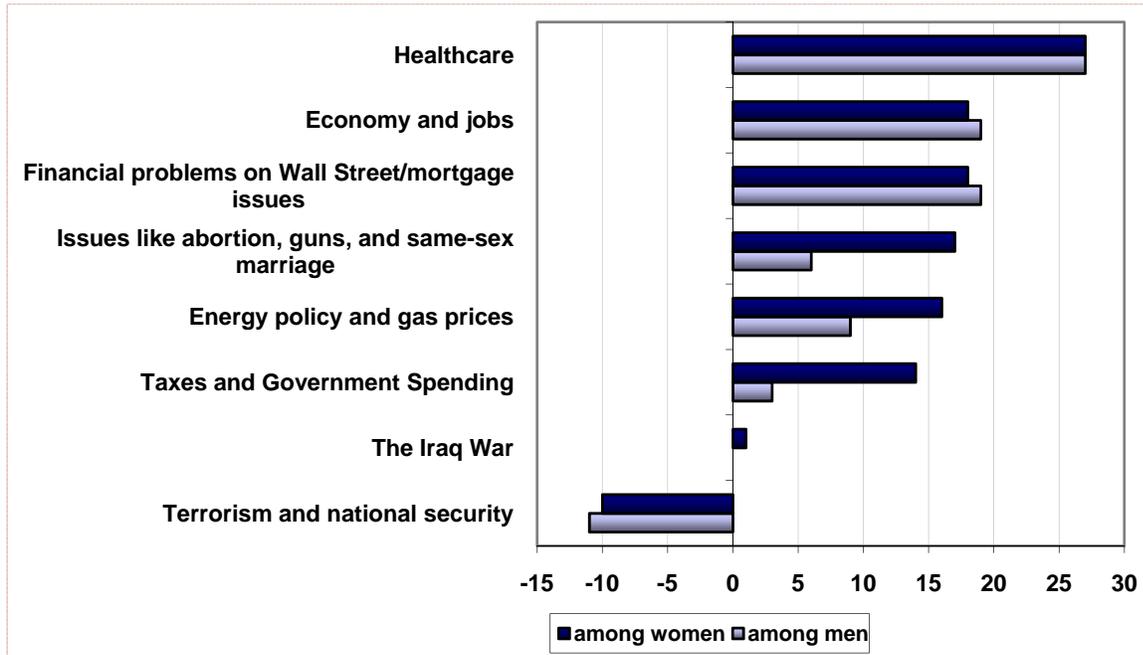
Source: CNN reports of exit polls:

<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html>

<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#USP00p1>

Note: Other response alternatives vary (not shown).

**Figure 8. Obama advantage or disadvantage in response to the question: “Which candidate [Obama or McCain] would do a better job handling....”**



**Source:** See Table 6.

**Note:** Obama advantage is percent who say Obama would better handle the issue minus the percent who chose McCain. The Obama advantage on Iraq among men is zero.

**Source:** Survey for *Newsweek*, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International, October 22-October 23, 2008 and based on telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,204.

Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut[Roper Center Study # USPSRNEW.102408.R09B].

**Table 1. Foreign policy priorities by vote intention (June 2008)**

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*Question text:* Which among these should be the top priority for the next American president and European leaders?

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	Vote Intention		Total
	Nov 2008		
	Obama	McCain	Sample
international terrorism	14%	41%	27%
international economic problems	27%	15%	21%
easing tensions in the Middle East	19%	10%	14%
climate change	15%	3%	10%
the spread of nuclear weapons	7%	12%	9%
stabilizing Afghanistan	8%	6%	7%
managing relations with China	6%	7%	6%
managing relations with Russia	1%	2%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

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**Source:** German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends 2008*. Sample size is 1000; 695 provided the vote intention shown in the table (53 percent Obama and 47 percent McCain). Fieldwork conducted June 5-23, 2008.

**Table 2. Foreign policy priorities by self-reported vote recall (June 2009)**

*Question text: Which among these should be the top priority for the next American president and European leaders?*

	Self-reported vote Nov 2008		Total
	Obama	McCain	Sample
international terrorism	17%	39%	27%
international economic problems	30%	25%	28%
easing tensions in the Middle East	13%	9%	15%
climate change	10%	1%	6%
stabilizing Afghanistan	9%	8%	8%
managing relations with China	6%	6%	6%
managing relations with Russia	3%	2%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

**Source:** German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends 2009*. Sample size is 1000; 790 provided their vote recall shown in the table. Fieldwork conducted June 12-27, 2009.

**Table 3. Foreign policy views by vote intention, June 2008**

	Vote Intention		Total
	Obama	McCain	Population
US global leadership is desirable	75	89	79
<i>Transatlantic Security Partnership</i>			
US-European partnership should become <i>closer</i>	57	39	48
US should be <i>more independent</i> from Europe	23	35	29
<i>NATO Alliance</i>			
NATO is essential to Western security	64	56	60
<i>Afghanistan</i>			
Approve US troops in combat role against Taliban	72	87	78
<i>Iran (preventing nuclear weapons program)</i>			
Increase diplomatic pressure but rule out use military force	38	19	29
Increase diplomatic pressure but keep use of force on table	37	62	49
<i>Russia</i>			
Provide security assistance to Georgia and Ukraine	57	67	62

*Democracy Promotion*

Agree it is US role to promote democracy abroad	29	53	41
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*Defense Spending*

Defense spending is too much	41	28	35
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Defense spending is just right	29	41	35
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**Source:** see Table 1.

**Table 4. Foreign policy views by self-reported vote recall, June 2009**

	Self-reported vote Nov 2008		Total
	Obama	McCain	Population
US global leadership is desirable	89	89	89
Approve Obama handling of international policies	93	23	61
<i>US-European relationship</i>			
Have favorable view of European Union	75	46	62
NATO is essential for security	66	60	62
Security partnership with Europe should be closer	53	42	48
Economic partnership with Europe should be closer	57	21	41
<i>Security Issues</i>			
Agree economic power is more important than military	71	54	63
Agree "war is sometimes necessary to achieve justice"	57	87	71
Iran: increase pressure but <b>rule out</b> use of military force	37	22	30
Iran: <b>increase pressure and maintain</b> military option	37	61	48
Favor reduce or withdraw troops from Afghanistan	49	24	37

Favor Increase troops to Afghanistan	22	34	27
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*Response to Economic Crisis*

US should remain open to trade	83	78	88
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Agree US should "solve our own problems first"	90	95	93
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Agree US should buy home goods	63	78	70
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Government spending to combat crisis is "just right"	42	12	29
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Government spending to combat crisis is "too much"	34	75	53
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*Climate Change*

Concerned about climate change	90	42	68
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Agree US should fight climate even if it slows economic growth	59	30	46
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Agree climate change can only be addressed internationally	65	47	57
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Totals: vote recall June 2009

**Source:** German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Transatlantic Trends 2009*. Sample size is 1000; 790 provided the self-reported vote shown in the table. Fieldwork conducted June 12-27, 2009.

