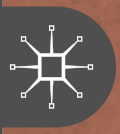

Polarization and US Foreign Policy

When Politics Crosses the Water's Edge

Gordon M. Friedrichs · Jordan Tama

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Gordon M. Friedrichs • Jordan Tama
Editors

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Editors
Gordon M. Friedrichs
Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law
Heidelberg, Germany

Jordan Tama
American University
Washington, DC, USA

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For Lena
For Jillian Pincus, Rachel Pincus, and Julie Tama

Preface

This collaboration began when we met in 2019 at a dinner in Heidelberg, Germany, as part of the annual meeting of the Political Science Section of the German Society for American Studies. Given our shared interest in polarization and US foreign policy, we decided the following February to organize a workshop on the topic, to be held at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at Heidelberg University. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic prevented us from conducting the workshop in person, but we were delighted nevertheless to be able to convene this stellar group of scholars for the workshop in an online format in November 2020. Afterward, the presenters revised their papers for inclusion in a special issue of the journal *International Politics* that we co-edited entitled "Polarization and U.S. Foreign Policy: Ideas, Institutions, and Policy Implications," which was published in 2022 (Volume 59, Issue 5). This edited volume re-publishes and updates the material in that special issue.

We are grateful to all the contributors of the edited volume for their excellent scholarship and for their collegiality throughout the process. We thank Lauren Prather, Kenneth Schultz, and Jim Scott for offering very valuable feedback on the papers as discussants at the 2020 workshop. We also thank Sarah Maxey, Rachel Myrick, Jim Scott, Dina Smeltz, and Peter Trubowitz for participating with us in a roundtable on polarization and US foreign policy at the 2022 annual meeting of the International Studies Association. We further thank the Heidelberg Center for American Studies and the University of Heidelberg for supporting the workshop where this work was first discussed, Michael Williams for his interest in having the

papers published as an *International Politics* special issue, and Isobel Cowper Coles and Vinoth Kuppan for their interest and support in transforming the special issue into this book.

Gordon expresses profound gratitude to his parents. He dedicates this book to his partner—Lena—whose love and support have been a cornerstone throughout his academic career.

Jordan is deeply grateful for his entire family, including his parents, grandparents, wife, in-laws, sister, and sons. He dedicates this book to his aunts—Jillian, Rachel, and Julie—who have provided him with so much love, guidance, and support over the years.

Heidelberg, Germany — Gordon M. Friedrichs
Washington, DC, USA — Jordan Tama

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Notes on Contributors

William Bendix PhD in Political Science (University of British Columbia, Canada, 2012), is an assistant professor in the Cyber Leadership and Intelligence Program at Dakota State University. His research focuses on Congress, cyber politics, and US foreign policy.

Florian Böller is Assistant Professor of international relations at RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany. Previously, he taught at Heidelberg University and held fellowships at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Harvard University. His research has appeared in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *European Political Science Review*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, and other journals.

James Bryan received his PhD in International Relations from the American University School of International Service. He primarily focuses on comparative public opinion, protests, democratization, and quantitative methods.

Shannon P. Carcelli studies international political economy and United States foreign policy, specializing in the role of legislative and bureaucratic institutions in foreign aid and sanctions policy. She holds a PhD in political science from the University of California San Diego and a BA from Carleton College. During the 2018–2019 academic year, she served as a post-doctoral fellow at Princeton University's Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance.

Gordon M. Friedrichs is a Senior Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law in Heidelberg,

Germany. His research focuses on how the interplay between domestic and international politics affects states' roles in the areas of security, trade, and democracy. His most recent book is *U.S. Global Leadership Role and Domestic Polarization: A Role Theory Approach* (Routledge, 2021).

Patrick Haney is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Public Management and Regional Affairs at Miami University. He took his PhD at Indiana University and specializes in American foreign and defense policy.

Patrick Homan is Professor of Political Science at Dominican University. His research and teaching interests focus on United States foreign policy, Congress, and international security. Homan is the author of *The Battle for U.S. Foreign Policy: Congress, Parties, and Factions in the 21st Century*, with Jeffrey S. Lantis (Springer 2020), and *Getting to 67: The Post-Cold War Politics of Arms Control Treaty Ratification* (2015). Homan has also worked on a number of pieces related to the scholarship of teaching and learning as an academic at a small liberal arts university. He has published articles in journals including *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *International Politics*, and *The Nonproliferation Review*. His latest research has touched on topics such as human security and climate change in South Asia as well as how the rise of far-right parties in Eastern Europe is impacting European foreign policymaking.

Gyung-Ho Jeong PhD in Political Science (Washington University in St. Louis, USA, 2008), is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia. His research interests include legislative politics, American politics, and foreign policy.

Jeffrey S. Lantis is Professor of Political Science at The College of Wooster. His research and teaching interests focus on United States foreign policy, Congress, and international security. Lantis is the author of numerous books on foreign policy decision-making, including *The Battle for U.S. Foreign Policy: Congress, Parties, and Factions in the 21st Century*, with Patrick Homan (Springer 2020), and *Foreign Policy Advocacy and Entrepreneurship* (University of Michigan Press 2019). Lantis has published articles in journals including *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *International Security*, *International Politics*, *Review of International Studies*, and *The European Journal of International Security*. His latest research focuses on space politics and the influence of members of Congress who are war veterans on contemporary defense policy.

Carrie A. Lee is an associate professor at the US Army War College, where she serves as the Chair of the Department of National Security and Strategy and director of the USAWC Center on Civil-Military Relations. She received her Ph.D. in political science from Stanford University in 2015, and a B.S. from MIT in 2010. She studies how democratic political institutions (like elections) affect inter-state conflict, military operations, and foreign policy decision-making, and has also done work on counterinsurgency strategy, public opinion and foreign policy, humanitarian crises and intervention, and nuclear arms control and nonproliferation.

Daniel Little is a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin studying political science, with a focus on American politics and public policy. His research interests include social movements in the United States and political responses to inequality, with a particular interest in labor unions.

Bryan W. Marshall is Professor and Chair of Political Science at Miami University. He received his Ph.D. while a fellow with the Political Institutions and Public Choice (PIPC) program at Michigan State University. Marshall's research on Congress focuses on how party leaders and procedures affect coalition building and congressional behavior. Marshall's most recent book, *The Committee* (University of Michigan Press 2021), covers some of his Hill experience as policy advisor working for the House Majority Whip, the Honorable Jim Clyburn.

Sarah Maxey is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Loyola University Chicago. Her research focusing on democracy and the domestic politics of foreign policy has been published in the *Journal of Politics*, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *Political Research Quarterly*, among other outlets. Maxey received a PhD in international relations from Cornell University in 2017. She was previously a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Perry World House and holds a BA from Georgetown University.

Zachary A. McGee is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Kenyon College in Gambier, OH. His research centers on questions of power among elites in the American political system. In particular, he seeks to understand the growing interconnectedness and complexity of the U.S. political system, especially between political parties and political institutions.

Rachel Myrick is the Douglas and Ellen Lowey Assistant Professor of Political Science at Duke University, where she researches questions related to the domestic politics of international security and US foreign policy. Her academic work is published in peer-reviewed outlets like *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *Journal of Politics*, among others. Myrick completed her PhD in 2021 at the Department of Political Science at Stanford University.

Dina Smeltz is Senior Fellow for Public Opinion and Foreign Policy at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. She oversees the Council's well-known annual survey of American attitudes toward foreign policy and has authored and co-authored many of the analyses based on that work. She also directs the Council's collaboration with Russian, Mexican, Canadian, Australian, and East Asian research organizations. She has published commentary on public opinion and international issues in *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *POLITICO*, *RealClearWorld*, and *Foreign Policy*.

Jordan Tama is a Provost Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Policy and Global Security at American University, Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and Co-Director of Bridging the Gap. His research focuses on the politics and processes of U.S. foreign policy. His most recent book is *Bipartisanship and US Foreign Policy: Cooperation in a Polarized Age* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Sean M. Theriault is a University Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of dozens of articles and five books including *The Great Broadening: How the Vast Expansion of the Policymaking Agenda Transformed American Politics* (co-authored by Bryan Jones and Michelle Whyman), which won the 2020 Fenno Prize, awarded to the best book on legislatures published in 2019.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Polarization and America's Role in the World

Gordon M. Friedrichs and Jordan Tama

Polarization has been a dominant phenomenon in contemporary American politics in recent decades (McCarty, 2019; McCarty et al., 2016). Partisan division, both among the public and political elites, has consumed American democracy, transforming a political system dependent on compromise into one suffused by hostility, gridlock, and dysfunctional democratic governance (Binder, 2015; Lee, 2015). Partisans often view supporters of the other party as politically illegitimate, unpatriotic, and morally wrong, which has fostered acts of mutual discrimination, divergent understandings of facts, justifications for anti-democratic behavior, and even outright hate (Finkel et al., 2020). These trends have only become more pronounced with the rise of populism and growing threats

G. M. Friedrichs (✉)
Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, Heidelberg, Germany
e-mail: friedrichs@mpil.de

J. Tama
American University, Washington, DC, USA
e-mail: tama@american.edu

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of violence against elected officials (Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2023; Howell & Moe, 2020), leading scholars to question whether American democracy is strong enough to survive (Lieberman et al., 2021).

The term polarization is routinely used in various ways, underscoring the importance of defining the term clearly and distinguishing among different types of polarization. Broadly, polarization refers to a state in which the opinions, feelings, behaviors, or interests of a group or society become more bimodal and the two modes move further apart (Esteban & Ray, 1994).[1] Ideological or preference polarization refers to the polarization of individuals' (among the general public or political elites) views about public issues, either across the board or in particular policy areas (Carmines & D'Amico, 2015; Kertzer et al., 2021; McCarty et al., 2016; Noel, 2013). Affective polarization, often referred to as negative partisanship, describes sharpening feelings of mutual animosity between people of different political persuasions (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018). Some work also points to the importance of residential or social polarization, characterized by people becoming increasingly separated into communities or groups that interact with each other less (Alduncin et al., 2017; Nall, 2015). When any type of polarization overlaps with party identities, partisan polarization exists. Partisan polarization can also be fueled by partisan warfare—the no-holds-barred approach in which politicians seek above all to expand the power of their own party and weaken the other party (Jacobson, 2013; Lee, 2009; Theriault, 2013).

Scholars of American politics have studied the causes and consequences of polarization (Campbell, 2016; Klein, 2020; Persily, 2015; Theriault, 2008; Thurber & Yoshinaka, 2015). Various studies suggest that polarization leads to political gridlock and obstructionism, a decline in policy innovation and progress, and even a drop in public support for democracy (Barber & McCarty, 2016; Binder, 2015; Gerber & Schickler, 2017; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Lee, 2015; Svolik, 2019). Yet while the polarization of U.S. politics and society has been a prevalent phenomenon of American democracy since the 1970s, key questions about the scope, character, and implications of polarization in the foreign policy realm remain to be fully answered.

In recent years, the subject has received increased attention from international relations scholars and U.S. foreign policy analysts (Walt, 2019). One body of work has examined the extent to which polarization in U.S. foreign policy is on the rise. The chief finding in these studies, which have focused mainly on congressional behavior or public attitudes, is that

Democrats and Republicans have grown further apart on international issues, just as they have on domestic matters (DeLaet & Scott, 2006; Gries, 2014; Jeong & Quirk, 2019; Kupchan & Trubowitz, 2007; Peake et al., 2012; Schultz, 2017; Smeltz et al., 2020; Snyder et al., 2009; Trubowitz & Mellow, 2011). Related research shows how increased polarization is weakening the capacity of Congress to shape foreign policy or oversee the executive branch (Fowler, 2015; Goldgeier & Saunders, 2018). But other work has pointed to continuing areas of agreement between Democrats and Republicans as well as ongoing congressional influence on U.S. foreign policy (Busby et al., 2020; Chaudoin et al., 2010; Kertzer et al., 2021; Scott & Carter, 2014; Tama, 2020). Given these contrasting findings, more research is needed to fully understand the degree to which contemporary foreign policy debates are polarized, variation in political dynamics across areas of foreign policy, and the relationship between polarization and the behavior of policymaking institutions.

Some scholars have also explored how foreign policy polarization can affect the outward-facing content or effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. The principal concern of this work is that polarization undermines bipartisan consensus for the grand strategy of liberal internationalism that has guided U.S. foreign policy in the post-World War II era (Jervis et al., 2018; Kupchan & Trubowitz, 2007). As Trubowitz and Harris argue, hyper-partisanship, the absence of a compelling foreign policy narrative, and the erosion of the domestic social contract have weakened America's "domestic political capacity to translate […] power assets into international influence" (Trubowitz & Harris, 2019). Daniel Drezner argues along similar lines that domestic polarization and the rise of populism in the form of the Trump presidency threaten the U.S. contribution to the liberal international order (Drezner, 2019).[2] Kenneth Schultz has highlighted additional effects of polarization, explaining how it makes U.S. foreign policy less reliable, less capable of learning from past mistakes, and more vulnerable to harmful external influences (Schultz, 2017). In a 2018 survey, U.S. foreign policy professionals even ranked domestic polarization as the most critical threat to the U.S. (Smeltz et al., 2018). At the same time, some work points to the resilience of U.S. support for liberal internationalism, highlighting ways in which domestic institutions and international realities constrain nationalist leaders from fully institutionalizing "America First" policies, and explaining why U.S. leaders will continue to have incentives to pursue internationalist policies in an interconnected world (Chaudoin et al., 2018, 2021; Ikenberry, 2020).

While these and other studies have provided a rich set of insights about the relationship between polarization and the content of U.S. foreign policy, scholars have only begun to examine the impact of foreign policy polarization empirically. Moreover, the effects of polarization in specific foreign policy domains, such as international negotiations or military operations, are largely unexplored. With the existence and strength of a liberal international order being contingent in part on sustained U.S. engagement, it is important to better understand the repercussions of polarization for America's international commitments and influence. The need for more research on these topics is only enhanced by the influence of Donald Trump, whose nationalist agenda and particularly partisan approach to politics have presented especially strong challenges both to remaining reservoirs of bipartisanship and to key mechanisms of international cooperation (Jacobson, 2017; Jervis et al., 2018; Stokes, 2018).

With that context in mind, this edited volume sets out to answer the following main questions: To what extent are U.S. foreign policy debates polarized along partisan lines? How is polarization affecting the institutions of U.S. foreign policy? And how is polarization changing the conduct or effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy? In this introductory chapter, we review new findings on these questions from the chapters in this edited volume and situate those findings within prior scholarship on polarization and foreign policy.

Overall Takeaways

The chapters in this edited volume present new research on the polarization of foreign policy ideas, the relationship between polarization and foreign policy institutions, and the effects of polarization on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. The chapters cover an array of substantive issue areas, including military intervention, arms control, foreign policy spending, trade, and America's international reputation. They also draw on many types of data, from conventional public opinion polls, to survey experiments, to information on a wide array of congressional activity. Moreover, the chapters employ a variety of analytical methods, including statistical analyses, qualitative comparative analysis, and case studies.

The chapters show how different types of polarization are manifest in contemporary U.S. foreign policy, in both public attitudes and in the behavior of elected officials. On the extent of polarization, they illustrate the prevalence of ideological, social, and partisan divisions on foreign

policy in recent years, but also suggest the need to incorporate some nuance into claims about polarization. Debates on issues ranging from climate change and immigration (see the Smeltz chapter), to arms control (see the Böller chapter), to the conduct of war (see the Lee chapter), to foreign policy spending (see the Bendix and Jeong chapter) reveal large and/or growing gaps between the preferences of Democrats or liberals, on the one hand, and Republicans or conservatives, on the other. Even views on some issues that previously exhibited little partisan divergence, such as attitudes toward China, Russia, and the Israel-Palestinian conflict, have recently become more polarized (see the Smeltz chapter). Members of Congress are also traveling abroad with lawmakers from the other party less often, reflecting a weakening social fabric on Capitol Hill (see the McGee, Theriault, and Little chapter).

At the same time, it remains surprisingly common for Democratic and Republican lawmakers to vote together on foreign policy (see the Bryan and Tama chapter), and presidents retain the capacity to achieve bipartisan support for certain kinds of military intervention (see the Maxey chapter). Moreover, on some issues, such as international trade and the scope of executive power, divisions within the parties or between Congress and the executive are at least as salient as divisions between liberals and conservatives (see the Bryan and Tama, Friedrichs, and Homan and Lantis chapters). The upshot is that preference polarization is intensifying in many respects, but not uniformly and not to the exclusion of other political dynamics.

The chapters also provide new insights and data on the effects of polarization on the institutions, execution, and effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. By making it more difficult for lawmakers to build the broad coalitions that are typically needed to enact laws, polarization is weakening congressional influence and enabling a further expansion in executive power, potentially facilitating rash or unwise presidential foreign policy actions (see the Marshall and Haney chapter). While lawmakers have sought to maintain congressional influence by shifting legislative activity to limitation riders—amendments to appropriations bills that restrict or prohibit certain types of spending—such devices are not well-suited to all types of foreign policy measures (see the Carcelli chapter).

Polarization also shapes and limits decisions on military action and international cooperation. Since Democrats place greater value than Republicans on avoiding civilian casualties and accord less importance than Republicans to achieving military victories, Democratic leaders tend

to be more cautious with regard to the use of force than their Republican counterparts (see the Lee chapter). With regard to international cooperation, U.S. presidents are becoming less capable of achieving Senate approval of international agreements as the prevailing ideology of Republican elected officials becomes more conservative (see the Böller chapter). At the same time, rising U.S. preference polarization is weakening overseas confidence in America and reducing the willingness of citizens abroad to cooperate with the United States (see the Myrick chapter).

A few of the chapters point to some more optimistic takeaways. The increased use by Congress of spending restrictions shows that lawmakers can adapt to political constraints in ways that enable them to maintain policy influence (see the Carcelli chapter). The role of ideology as a driver of congressional behavior can also enable Congress to act as a source of policy innovation (see the Bendix and Jeong chapter), while the intraparty divisions that characterize some foreign policy debates can foster the emergence of new ideas, policy entrepreneurs, and cross-cutting coalitions (see the Friedrichs and Homan and Lantis chapters). Overall, though, the chapters provide a variety of important cautionary tales about ways in which polarization can make it more difficult to carry out an effective foreign policy.

Polarization and Foreign Policy Ideas

A large literature has documented important differences between how liberals and conservatives view the world. Broadly, whereas liberals favor a cooperative approach to international politics and prefer non-military to military instruments of national power, conservatives are warier of multilateral mechanisms and more supportive of military might (Broz, 2011; Fordham & Flynn, 2021; Gries, 2014; Holsti, 2004; Jeong & Quirk, 2019; Milner & Tingley, 2015; Rathbun, 2012; Raunio & Wagner, 2020; Smeltz et al., 2020; Wenzelburger & Böller, 2019; Wittkopf, 1990). At the same time, U.S. debates over some foreign policy issues, including international alliances, economic sanctions, humanitarian intervention, and human rights, do not break down consistently along left-right lines (Busby et al., 2020; Cutrone & Fordham, 2010; Kertzer et al., 2021; Maxey, 2020; Tama, 2020). Empirical insight on party unity scores in the House of Representatives regarding U.S. foreign policy voting patterns from 1970 to 2012 suggests a rather cyclical trend of increasing and decreasing polarization (Hurst & Wroe, 2016). In addition, many issues,

such as international trade and foreign aid, involve both inter-party and intra-party divisions (Milner & Judkins, 2004; Milner & Tingley, 2010; Prather, 2024; Rathbun, 2016; Thérien & Noël, 2000). In short, liberals and conservatives are strongly polarized on some major foreign policy questions, but the overall alignment between left-right ideology and foreign policy preferences is highly imperfect.

Prior work has also explored the relationship between public attitudes and the views of decision-makers or elites. On the one hand, scholars have established that citizens have certain core values that shape their worldviews, suggesting that the public forms some of their own judgments about international issues (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017; Rathbun et al., 2016). Public attitudes, in turn, sometimes influence the decision-making of leaders, particularly on salient issues (Aldrich et al., 2006; Foyle, 2017). On the other hand, studies have shown that cues from leaders and other elites can themselves greatly shape public attitudes on foreign policy (Berinsky, 2009; Guisinger & Saunders, 2017; Zaller, 1992). A key consequence of this elite cue dynamic is that polarization among elites tends to filter down and exacerbate ideological polarization among the public (Westwood et al., 2019). This dynamic has been perpetuated by the rise of social media and the polarization of the traditional media landscape (Prior, 2007). As a result of this particular information and political environment, information asymmetries on foreign policy between citizens and leaders have been further deepened, eroding a key constraint by inclining constituents to reflexively support "their" leaders while disapproving of the political opposition (Baum & Potter, 2019).

Given these interrelationships, it is important to understand how and to what extent foreign policy ideas are polarized among the public and decision-makers. Several of the chapters in this edited volume evaluate whether, to what extent, and how the views of citizens or leaders about U.S. foreign policy are becoming polarized along left-right or other lines.

Dina Smeltz examines preference polarization in public attitudes on foreign policy, drawing on a long-running series of surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. She finds that polarization in public foreign policy views is increasing overall, but some issues are far more polarized than others. Democrats and Republicans still largely agree on the big-picture framework and goals of U.S. foreign policy, supporting active engagement in the world, security alliances, overseas military bases, and international trade. Consistent with long-standing liberal-conservative divisions, polarization is much greater on some key means of foreign

policy, such as the importance of multilateral institutions and military superiority. Most strikingly, polarization with respect to threat perceptions has jumped in recent years, with Republicans more concerned about hard security threats, such as the rise of China and international terrorism, and Democrats more concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and racial and economic inequality at home. These differences reveal that Democrats and Republicans do not even agree about which types of issues should demand government attention. Smeltz also discusses how presidential messaging on some hot-button issues, particularly under Donald Trump, has exacerbated polarization.

Sarah Maxey tackles another dimension of public attitudes, using original survey experiments to explore the influence of affective polarization on the American public's support for military intervention. She finds that the impact of affective polarization on public support for military action varies across types of intervention and between Democrats and Republicans. Whereas affective polarization makes it harder for presidents to gain bipartisan support for interventions motivated by security goals, it does not limit the ability of presidents to achieve bipartisan backing for humanitarian interventions. In another important nuance, Democratic and Republican leaders face different political landscapes on the use of force, as the greater support of Republican citizens for military action makes it easier for Democratic presidents than for Republican presidents to gain bipartisan support when deploying the military into combat. The upshot is that debates over the use of force are not immune to polarizing dynamics, but there exist important distinctions in the politics of military intervention debates.

William Bendix and Gyung-Ho Jeong consider the attitudes of elected officials, investigating the relative importance of ideological preferences and partisan calculations as drivers of congressional decision-making on amendments concerning defense and foreign aid spending. Whereas much research on congressional decision-making focuses solely on the voting behavior of lawmakers, Bendix and Jeong evaluate contributors to both legislative cosponsorship and legislative votes. They find that ideological preferences strongly influence both cosponsorship and voting decisions, with liberals favoring amendments that limit defense spending and conservatives favoring amendments that limit foreign aid. While party identities also influence voting patterns on these limitation riders, ideological preferences play a more important role. More broadly, their study suggests that

liberal and conservative ideologies greatly shape how members of Congress approach foreign policy issues.

Patrick Homan and Jeffrey Lantis offer a different take on congressional foreign policy views, highlighting the importance of establishment and anti-establishment factions within each party in debates over war powers. While most studies of congressional views home in on the roles of liberal and conservative ideology, Homan and Lantis underscore differences in the attitudes of legislators regarding the exercise of power in Washington. Based on an examination of congressional votes concerning the use of force during the Obama and Trump administrations, they find that progressives and conservatives possessing anti-establishment views often split from their party leaders and align with each other in seeking to restrict the authority of the executive branch to deploy the military overseas. Even when such intraparty factions are relatively small, they have the potential to shape legislative outcomes when Congress is closely divided between the two parties, as it has typically been in recent years.

Polarization and Foreign Policy Institutions

The polarization of American politics and society severely challenges the democratic accountability of the political system and its agents, while changing how elected representatives carry out their roles and responsibilities (Cayton & Dawkins, 2020; Page & Gilens, 2020; Sinclair, 2016). A key observation by scholars is that the alignment of political ideologies and partisanship has led to partisan conflict in Congress with the goal to prevent political achievements of the opposition (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015;). Polling shows that the most salient reason why Americans identify with a political party—besides their party's policies—is the conception that the other party will do harm to the country (Pew Research Center, 2018). At the same time, partisan warfare has been exacerbated by the small size of congressional majorities and frequent turnover of party control on Capitol Hill in recent years, which provides parties with a greater incentive to focus on partisan competition (Lee, 2016).

As a result of these trends, both parties have instituted procedural changes in order to increase their political success rate, including strengthening the party leadership to expedite partisan legislation and relying less on the seniority system when naming committee chairs (Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Evans, 2012; Smith, 2014; Wallner, 2013). The majority party has sought to suppress minority opposition to push through its policy agenda