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New START a Step Closer?

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|
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The Senate Foreign Relations Committee [approved out of committee](#)^[3] the New START Treaty by a vote of 14 to 4. All 11 Democrats voted in favor, along with three Republicans, Richard Lugar, Bob Corker, and Johnny Isakson. Prospects for ratification in the full Senate remain up in the air. It seems unlikely that the treaty will be ratified before the congressional recess, or the November elections. But a lame-duck session will be necessary to deal with other unfinished business, and odds are good that the treaty will be considered then.

I've weighed in [elsewhere](#)^[4] that the treaty makes sense and should be ratified. I don't expect it to revolutionize our relations with the Russians, for good or ill, and I don't expect it will have a huge impact on the number of nuclear weapons in the world. Arsenals are coming down, and will continue to come down, with or without the treaty. The verification provisions alone seem worthwhile enough to merit ratification.

The politics are curious to me, however. I simply can't believe that any senate race in the upcoming elections will turn on whether sitting senator X or challenger Y will vote in favor or against ratification. [Polling shows that Americans are overwhelmingly focused on domestic concerns](#)^[5]; foreign policy is unlikely to be a major factor in any race. The one foreign policy that most concerns people is the ongoing and deepening war in Afghanistan, and even that isn't likely to move senate or congressional elections. Arms control treaties seem like something out of the Cold War; not a pressing concern for Americans worried about jobs, health care, taxes, and American troops being shot at and killed in central Asia.

If senators are not driven primarily by political considerations on this issue, does that make ratification more or less likely? I honestly don't know. But I'll be watching some notable swing votes, including a number of senators who will be retiring this term, to see what signals they are sending. Ratification is likely to be a close-run thing, and may turn on just one or two individuals voting their conscience.

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- [4] <http://www.cato.org/pressroom.php?display=ncomments&id=335>
- [5] http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/media_press_room_detail.php?press_release_id=132