

Understanding Foreign Policy in a World of Domestic Polarization

SCUSA 71 Policy Paper

Members:

Purpose

To maintain the integrity of our democracy, the desires of the American people should be considered in foreign affairs; however, the advice of foreign policy experts must take precedence to make the most educated policy decisions. As a democratic republic, the American government has a responsibility to follow the will of the people; however, to maintain its position as a world power, the United States must project an international image of power and stability. Therefore, the different factions within the Federal Government must work effectively alongside each other, with regard to the checks and balances and disregard for faction polarization.

Polarization in War

We currently find ourselves in an environment where Congress often offloads responsibility to the executive branch regarding the use of military force. This is politically expedient, as it creates an opportunity to vilify political opponents while avoiding responsibility for key decisions that affect re-election. This abdication of control over military action creates a challenge for American foreign policy in that if the majority of our foreign affairs are guided by executive agreement, how can our nation's leaders credibly commit to our partners that we won't default after four years?

While Congress offloads responsibility to the executive, politicians and pundits frame issues based on solutions that toe party lines, rather than on effectiveness. For example, when President Obama first discussed drawing down in Afghanistan, many critics presented the proposal as having been created by individuals who are "soft on terrorism"¹. The response is that critics don't care about bringing our troops home. This routine attack on the character and integrity of individuals' policy preferences, rather than the policies themselves, drives constituents to poles regardless of realities on the ground.

Lack of general awareness regarding foreign affairs among the population combined with misinformation increases party polarization between and within parties in regards to war. Because of this, people are more willing to blindly follow their party leaders and lack the initiative to seek out facts through lens other than their party's views. This is a contributing factor to the polarization of the political spectrum.

With increased polarization, we see an increase in polarization between Democrats and Republicans and within the parties, themselves. This public polarization translates to institutional polarization as leaders are incentivized to appeal to the extremes of their parties in order to secure voters. As the radical Left and radical Right have gained traction among the electorate; polarization within the party have become more pronounced. As a result, party leaders struggle to pass reasonable policy relating to foreign policy because it is becoming increasingly difficult to get multiple factions within the party to support a unified agenda, thus weakening the party as a whole.

Sensationalism within the media incentivizes politicians and their constituents to engage in polarized, malicious discourse. The simplicity and rapid tempo of modern media platforms inhibits nuanced and cooperative exploration of complex issues. The American people are both

¹ Peter Baker, "Obama Challenges Terrorism Critics," *New York Times*, February 7, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/08/us/politics/08terror.html>.

victims and perpetrators of this phenomenon, indoctrinated to glorify bombastic, combative rhetoric. Simplicity engenders caricaturization such that dissenting views become unacceptable, rather than disagreeable. In order to mitigate this trend, politicians must reorient their focus towards their legislation; political capital must be used in Congress rather than on Twitter.

Polarization in Trade

There has been an overall shift towards isolationism due to the externalities of globalization and free trade, resulting in disenfranchised Americans with experiences of deindustrialization and poverty. The disconnect between Americans and their elected leaders stems from inconsistency in political movement eroding government trust. Furthermore, domestic polarization has led to drastic stonewalling of parties to enforce party interests by the elected officials. The policy is at odds with the people while the people are at odds with the ideology, forming an entrenched gridlock of competing interests.

Causes of polarization on trade include a disenfranchised Middle America, inconsistency with policies due to administration change, the structuring of parties for political gain, simplified rhetoric surrounding trade policies, misinformation about trade policies, and industries exporting jobs outside of the United States. Many areas in America--principally the Rustbelt--has experienced catastrophic loss of industry in the past. Industries have looked to other nations for low-cost labor and more affordable products. Due to the loss of industry and the exportation of manufacturing jobs, discontent has arisen towards elected leaders, culminating in the paradigm shift of the 2016 election.

In national politics, there are frequent administration changes due to the two-party system pressing different agendas. Also prominent is the spread of misinformation regarding trade progressing to misinformation of a disenfranchised populace. The disenfranchised populace elect officials with more extreme agendas regarding trade. Due to the election of officials with more extreme agendas, polarization occurs in national politics; Furthering polarization of national politics occurs with the pursuit of party alliance by official with extreme agendas. Effects felt by the United States trade due to polarization are lack of trust in politicians, stonewalling of agendas in Washington, trade policy becoming a greater politicalized agenda, the loss of trade allies, and the further spread of misinformation.

Conclusion

Polarization's woes don't have to doom American politics forever. Real steps can be taken to improve our current situation. States ought to adopt independent commissions for redistricting, so congressional districts would not be drawn to favor strongly partisan officials. This has been practiced in Arizona and California, both of which are becoming more "purple" respectively, and whose representatives from these newly drawn districts tend to vote more moderately. Creating a "one-click" system that facilitates access to how representatives vote (including on bills related to the use of force), what programs are expiring, and how changes to legislation will affect their constituency will foster greater accountability for elected officials' decisions. Lastly, investing in better civic education will help inform constituencies on issues that directly impact their community, including America's conflicts. We believe this will create a situation where Congress leans forward and takes a more decisive role in foreign affairs.

Bibliography

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