



Will U.S. military fatalities sway voters on Election Day?

Posted By Uri Friedman - Thursday, November 1, 2012

Time and again, we've been told that the economy is the most important issue in this year's campaign. But political scientist Douglas Hibbs believes economic indicators aren't the sole predictors of election outcomes. His "Bread and Peace" model, which forecasts the winner of presidential races based on growth in personal, after-tax income and American fatalities in unprovoked wars, is the only forecasting model I've come across that takes foreign policy into account in divining whether Barack Obama or Mitt Romney will triumph next week.

And unlike several competing models that focus on economic measures, Hibbs's has Romney beating Obama -- by a comfortable margin of 53-47.

So, is it the Peace component that's tipping the scale for Romney? Not so much. "There's not much action, I don't think, from Afghanistan on Obama's vote share," Hibbs told Foreign Policy, adding that there have been roughly 1,500 U.S. military fatalities in Afghanistan under the president's watch. "Proportional to U.S. population, that's just way too small to have great electoral effect." It's paltry income growth and the sluggish economic recovery, he argues, that could dash Obama's quest for a second term.

Hibbs, who cites John Mueller's 1973 study *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* as a major influence on his work, says that since World War II, troop fatalities have only played a decisive role in two elections: 1952 and 1968. In those instances, the bloody Korean and Vietnam wars torpedoed the campaigns of Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey despite favorable economic conditions.

"Absent America's interventions in the Korean and Vietnamese civil wars, the strong real income growth record prior to those elections (particularly in 1968) should easily have kept the Democrats in the White House," Hibbs wrote in a recent article for the journal *PS: Political Science and Politics*. His graph below shows the extent to which the 1952 and 1968 election results were outliers when you plot income growth against the incumbent party's share of the vote. As Hibbs sees it, the deeply unpopular wars raging during those two years produced the anomalous outcomes:

For some perspective on how today's post-draft, high-tech wars differ from Korea and Vietnam, consider this: There were 29,260 U.S. military deaths (190 per millions of U.S. population) in Korea at the time of the 1952 election and 28,900 (146 per millions of U.S. population) in Vietnam at the time of the 1968 election. The 1,500 fatalities under Obama, by contrast, amount to roughly five deaths per millions of U.S. population.

In his model, Hibbs distinguishes between "provoked" and "unprovoked" conflicts, with the implicit assumption that voters are more willing to stomach fatalities when the United States has been attacked. And he posits that when voters are unhappy about military casualties, they punish the party that initiated the deployment of U.S. forces. According to this logic, Americans won't hold fatalities in Iraq against Obama this year because he inherited the war from George W. Bush. But they will attribute fatalities in Afghanistan to the president, since Bush invaded Afghanistan in response to al Qaeda's provocation on 9/11 while Obama recast the conflict as a "war of necessity" and ordered a troop surge in the country.

It's unclear from polling whether voters make these distinctions and consider the Afghan conflict Obama's war, but Americans have clearly soured on the military engagement. According to a Pew Research Center poll last month, 60 percent of Americans want to remove troops from the country as soon as possible regardless of whether the situation there is stable, and more than half think the

military effort isn't going well. When pollsters ask voters what the most important issue facing the country is, the war in Afghanistan typically garners no more than 5 percent of responses.

I asked Hibbs whether military fatalities would have a more pronounced impact on the electorate if the media covered the Afghan war more extensively. "In an open and democratic society with quite a free and inquisitive and aggressive press, the press follows the reality, it doesn't create it," he responded. "If we had 1,000 guys coming home in body bags a month in Afghanistan like we did in Vietnam ... the press would be all over it."