**SCUSA 71 Table Paper:**

**Foreign Policy in an Era of Domestic Political Polarization**

In 1947, Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asserted on the Senate floor that we must stop “partisan politics at the water’s edge.” Vandenberg meant that domestic partisan conflict should not extend past America's borders. Doing so risked undercutting the authority of the state internationally by preventing U.S. political leadership from presenting a unified front to allies and foes. But in an America rife with polarization, do partisan domestic politics still stop at the water’s edge? This paper begins with a review of the polarized nature of contemporary American politics before assessing how domestic politics has historically shaped foreign policy. It then discusses how polarization puts institutional and political constraints on Congress and the President to construct foreign policy. It concludes by discussing the consequences of this condition and potential reforms to alleviate it.

**Polarization in American Politics**

Simply put, “polarization” refers to the extreme divergence of political attitudes. In American politics, it is generally used to refer to the ideological divergence of the two major parties in a way that suppresses moderates. If there’s one thing Americans agree on, it is that we are a polarized nation.

Scholarship in political science offers a more nuanced take. As a state, polarization refers to the extreme divergence of opinions; as a process, it constitutes a growth in such extremes over time. How polarization occurs is up for debate, with some scholars emphasizing elite polarization (through which party leaders polarize voters) while others emphasize popular polarization (in which opinion in the electorate polarizes representatives). Whether polarization comes from the top or bottom, it encourages citizens to interpret politics through a “perceptual screen” validating their partisan priors.

A variety of factors have contributed to polarization. As political elites drifted to ideological extremes since the 1960s, expelling conservative factions from the Democratic Party and liberals from the GOP, ideological overlap between the parties disappeared. As cable news programs with partisan takes have proliferated, consumers of news have become more partisan and politically engaged since fewer outlets offer programs conveying political information without a partisan skew. People with polarized opinions consequently self-sorted into the two major parties while moderates were left increasingly abandoned.

There is some scholarly disagreement as to whether the current climate is uniquely polarized in the scope of American history. However, regardless of whether we are polarized to an unprecedented degree, contemporary polarization has moved beyond disagreement over policy. Partisans today hold strongly unfavorable views about their opponents, as polarization has fostered an “us vs. them” mentality manifesting in anger, hostility, and resentment that goes beyond policy disputes.

Nonetheless, bipartisanship in foreign policy—often understood as congressional deference to the President regardless of party—has declined as the nation has divided ideologically. With the election of Donald Trump, who is viewed by many as a populist with views that challenge many elements of decades of American foreign policy, have partisan politics decisively crossed the water’s edge?
Domestic Politics and American Foreign Policy

American foreign policy literature typically focuses on the nation’s relative power—our material foreign policy capacities measured against our geopolitical competitors—at the expense of exploring its “usable power”—the power afforded to policymakers by domestic political conditions. Trubowitz and Harris argue that Presidents have “usable power” to pursue their foreign policy agendas when they get bipartisan support from Congress and sell their foreign policy as economic boons at home.

From 1930 through 1975, bipartisanship was a norm in foreign policy. Both parties included conservative and liberal factions, enabling Republicans to exploit North-South divisions in the Democratic Party to win bipartisan support for increased military spending while Democrats capitalized on East-West divides in the Republican Party to secure support for liberal internationalism. These coalitions gave policymakers political capital to use military force, initiate large humanitarian interventions abroad, and negotiate trade deals through the twentieth century.

In less polarized contexts, presidents and Congress had a harmonious relationship when setting the foreign policy agenda. FDR fused his emphasis on domestic economic security with free trade, opening the door for Republicans to embrace liberal internationalism and break the grip of the party’s western isolationist wing. Truman furthered Roosevelt’s legacy by securing Republican support for the Marshall Plan, even from the former isolationist Arthur Vandenberg and the fiscal conservative Robert Taft. Bipartisanship thus enhanced the plan’s credibility internationally (by signaling to other nations that it was even supported by isolationists) and domestically (by reassuring voters about its expense since fiscal conservatives were on board). Through the Cold War, JFK, LBJ, and Reagan secured bipartisan support from Congress for expansive internationalist agendas by fusing anti-communism with strong national defense and a free trade agenda promising domestic economic growth. Tying liberal internationalism to national security and domestic economics made it nearly impossible for partisans in Congress to dissent from these presidents’ foreign policy agendas.

This political landscape began to change in the 1990s. Without a clear threat to American democracy after the end of the Cold War, support for liberal internationalism waned. President Clinton’s attempt to link free trade to economic growth fell flat as American workers soured on globalization as a source of economic opportunity. In the 2000s, Republicans responded by structuring foreign policy debates more heavily in national security terms, politicizing the fact that the public viewed Republicans as stronger in this regard. But reframing foreign policy more heavily in partisan terms hampered the party in the long-term. As U.S. military efforts in Iraq became perceived as costly and ineffective, public pressure to “do less” internationally helped drive the election of Barack Obama. Obama promised cautious diplomacy instead of military might, which secured support from his party but engendered hostility from across the aisle. By 2008, the Presidency’s “usable power” was shrinking. Both Bush and Obama failed to obtain bipartisan support for their foreign policy agendas from Congress. When their policies fell short, they were depicted as presidential defeats rather than failures for which both sides shared blame.

The Cold War era consensus on anti-communism from Truman to Reagan fostered elements of bipartisanship that linked grand strategic ambitions with national and economic security at home. But as we have seen, debates over foreign policy have changed in the polarized twenty-first century. How does this political climate affect the development and implementation of foreign policy?
Political and Institutional Effects on Foreign Policy

Constitutionally, both Congress and the President have central roles in the elaboration of American foreign policy. As polarization has increased, the nature of this relationship has changed.

Scholars of presidential politics have highlighted the tremendous advantage presidents have in foreign policy realms in comparison to Congress. But it’s not simply that power and information symmetries favor the President in foreign policy; it’s also that gridlock in Congress makes it hard to check presidential overreach. If members are polarized, it is difficult to build coalitions with a 60-vote filibuster proof Senate majority, or harder yet, a veto-proof two-thirds in both houses. This status quo bias inhibits Congress from implementing reform even if most members are unhappy with a policy.

What does this mean for foreign policy? Members of Congress first and foremost remain wedded to the preferences of their districts. They are often willing to expend political capital in pursuit of narrow particularistic interests that please their constituents, but are less eager to do so when it comes to protecting the institutional prerogatives of Congress. Since presidents have natural advantages in foreign policy, this has enabled executives to increase control over foreign policy without concern that Congress will act to reassert its own authority. Protecting the institution’s privileges remains significantly below appeasing constituents on the list of priorities for members of Congress.

As foreign policy has polarized, Congress has traded away some collective institutional prerogatives to the President to maximize ex post opportunities to claim credit for good foreign policy while blaming the executive for failures and avoiding responsibility. This development complements literature exploring the growth of the unitary executive, a President relatively unbound by Congress to unilaterally construct policy. According to unitary executive theory, since Congress is unable to perform its duties quickly and efficiently, an empowered executive is necessary to meet the complexities of time-sensitive demands in the modern international system. Critics of the unitary executive suggest that Congress’s unwillingness to protect its institutional powers has been essential to the rise of the unitary executive. Notably, literature on “diversionary theory” contends that this has enabled executive branch adventurism. By permitting presidents to use military ventures as diversions from domestic political turmoil and discord with Congress, executives can pursue the elusive “rally around the flag effect” when things are not going well at home without concern that Congress will meaningfully check their behavior.

While this scenario makes intuitive sense, this literature sits uncomfortably in contrast to empirical research on the party cover thesis. This theory contends that under unified government, presidents are more likely to take bold risks in foreign policy. If their party controls Congress, it diffuses responsibility for their decisions; successes and failures alike are shared by the party. But under divided government, the theory postulates that presidents are less likely to pursue high-risk foreign policy for fear that their partisan opponents in Congress will force them to bear all the blame should those policies fail.

Empirical analysis validates the party cover thesis and challenges diversionary theory—presidents are less likely to engage in bold foreign policy when their domestic agenda is obstructed by partisan politics. In fact, the risks of pursuing diversions during divided government carry political risks that significantly outweigh the meager benefits of any measurable “rally around the flag” effect. So when Presidents are plagued by domestic strife, the “diversions” they pursue in foreign policy are typically
low-risk, low-cost, and low-reward. Small foreign aid projects that require minimal investment and effort are often deployed for diversionary purposes when Presidents are struggling to work with Congress. But when they are successfully pushing their legislative agenda, presidents are far more likely to initiate high-risk military interventions, renegotiate trade arrangements or build new ones, or pursue expensive foreign aid projects. With the party’s support in Congress, they have political cover should those decisions backfire.\textsuperscript{31}

Advocates of unitary executive theory emphasize how presidents have increasingly worked to outmaneuver dysfunctional and polarized Congresses through unilateral action to meet the demands of a globalized political world.\textsuperscript{32} This is particularly clear in the growth of executive agreements as an alternative to the treaty process.\textsuperscript{33} But a polarized Congress does not simply create a power vacuum in foreign policy that is filled by presidents eager to seek political victories abroad to sell during their next campaign. Rather, a gridlocked Congress inhibits Presidents from taking risks in lieu of low-cost, low-risk, low-reward policies. Intense polarization does not contribute to the unitary executive, but it makes both Congress and the President unwilling to take the lead in foreign policy, undercutting the capacity of the U.S. government’s position as a leader in international politics.

**The Costs of Polarized Foreign Policy**

What happens when American foreign policy is hampered by polarization at home? Overseas, less bipartisanship leads to less faith in the credibility of U.S. foreign policy commitments. Without durable policy from Congress, Presidents can quickly undo their predecessors’ legacies through their unilateral choices, whether it’s President Bush pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol, President Obama leaving Iraq, or President Trump abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Paris Climate Agreement, and Iran Nuclear Deal. This instability not only means that allies and foes doubt the credibility of America’s foreign policy, but so does the American public, which views bipartisanship as assuring stability and security. In short, polarization creates distrust in the American government, internationally and domestically.\textsuperscript{34}

Several congressional policies have been debated by scholars as detriments to healthy executive-legislative relations. The War Powers Resolution (1973), passed to check the president’s ability to commit to foreign conflict, requires presidents to terminate armed conflicts within sixty to ninety days without congressional authorization to continue. Supporters of the WPR maintain that it is a necessary check on the President, but critics believe Congress has not enforced it adequately, giving presidents almost free reign to commit troops overseas. Similarly, in the aftermath of September 11\textsuperscript{th}, Congress passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF, 2001), which authorized the use of armed force against groups that helped facilitate or plan the attacks or protect those who did. The AUMF remains in effect today, permitting ongoing military interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Africa. While its supporters deem this measure necessary, its critics claim that presidents have overstepped the AUMF’s limits without reproach from Congress.\textsuperscript{35}

When the public increasingly distrusts the government, policymakers are less willing to take on the political risk of large-scale wars, reforming trade arrangements, or pursuing high-investment foreign projects.\textsuperscript{36} This is concerning in light of Philip Klinker and Rogers Smith’s arguments in *The Unsteady March* (1999). Klinker and Smith claim that some of the U.S.’s most significant steps towards racial equality have occurred during large-scale international conflicts, which required extensive economic
and military mobilization of the U.S. population. This prompted groups that had long been marginalized in the U.S. to demand that if the state made them contribute to national security, it also had to protect their rights. Bipartisan unity in the face of conflict thus exposed Congress to decisive domestic pressures for equality. But as polarized Americans have expressed deeper distrust in government, Congress has become less willing to engage in bold foreign policy. Attenuated wars prosecuted by the executive enable Congress to avoid the responsibilities and pressures that come with managing conflicts. Thus, the domestic dynamics that may have spurred racial progress during large-scale conflicts are now less relevant to members of Congress.

Ways Forward

Can the US tame polarization and restore bipartisanship? If we are focused on securing bipartisan support in Congress, one potential solution is to revive American foreign policy as a means of securing economic dividends at home. But within both the Democratic and Republican parties, voters who once saw liberal internationalism as serving their economic interests no longer think that it pays. Can liberal internationalism be reframed as a domestic economic benefit in ways that rekindle the bipartisanship that once characterized American foreign policy, as some hope? Or alternatively, do the commonalities in the foreign policy platforms of President Trump on the Right and the surprisingly successful 2016 Democratic presidential primary candidate Bernie Sanders suggest that an economic populism challenging liberal internationalism is now the most viable route to bipartisanship in U.S. foreign policy?

Another proposed solution foregoes building bipartisanship in Congress. In Relic (2016), Terry Moe and William Howell advocate giving the President broad fast-track authority, a power that is currently limited to international trade agreements. Fast-tracking empowers presidents to deliver proposed trade agreements to the House and Senate for simple majority approval (not susceptible to filibuster). Members must vote yes or no to the proposal without amendments and must act within a specified time-period or else it becomes law, thus eliminating congressional inaction as a means of avoiding hard decisions. Howell and Moe propose giving the President fast-track authority beyond international trade, contending that parochialism is too embedded in the fabric of Congress to make a dysfunctional institution workable in the twenty-first century. But is circumventing congressional polarization through executive empowerment worth the costs of further weakening Congress in relation to the Executive? Is their solution simply a band-aid on a broken bone, ignoring the deeper roots of the problem in Congress and the polarized electorate?

Alternatively, Kevin Kosar has proposed ways to rekindle Congress’s desire to protect its institutional powers. He proposes reforms to force members to stay in Washington longer during the year, hire more staffers, and strengthen the institution’s analytical support offices (like the Congressional Budget Office, General Accounting Office, and Congressional Research Service). These enhanced resources, he hopes, would make policymaking easier for members and thus enable them to reserve more political capital for reclaiming the institutional prerogatives Congress has ceded to the President. But does Kosar overlook the political benefits members receive by maximizing their ex post opportunities to share credit for foreign policy successes and pin failures on the President when the institution cedes power to the executive? Are Howell and Moe right when they claim Congress is too parochial to serve the national interest?
Whether we are addressing Congress, the Presidency, or the economy, progress will entail significant costs and tradeoffs that are likely to be greater than those encountered throughout most of American history. With a President who favors often radically different approaches to international politics than his predecessors, understanding how domestic politics defines the range of options in American foreign policy is a necessary first step in reducing the crippling effects of polarization.

Endnotes

32 Calabresi and Yoo, *The Unitary Executive*.
Recommended Reading


