***War on the ballot: How the election cycle shapes presidential decision-making in war*, Andrew Payne, New York, Columbia University Press, 2023, 336 pp, £30, 9780231209656, eBook available.**

Reflecting on the future strategy of the United States in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson informed his National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy in March 1964 that 'I've got to win an election … And then you can make a decision' (p. 92). To that end, Johnson advised Bundy to include 'a little peace demagoguery for the mothers' in his upcoming presidential campaign, before later making the fateful escalatory decisions concerning the Americanisation of the Vietnam War in 1965 (p. 98).

Andrew Payne's *War on the Ballot* is replete with similarly compelling evidence that attests to the influence of the electoral cycle on the military strategy of US presidents. Crucially then, *War on the Ballot* advances upon previous International Relations studies of democratic foreign policymaking with a consideration of *how, why, and when* elections matter to leaders. Asking these questions enables *War on the Ballot* to move beyond the dominant approach within the discipline that narrowly focuses on the period directly preceding a presidential election, and also helps to explain the contradictory findings of prominent accounts that either stress or downplay the constraints of foreign policymaking in a democracy.

This is because, as Payne outlines in an excellent theoretical chapter, electoral pressures are 'a conditional source of constraint' that can either encourage or discourage presidents to pursue more aggressive or more defensive actions (p. 12). The conditionality depends on the relationship between presidents' strategic preferences and the perceived preferences of the electorate. *War on the Ballot* puts forward five different 'mechanisms' (though 'responses' may be a more apt term) that account for the variations in the relationship between strategic and electoral preferences: 'delay', 'dampen', 'spur', 'hangover', and 'spoiler'. The chapter also outlines the expected temporal sequence of these mechanisms, such as the 'hangover' mechanism only applying early in a first presidential term and the 'spoiler' mechanism occurring at the end of presidential terms.

The rest of the book is devoted to exploring these mechanisms in the context of the administrations of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. The book utilizes a vast array of archival material for the chapters on the wars in Korea and Vietnam, before capitalizing upon an impressive degree of access to policymakers directly involved in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Payne highlights, *War on the Ballot* thus introduces the reader to new evidence concerning the behind-the-scenes deliberations over US strategies during the War on Terror due to unique archival access and interviews with 20 important figures such as Anthony Blinken, George Casey, David Petraeus, and Michelle Flournoy.

For example, *War on the Ballot* presents compelling evidence of the 'delay' mechanism in the context of the 2007 military 'surge' in Iraq during the Bush administration. The delay mechanism – where presidents are in favour of increased military commitments but due to political fears wait until after election day before enacting policy change – is the most common policy response detailed in the book. This example of the Bush administration not "do[ing] anything that would be above the radar screen" in the run-up to the 2006 midterm elections (as then National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice put it) demonstrates one of the contributions of the book to the study of elections and foreign policy: it is not just presidential elections that matter.

The second term of the Bush presidency also illuminates the unique dynamics of a 'lame-duck' president, with Bush being willing to 'overrule virtually his entire national security team' in the wake of the 2006 midterm elections (p. 177). These dynamics speak to the interaction between electoral vulnerability and bureaucratic politics which would be well worth future exploration.

Nonetheless, Chapter 5 also shows that 'lame-duck' presidents are still subject to different forms of electoral pressures with what Payne labels the 'spoiler' mechanism. As the name suggests, the concept refers to how incumbent presidents' bargaining positions can be undermined by an upcoming election, such as Bush's relative powerlessness with Iraqi negotiators over the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement. In the words of former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, 'my role was to figure out … how to slow down the Washington clock, and how to speed up the Baghdad clock' (p. 182).

The case for the significance of electoral pressures is strengthened throughout the book by thought-provoking counterfactual analysis at the end of each chapter. As Payne argues, the empirics bring the influential literature on the effectiveness of democracies in war into question, as well as raising normative concerns about democratic policymaking. Not only do presidents appear to be admittedly risking soldiers' lives to enhance their electoral prospects, but this appears to be a logical outcome of the 'very institution designed to keep such behavior in check – the electoral process' (p. 238).

War on the Ballot outlines convincing future research avenues concerning the impact of institutional arrangements, including the consequences of the variation within and beyond democracies. The book also rightly flags the potential applicability of a similar research agenda regarding the initiation of conflict and other areas of foreign policy. After all, *War on the Ballot* shows that policymakers are always considering these competing forces. As Nixon put it in September 1963, his administration was fighting "three wars—on the battlefield, the Saigon political war, and US politics" (p. 126). Especially as significant conflict emerges and evolves in the twenty-first century, International Relations scholarship would do well to remember this.