

# Can America Lead When It's Divided? U.S. Political Polarization and Foreign Policy Effectiveness

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## ABSTRACT

As partisanship within domestic politics in the United States continues to intensify, inconsistencies in U.S. foreign policy present themselves as a major challenge to American hegemony on the world stage. This paper analyzes the implications of growing political polarization in the United States on the overall effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. Drawing on case studies, interviews, and literature reviews, this paper explores several key points: the perspectives of political scientists Jordan Tama and Rachel Myrick on the scale political polarization has on foreign policy; shifts in presidential administrations and public opinion regarding conflict resolution and the economy; insights from various experts and officials on how partisanship influenced their work and organization, and; recommendations for mitigating the negative effects of political polarization from impacting U.S. foreign policy. No water's edge here.

**Keywords:** Political Polarization; International Relations; Partisanship; Foreign Policy; U.S.

## INTRODUCTION

Republican senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan coined the phrase “partisan politics stop[s] at the water’s edge” following the Second World War, trusting that while Americans will continue to debate and remain partisan over domestic issues, they would surely set aside their differences and unify when it comes to foreign policy—whether it be conflict, tariffs, or aid. Yet, over the last twenty years, the U.S. has seen unprecedented levels of increased domestic polarization: based on Gallup polling in 2024, over 75% of Republicans in

the U.S. define themselves as “conservative” or “very conservative”—up from 63% in 2005. The same is true for Democrats, with a jump from 33% describing themselves as “liberal” or “very liberal” in 2005 to 55% in 2024 (1). This polarization manifests itself in two forms: ideological polarization, which refers to policy differences, and affective polarization, which refers to distrust between groups; this article’s analysis of political polarization encompasses both definitions.

As a result, the question arises: How can the United States, as a democratic nation, sustain an effective foreign policy? Furthermore, to what extent does domestic polarization truly influence foreign policy? And while Vandenberg’s phrase—and its validity—continues to spark debate by politicians and scholars alike, there remains a critical gap in our understanding: a scarcity of research dedicated to examining how domestic polarization impacts and shapes American foreign policy.

This article aims to illustrate the complexities

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of this issue, explore two primary perspectives on the effect of polarization on foreign policy, and offer recommendations for bridging partisan divides to enhance international cooperation and more effectively tackle global challenges. Although the United States has maintained short-term foreign policy effectiveness in areas of national security, increasing domestic polarization has significantly undermined its long-term leadership capacity by eroding credibility, policy continuity, and democratic legitimacy abroad.

Importantly, key informant interviews were conducted with current experts, senior fellows, and former employees of organizations such as the Atlantic Council, Bretton Woods Committee, International Monetary Fund, and the House of Representatives. Due to the nature of this political research and the roles of many interviewees, an Institutional Review Board was established, and all four interviewees have been anonymized as simply ‘Experts’ for this paper; any identifying information has been removed to ensure confidentiality. The insights obtained from the expert interviews reveal a wide range of perspectives on how U.S. political polarization impacts foreign policy. For instance, Experts #2 and #4 emphasize that bipartisan coalitions can form in the face of common threats and allow for effective policy implementation despite ideological divides. In contrast, Experts #1 and #3 assert that polarization undermines U.S. advantages in international affairs, contending that a perceived un-united front weakens the nation’s credibility abroad.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two primary ideological frameworks regarding the impact of political polarization on the effectiveness of foreign policy. Dr. Jordan Tama from American University argues that polarization has a relatively minor impact on foreign policy, particularly when policy focuses on combating foreign adversaries like China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. He explains that this is partly due to bipartisan coalitions existing as a result of intra-party divisions rather than compromise. However, he maintains that political polarization still impacts more contentious topics, such as climate change and immigration. In contrast, Dr. Rachel Myrick from Duke University contends that domestic polarization within the U.S. and many Western democracies fundamentally undermines their advantages when implementing foreign policy as ‘free’ nations. This challenges the prevailing notion that democracies hold

an edge over non-democratic nations in the realm of international relations, and is supported by Expert #4: “[W]hen you look at these [polarizing] issues, one would find that it’s perhaps less partisan than it seems.”

In Dr. Jordan Tama’s book, “Bipartisanship and US Foreign Policy,” Tama begins by examining examples of bipartisanship despite political tension within the nation. He notes that despite impeachment attempts in Congress against President Trump over political pressure on Ukraine during his first administration, significant bipartisan agreements occurred on “[a] variety of substantive foreign policy issues” (2). Both Democratic and Republican party lawmakers approved the creation of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement trade agreement—a successor to the North American Free Trade Agreement—and mandated sanctions on officials responsible for human rights violations in Hong Kong. Tama declares that even amid partisan divides, ‘critical areas’ such as national security and economic hegemony are still pushed in a bipartisan manner, regardless of the fact that polarized rhetoric continues to dominate public discourse. Still, Tama acknowledges that this is not true for every area in international politics. In agreement with Myrick, he notes that in 2009, “[roughly] 95% of House Republicans voted against a Democratic proposal to mandate reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases in various sectors of the economy” (2); thirteen years later, not a single Democrat or Republican ever crossed party lines when voting on landmark legislation backed by Joe Biden designed to support a U.S. transition to clean energy.

Dr. Rachel Myrick’s publication, “Polarization and International Politics,” emphasizes the existence of polarization in democracies other than the United States—asserting that these “episodes of extreme polarization” are “uncharacteristic of healthy democracies” (3). Later, she argues that democracies have three primary advantages over autocratic regimes in terms of maintaining stability, credibility, and reliability, and polarization negatively impacts all three benefits. Lastly, Myrick heavily dives into the polarization between Democrats and Republicans and the decision to supply Ukraine with military aid. Unlike Tama, who argues that there was joint support of providing military aid to Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Myrick believes that the conflict in Ukraine “introduced questions about the reliability of American commitments” (4)—and polarization affected the U.S.’s relationship with its European allies. Concerns surrounding long-term reliability were a recurring theme in the interviews, with

Expert #3 remarking, “I mean, [Europe] hopes that the U.S. will come to the rescue if something goes wrong with the Russians...[but] there are still big internal problems [in the U.S.] that ever-so-slightly undermine that”. This perspective reinforces Myrick’s cautionary thesis, illustrating how domestic problems ultimately translate into tangible worries over American credibility. In contrast, Expert #2 disagreed, believing that “the U.S. [has always remained] committed to deterrence from actors which would threaten [Europe], whether they’re Russia, Iran, or Iran’s proxies... Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, etc.”—a view consistent with Tama’s view on bipartisan security commitments.

Nevertheless, while both Tama and Myrick provide compelling analyses, their conclusions diverge significantly. Tama offers an optimistic perspective—believing that despite heightened partisan rhetoric and intra-party fracturing, bipartisanship will continue to exist in policy areas concerning national security and economic interests. He attributes this to pragmatic necessity and fragmented loyalties within parties, allowing for ad-hoc coalitions on issues such as China or ratifying trade agreements. However, he concedes to Myrick that highly ‘contentious’ topics, such as climate change and immigration, remain deeply intractable along partisan lines. Conversely, Myrick presents a more cautionary view, arguing that the very nature of pronounced domestic polarization undermines the fundamental advantages—stability, credibility, and reliability—that democracies are afforded in international affairs. For Myrick, even cases that may appear bipartisan, such as initial domestic support to provide military aid to Ukraine, are obscured by concerns surrounding the long-term reliability of U.S. security guarantees to Europe due to an increasingly polarized landscape. The following case studies on conflict resolution and economic strategy will test these competing claims by examining historical policy shifts and contemporary economic challenges, determining whether Tama’s pragmatic view holds or if Myrick’s erosion of democratic advantages proves more decisive.

## **CASE STUDY: CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Political polarization within the United States has severely impacted citizens’ trust in its domestic legislation; but, by analyzing conflict developments, public opinion polling, and the policy approaches taken by different U.S. presidential administrations—including Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden—we gain insight into how domestic political climates may have

influenced foreign policy outcomes over the last six presidencies.

Throughout the Administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, there was a harmony in conflict resolution strategies despite differences in political affiliation—largely attributed to lower levels of domestic political polarization at the time. In fact, both Clinton and Bush adopted similar conflict resolution policies, pushing for ‘peace operations’ and coalition missions across the globe. For example, NATO’s 1999 bombing campaign in Yugoslavia under Clinton, a notable military campaign that displayed international cooperation, draws similarities to the level of precise coordination during the Coalition of the Willing’s 2003 invasion of Iraq. Moreover, the American public’s support for both was over 62% at the time of the interventions (5). Lastly, Clinton and Bush both agreed to protect U.S. military personnel and key officials against any criminal proceedings by external criminal courts, regardless of the result of these conflict resolutions or military action. Clinton asserted that he would not submit the International Criminal Court treaty to the Senate until “fundamental [American] concerns are satisfied” (6). One year later, Bush passed the bipartisan American Service-Members’ Protection Act—better known as the ‘Hague Invasion Act’—to ensure that the ICC could not bring charges against Americans. This symmetry across party lines follows the trend of political polarization remaining low in the U.S.; only ~16-17% of voters viewed the opposing party as ‘unfavorable’ (7).

Before the election of President Obama in 2008, domestic political polarization intensified in the nation’s political discussion: in 2004, 29% of Democrats viewed Republicans as ‘unfavorable’; 21% of Republicans viewed Democrats in the same light (7). Yet, foreign policy remained largely unaffected by domestic partisanship: the Obama Administration shifted from large-scale interventions to more targeted operations, seen in Afghanistan and Pakistan. For example, the killing of Osama bin Laden—the mastermind behind the September 11th attacks—and the withdrawal of ground forces from Iraq garnered bipartisan support, obscuring underlying partisan divisions. But the continued American presence in the Middle East, especially following an accidental airstrike on a hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, intensified unease among a majority of U.S. citizens (8). Additionally, following the Russian Federation’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, internal partisan disagreements on how the U.S. should respond to Russia marked the beginning of polarization

impacting conflict resolution policy. During this time, 27% of Democrats viewed Republicans as threats to the nation; over 35% of Republicans viewed Democrats as threats to the country (7).

The transition from the Obama Administration to the first Trump administration in 2016 was marked by heightened domestic partisanship compared to the previous elections. Trump's conflict resolution approach discouraged the idea of nation-building and attempted to follow a 'peace through strength' policy in various regions throughout the world. More specifically, he called for a new, security-oriented strategy for U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan rather than attempting to rebuild Afghanistan like his predecessors, remarking, "[America is] not nation-building again; we are killing terrorists" (9). However, with disagreements over NATO funding and allied responsibilities during his administration, maintaining a uniform conflict resolution policy between the U.S. and Europe had become increasingly difficult. This, along with increasing domestic tensions within the U.S. surrounding race and the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in the Administration taking a more isolationist stance on foreign policy.

Following the election of Barack Obama's Vice President Joseph Biden, polarization within the country continued to escalate—especially as Trump, who was expected to run in 2024, continued to appear in media headlines as he dealt with court cases, raids, and assassination attempts. The controversial withdrawal from Afghanistan generated widespread concern about the effectiveness of U.S. military engagements in the Middle Eastern region, while also sharply dividing public opinion on American intervention. Furthermore, the Biden Administration's response to the Russo-Ukraine conflict, including donating military aid to the country, contrasts with the second Trump Administration's handling of the war, with the latter Administration continuing its policy of isolationism and taking a lighter stance on providing aid to the country. Yet, the Trump administration had begun taking approaches similar to the Bush Administration's despite stark polarization within the country: the U.S. conducted various 'pre-emptive strikes' on both personnel and nuclear sites—most recently in Iran, where the Trump administration destroyed various Iranian enrichment bunkers across the country (10).

### **CASE STUDY: ECONOMIC STABILITY**

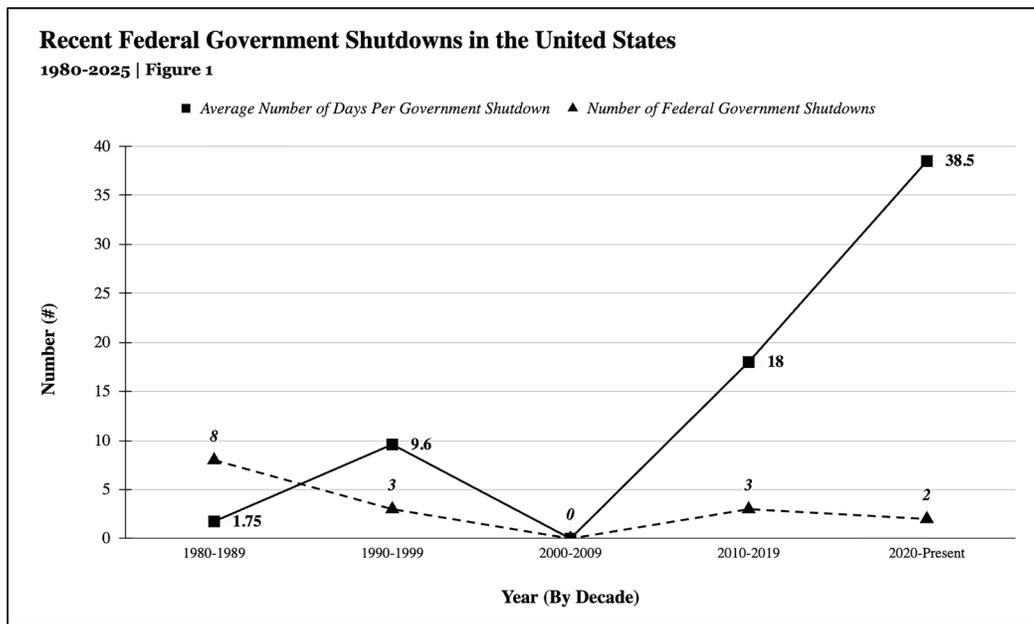
Political polarization—whether ideological or affective—is a multicausal concept. Myrick goes further

by claiming that polarization is “not randomly assigned across countries...[but] rather intimately connected with economic, social, and political [changes]” (4). When compared to conflict resolution, the United States has tended to act assertively on foreign policy issues that involve the domestic economy (2). In fact, Congress has passed numerous bipartisan sanctions historically, including some that were resisted by administrations that worried sanctions might antagonize foreign governments. The most noteworthy example is the signing of the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. The bill prevented U.S. companies from engaging in business with sanctioned adversaries of the U.S., including North Korea, the Russian Federation, and Iran. Despite the Senate approving the legislation by 98-2, the Trump administration expressed concern that Congress had begun to “[encroach] on the executive branch's authority to negotiate...good [trade] deals” (11).

This is not to say that polarization in Congress does not exist or does not cause economic difficulties within the nation. If Congress is unable to pass appropriations bills for the fiscal year and forces a government shutdown, it not only can diminish the credibility of American markets for foreign investors, but also lead to losses in terms of GDP, weakening America's global economic position.

Disturbingly, while the frequency of government shutdowns has fluctuated, their average duration has increased significantly since 1981 (Figure 1). This trend toward longer shutdowns translates directly into greater economic losses and more severe disruptions to governance, a consequence starkly illustrated by the 2018-2019 partial shutdown. During this event under the first Trump administration, an estimated 3 billion dollars of the U.S.'s real GDP was lost (13) due to the suspension of federal services and delayed international investments. This domestic paralysis also had direct foreign policy repercussions, as the furlough of State Department and embassy staff hindered diplomatic communications and weakened the U.S.'s capacity to advance its foreign policy agenda abroad.

Despite the damage brought by governance failures like shutdowns, economic prosperity still remains a major foreign policy objective for Americans, with 67% citing “favorable trade policies” as an important goal (14). Yet, polarization profoundly changes how this objective is pursued—driving a substantive shift in U.S. economic strategy; since the beginning of the second Trump administration, the United States has shifted towards protectionism, to which Expert #2 attributes



**Figure 1.** A graph of both the average number of government shutdowns and their average time length, separated by decade since the 1980s. While the frequency of U.S. federal government shutdowns (number of shutdowns) has fluctuated, their average duration has significantly escalated in recent decades—showing that shutdowns are now lasting longer than before (12).

“internal social pressures” that have caused the U.S. to abandon “the idea of [engaging] in unrestricted trade.” This policy turn was recently concretized with the U.S. government’s announcement of 100% tariffs on China in October 2025 (15). Critically, as Expert #4 noted, maintaining a “tough stance on China” has become a “key” mechanism for securing bipartisan support—demonstrating how polarization, rather than precluding action, can coalesce around adversarial frameworks. This dynamic echoes the protectionist critiques long championed by Trump, underscoring how domestic political pressures can redefine economic policies in ways that resonate across the divide (4).

## CONCLUSION

As the United States attempts to endure the storm far beyond the water’s edge, the U.S.’s ability to formulate and implement effective foreign policy is in jeopardy. Insights provided by interviews, case studies, and literature reviews of both Tama and Myrick reveal that the current political climate in the U.S. severely undermines its ability to navigate international negotiations and implement external policy efficiently in nearly every aspect. And, while both Tama and Myrick concur

that humanitarian—or contentious—issues, such as climate change and immigration, reveal a more partisan landscape, their implications regarding foreign policy effectiveness differ. Tama argues that ‘inconsistency’ is hardly new, attributing inconsistency to intra-party divisions and suggesting that it does not harm the possibility for bipartisan cooperation in any core national security or economic interests. Myrick, conversely, contends that issue-specific polarization fundamentally erodes the three foreign policy advantages, stability, credibility, and reliability, which democracies hold in international affairs.

Beyond the debate between Tama and Myrick, the United States also risks losing its position as the leader of the Western world. Given these constraints, only a few options remain for the United States: the first would be for political institutions to prioritize bipartisan discussions on foreign policy issues, not just domestic ones. This includes creating platforms and/or funding think tanks that bring together lawmakers, experts, and scholars to promote bipartisan discussion and monitor studies on the effects of political polarization on foreign policy. The second would be for the establishment of a standing House and/or Senate subcommittee that directly addresses the increasing political polarization within

the country. Congress, despite having committees on Ethics, Small Business, and Foreign Affairs, has no active committee/subcommittee that solely focuses on public opinion or partisanship impacting foreign policy. The third and final option would be for the United States to begin re-strengthening its diplomatic efforts by expanding exchange programs, stimulating effective international aid, and promoting collaboration with both global organizations and foreign policy think tanks to enhance the U.S.'s image and adaptability—offsetting any geopolitical friction impacted by partisan divide. This imperative to “reassure...our Western partners abroad with [both] words and actions,” as emphasized by Expert #1, underscores the necessity of the third recommendation: to re-strengthen diplomatic efforts through exchange programs and collaboration, actively working to offset geopolitical friction caused by partisan divide. Unfortunately, however, the U.S. may struggle to implement these strategies if future U.S. administrations continue with an erratic approach to foreign policy due to an unchanging, politically polarized landscape. Senator Vandenberg’s belief that polarized politics would not impact external affairs no longer reflects the reality of modern U.S. foreign policy.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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