

The United States' credibility in a polarized age of politics

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Abstract

Political polarization is a growing area of research among political science scholars. This thesis focuses on domestic partisan polarization's effects on the credibility of the United States' foreign policy signaling internationally. Political polarization has increased in the United States since the end of the Cold War, affecting the domestic political process for actors holding or seeking office. The domestic impact of heightened polarization is lower accountability for actors holding or seeking public office. Reduced accountability for Presidents leads to less consistent foreign policies across administrations, which results in the questioning of the United States' commitments by other international actors. Feasible generalized least squares models were used to test the polarization hypotheses quantitatively. Lastly, a qualitative case study covering the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is utilized to illustrate the implications rising polarization has on the credibility of the United States' commitments.

Keywords: accountability, audience costs, credibility, foreign policy, hedging, partisanship, polarization, signaling.

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Dedication

To my dad Brian, for sparking my interest in political science and encouraging me to chase my dreams.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Polarization and its effects on domestic politics is an increasingly prevalent area of study for political science, especially as it focuses on the electoral and elite levels. There is increasing research that shows the American electorate and its representatives have become more polarized over the past decades, and the partisan divide is now greater than at any point in the twenty-first century.¹ The consequences of this polarization are examined more thoroughly in domestic politics but may also have larger implications for U.S. foreign policy and geopolitics in general. One specific question that deserves notice and further examination is: does the increase in domestic polarization undermine the credibility of the United States' foreign policy?

The central argument of this work is that as partisan polarization increases in the United States, we should also witness a decline in the credibility of the United States foreign policy signaling to other international actors. Partisanship concerning United States policies, both foreign and domestic, is rooted in contrasting ideologies: “widely shared and systematic beliefs about how the world does and should work.”² Foreign policy is the result of a competitive dynamic between the political parties’ domestic interests and ideologies to the same degree as domestic policy.³ Politics does not “stop at the water’s edge,” and since domestic politics influences foreign policy decisions, this means as polarization increases there are likely to be repercussions for international allies and partners.

¹ Abramowitz, Alan I., and Steven Webster. “The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections in the 21st Century.” *Electoral Studies* 41 (2016), 12. & Abramowitz, Alan I., and Kyle L Saunders. “Is Polarization a Myth?” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008), 547. & Abramowitz, Alan I. *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, (2018), xvi.

² Gries, Peter. *Politics of American Foreign Policy How Ideology Divides Liberals and Conservatives over Foreign Affairs*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, (2014), 5.

³ Abramowitz, *Great Alignment*, 64.

Traditionally, democratic states' institutions and norms provide greater accountability, improving the credibility and consistency of their foreign policy signaling, in comparison to non-democracies. Electoral accountability for democratic leaders incentivizes policy consistency and constrains policy change; this enhances democracies' ability to make credible long-term commitments, cooperate with partners more effectively, and deter adversaries.⁴ Due to domestic constraints against initiating conflict, democracies are more selective when issuing threats to 'target' states, and when threats are made they are perceived as especially credible, leading to less resistance to such threats.⁵ In other words, the institutions instilled within democracies create more credible foreign policy signaling that can result in further international cooperation. Since non-democracies are less constrained by opposition parties and electoral defeat, their threats and commitments are viewed to be less credible when compared to democratic states. Nevertheless, this democratic credibility might weaken as domestic polarization increases.

As domestic polarization exacerbates the inconsistency of foreign policy across presidential administrations, other nations may question the United States policy credibility. Intensified polarization can lead to the United States becoming a less reliable partner to not only its current but possibly future allies because partisan polarization leads to less accountability for officeholders due to a reduction in audience costs.⁶ Lower accountability means leaders worry less about voter defection since their source of support is consolidated into a more ideologically homogeneous group. As a result, when presidential administrations change from one party to

⁴ Leeds, Brett Ashley, and Michaela Mattes. *Domestic Interests, Democracy, and Foreign Policy Change*. Elements in International Relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2022), 70.

⁵ Schultz, Kenneth A. *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2001), 2.

⁶ Schultz, Kenneth A. "Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy." *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2017), 15.

another, significant policy swings may complicate the ability of the United States to make credible commitments to allies and adversaries.⁷ Thus, I hypothesize that increasing domestic polarization will lead to less policy consistency, reduce the credibility of the U.S. and cause a reduction in the willingness of states to partner with the United States on the international stage.

Polarization can create drastically different foreign policy responses to the same or similar crises across presidential administrations, creating commitment issues for the United States. Unilateral withdrawals from multilateral treaties or agreements damage the relations with the other members of the agreement, making future cooperation less likely.⁸ A state's unilateral exit also signals that the passage of a resolution or ratification of a treaty does not credibly tie the state to uphold it.⁹ A state withdrawing from an agreement should have its credibility questioned more highly by other states in the shared agreement.¹⁰ For instance, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, was agreed upon during the Obama administration and became a highly salient and polarizing issue during the 2016 election cycle. Later this resulted in the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the multilateral agreement to keep Iran's nuclear program exclusively peaceful. Until this point, the Biden administration has yet to be successful in recreating an agreement similar to the Iran Nuclear Deal.

The research design for this theory includes data visualizations to depict increasing partisan polarization among elite and mass levels, utilizing datasets from Voteview (DW-NOMINATE) and the American National Election Studies (ANES). Then, I estimate feasible

⁷ Ibid, 9.

⁸ Schmidt, Averell. "Damaged Relations: How Treaty Withdrawal Impacts International Cooperation." American Journal of Political Science (2023), 1.

⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰ Ibid, 5.

general least squares models, to show the effect of increasing polarization on the United States foreign policy credibility when engaging with other nations at the United Nations. Finding that increasing elite polarization in the United States Congress is, on average, correlated with a divergence in foreign policy alignment between the U.S. and other nations. The elite polarization model results revealed support for the first hypothesis. I do not find quantitative support for the second hypothesis. The model suggests increasing mass polarization among the United States electorate seems to correlate, on average, with convergence in foreign policy alignment between the U.S. and other states.

Proceeding the foreign policy credibility modeling is a qualitative case study on the Iran Nuclear Deal to show the implications increased partisan polarization has on United States foreign policy decision-making across administrations. The Iran Nuclear Deal led to divisive partisan fighting between the two parties, which resulted in the implementation and later abandonment of the multilateral agreement. Due to heightened polarization lowering audience costs, joining the JCPOA as well as withdrawing from the deal had minimal consequences for the officeholders domestically. However, internationally, it is possible the U.S. was viewed as a less credible partner making signaling less efficient and a future deal less likely.

Domestic polarization is an increasingly crucial area of scholarship and understanding polarization may lead to some eventual consensus in the United States. Polarization within the U.S. has intensified policy positions and accelerated the decline of bipartisanship in recent decades. This study is important for political science research and public policy, as it seeks to examine the international effects of domestic polarization. Since the United States' political dynamic is so divisive today, it is plausible that further examination of polarization can serve as a preliminary to identifying and possibly solving the negative consequences of polarization

Chapter 2 - Rise of Polarization in the U.S. During the Twenty-first Century

Since the end of the Cold War, domestic political polarization in the United States has been on the rise and is arguably at its peak since 1989. Within the political science literature, there is a near consensus that U.S. political elites have become more polarized over recent decades. While scholars debate the extent to which the U.S. population as a whole has become more polarized, ideological polarization and negative partisanship have caused the electorate to ‘sort’ into distinct parties, threatening future U.S. partnerships abroad.¹¹ In the following section, I explain how polarization affects the domestic political environment and U.S. international relations.

Political polarization can be thought of as the division of two entities through the intensification of differing ideological preferences on various issues. Political elites' polarization drives the electorate's polarization and vice versa. The electorate takes cues from elites on issue positions and these cues are amplified by various forms of media.¹² Parties and elected officials have grown more consistent in their policy positions on a range of issues and this coincides with the public displaying more consistent views and increasingly identifying with one party or another.¹³ Likewise, the elites who are elected to office are motivated by the benefits of public

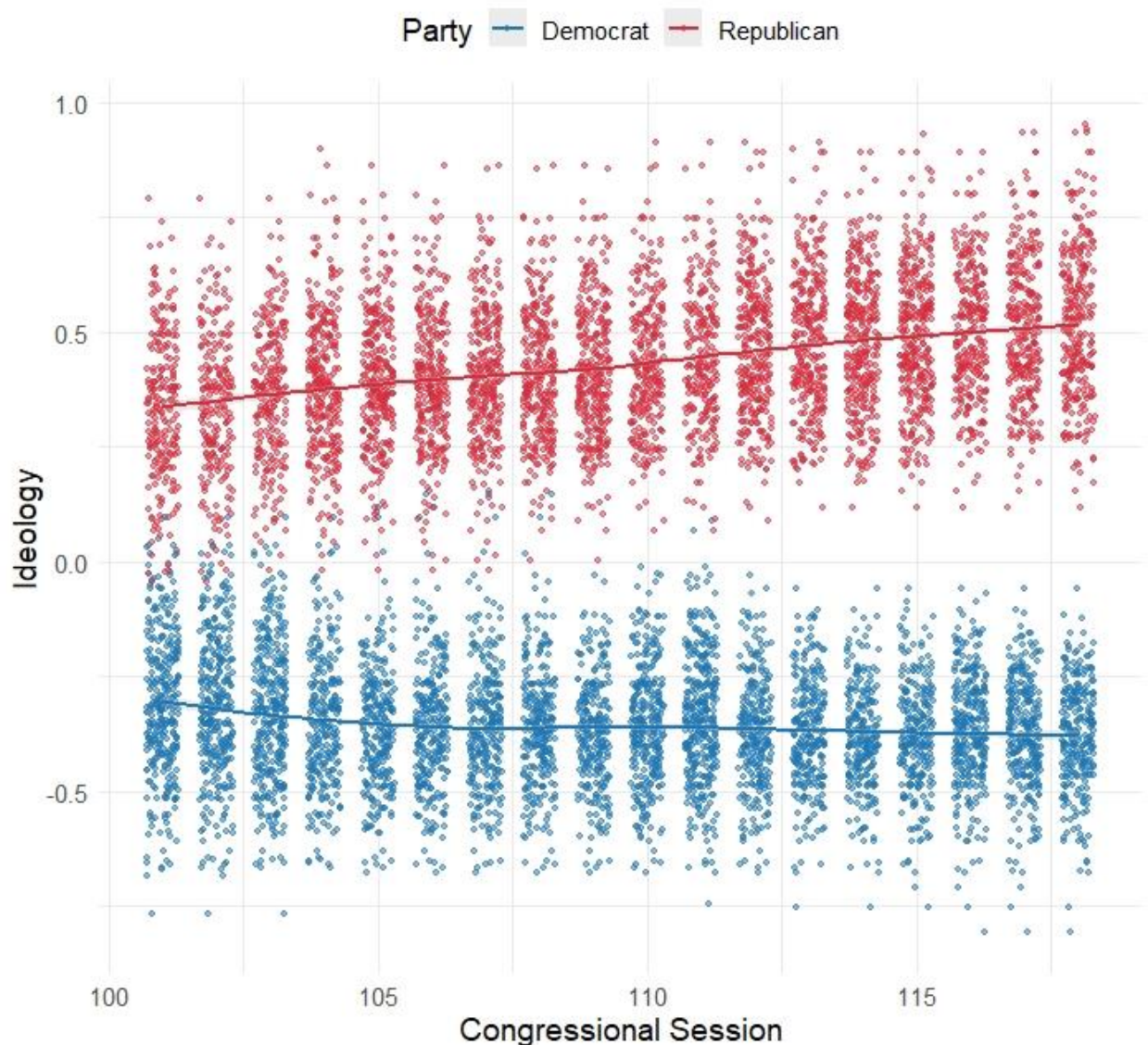
¹¹ Maxey, Sarah. “Finding the Water’s Edge: When Negative Partisanship Influences Foreign Policy Attitudes.” *International Politics (Hague, Netherlands)* 59, no. 5 (2022), 804.

¹² Abramowitz, Alan. *The Disappearing Center Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, (2010), 7. & Smeltz, Dina. “Are We Drowning at the Water’s Edge? Foreign Policy Polarization Among the US Public.” *International politics (Hague, Netherlands)* 59, no. 5 (2022), 787. & Fiorina, Morris P., and Samuel J. Abrams. “Political polarization in the American public.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, (2008), 582. & Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood. “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States.” *Annual review of political science* 22 (2019), 130-131.

¹³ Abramowitz, *Disappearing Center*, 7.

office and therefore take cues from their constituency to maximize their chances of holding office. Polarization is not exclusively national in the U.S. either, state-level legislatures are replicating the same elite polarization witnessed in Congress.¹⁴ Figure 1 below depicts the ideological placement of elites in the U.S. Congress over time.

Figure 1: U.S. Congressional Ideological Polarization



¹⁴ Zingher, Joshua N. *Political choice in a polarized America: How elite polarization shapes mass behavior*. Oxford University Press, (2022), 75.

There is not a great difference in polarization when comparing the two legislative chambers of the U.S. Congress. The average ideology party score only differs marginally between the Senate, House, and Congress; they all follow a similar trend. Therefore, I examine the U.S. Congress to visualize the divergence between parties at the elite level. I removed the independent legislators in both chambers across the data as they are not the prevalent part of this study. While they do caucus with one party or another, they are a very small number of those making up the legislature and are not likely to make an impact on the DW-NOMINATE measurement. The Senate and House of Representatives unsurprisingly follow the same trend as the overall bicameral legislature. Using both chambers to measure elite polarization provides a larger sample for use, making the measurement more robust.

The DW NOMINATE measure is a two-dimensional weighted spatial scale estimation to show the ideological closeness of legislators on recorded roll-call votes. Legislators of Congress voting “yes” or “no” on an issue creates two points on the spatial model, and through bundling the non-related issues positions, it summarizes the politician’s preferences onto a formal structure.¹⁵ The first dimension is a liberal-conservative, left-to-right scale, decided by how members of Congress vote on specific issues.¹⁶ The second dimension is focused on regional differences between the two major parties.¹⁷ Much of the second dimension covers issues such as slavery, the economy, civil rights, and a range of social issues throughout U.S. history. Figure 2 below combines the scores of the two parties’ members to show the increase in the level of political polarization within Congress as a whole. The figure plots the ideological divergence

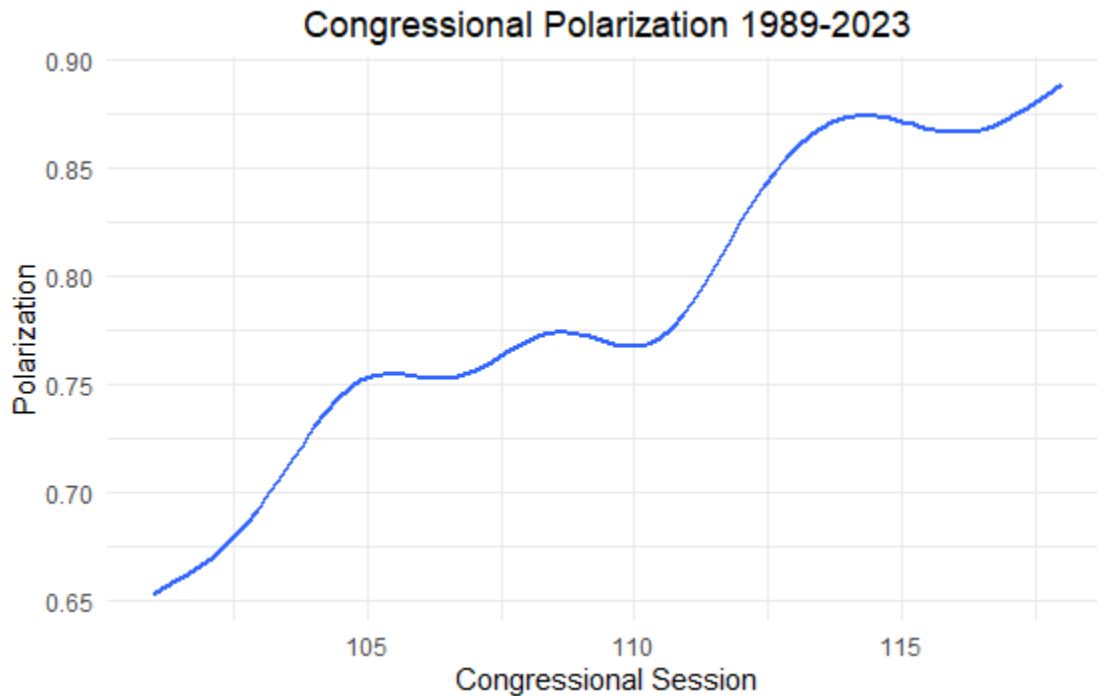
¹⁵ Poole, Keith T, and Howard Rosenthal. “D-Nominate after 10 Years: A Comparative Update to Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2001), 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, 7.

¹⁷ Ibid, 7.

of the two parties from 1989-2023. It reveals a steady increase in the overall level of ideological polarization among the members of Congress. The two most exponential jumps in congressional polarization are observed from the 101st to 105th and 110th to 114th congressional sessions.

Figure 2. Trend of U.S. Ideological Polarization



The American electorate's preferences have also intensified since the end of The Cold War. As polarization increases among the public, the political behavior of candidates and elected officials is increasingly constrained by the preferences of the most politically engaged members of the electorate.¹⁸ There have been record levels of voter turnout among the American electorate during and since the 2004 election cycle. In addition, almost every form of political participation also increased.¹⁹ Along with electoral participation, the U.S. electorate has also engaged in increased straight-ticket voting. In other words, voters are more likely to vote along party lines

¹⁸ Abramowitz, *Disappearing Center*, 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 112.

for all candidate choices.²⁰ Whether elite polarization is driving mass polarization, or the inverse, elite and mass polarization have steadily increased since the 1990 election cycle.

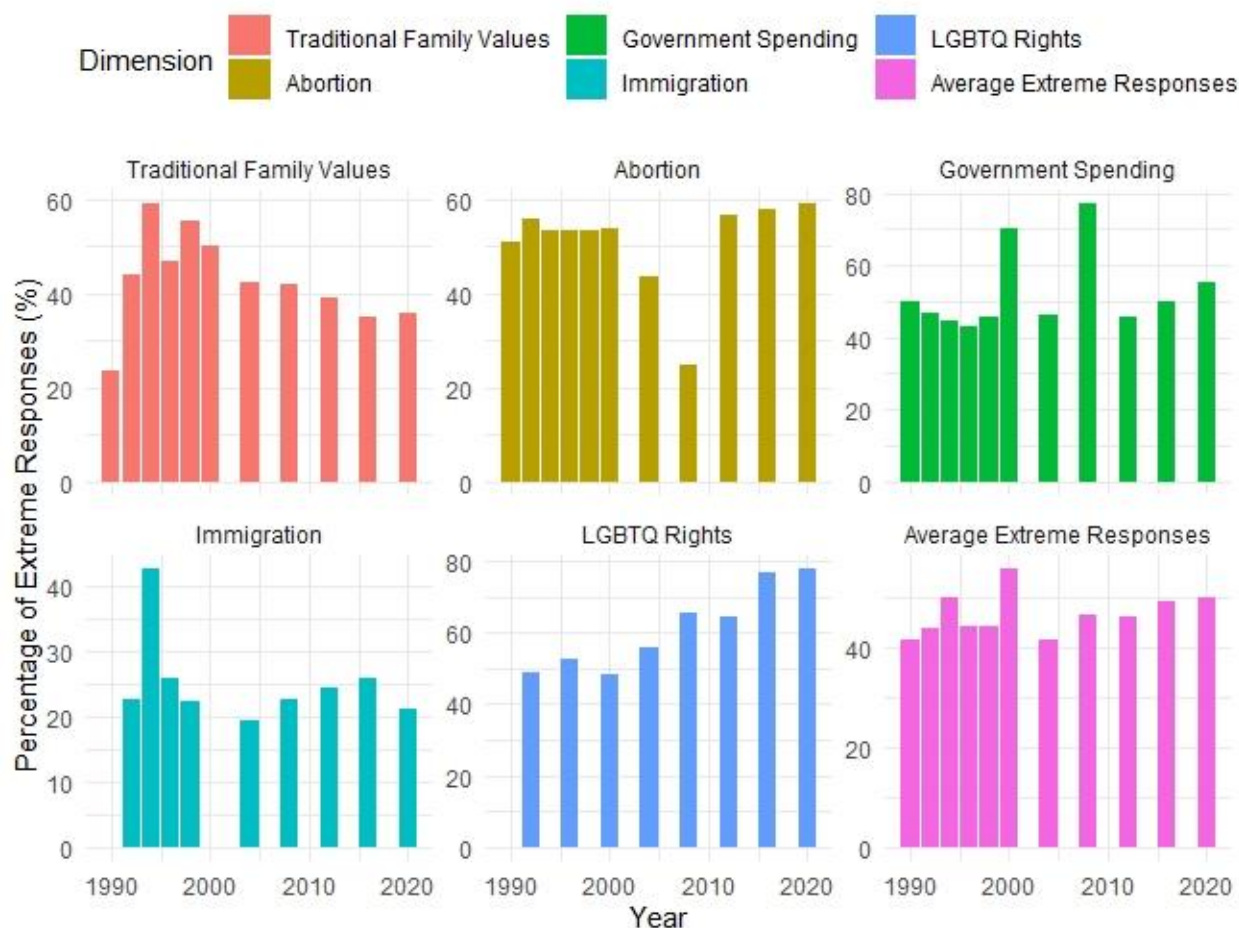
Figure 3 displays the percentage of respondents who selected the most extreme responses on five survey questions from the ANES. The bar charts below show the percentage of all respondents who selected the most extreme issue position per their respective ideology or partisanship. The questions were selected to provide a scale of responses and were only missing limited data, if any, for the period of observation. Certain questions have experienced a rise in extreme responses such as over LGBTQ rights, abortion, and government spending. The other questions surrounding traditional family values stayed relatively stable, and immigration slightly decreased during the decades of observation. The final chart averages the extreme responses from each question together to show the overall trend of the five survey questions asked to respondents.

The percentage of extreme respondents varies over the time series depending on the question. Questions about traditional family values and immigration seemed to have lower percentages of respondents who selected the most extreme answers over time. This decrease in extreme responses could be due to the partisan makeup of those who participated in the surveys. Throughout the decades of observation, most respondents identified as Democrats, and this drastically increased after 2002. Questions that covered abortion and LGBTQ rights accrued more extreme responses over time. The issue of government spending slightly increased, but remained largely stable over the years of observation. When the 5 questions are averaged together the percentage of extreme responses increased from 41 percent in 1990 to 49 percent in

²⁰ Abramowitz, *Disappearing Center*, 9. & Abramowitz, and Webster. “The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections in the 21st Century.” *Electoral Studies* 41, (2016), 12.

2020. The percentage of extreme responses varied depending on the issue but there was an overall increase in mass polarization when the questions were averaged together.

Figure 3. Percentage of Extreme Responses Over Time (All Respondents)



Surveys demonstrate that citizens know little about politics, government, and current events, let alone foreign policy. While the majority of the electorate chooses only to consume a limited amount of information about politics, many voters hold a wide range of intense positions on political issues, stay up to date with current events, and engage in various forms of political activism. Voters also take cues from their partisan elite’s rhetoric on issues, which creates an avenue to shape their opinions. Some scholars even argue political engagement among the U.S. electorate may have increased due to the rise in polarization in recent decades. Partisanship is

relative to voter turnout as political elites attempt to mobilize their source of support. Strong partisans are more politically active than independents or non-partisans, therefore, there is a more pronounced representation of issue positions held by strong partisans. The over-representation of strong partisans is compounded by electoral ingroups becoming more homogenous.

Figure 4 Mass Polarization Trend Between Republicans and Democrats

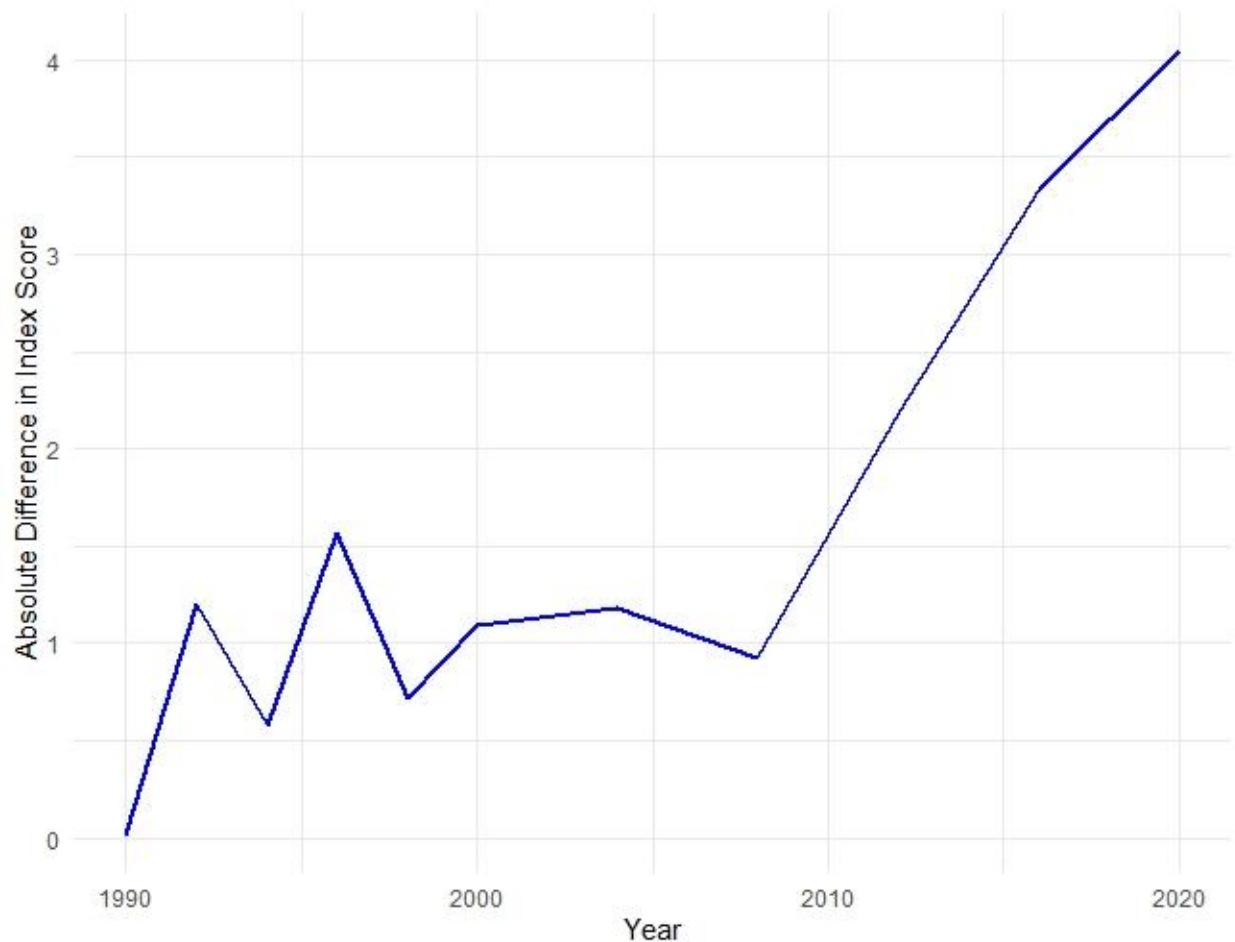


Figure 4 shows the trend in mass polarization from 1990 to 2020 among only Democratic and Republican respondents within the American electorate. The graph depicts the growing distance between the average Republican and Democratic respondents. The line displays the difference in the average index scores for the two parties' respondents, as the absolute difference

increases over time it represents a divergence among the public on the five-question index. Mass polarization has been rising since 1990, although the two types of respondents were fairly close on issue preferences during the early years of observation. However, just before the year 2010, there was a dramatic shift, causing the most exponential rise out of the years selected. This supports polarization literature finding that voters are becoming less moderate and are increasingly identifying as “liberals” and “conservatives.”²¹ Members of the electorate who are more politically cognizant are more polarized in their political attitudes, presumably leading to elites responding to the interest of the more engaged segments of the electorate.²² Similarly, increased polarization among elites can result in higher voter turnout. As voters perceive greater differences between candidates or parties, they presumably become more engaged as the stakes are perceived to be raised.²³

Even if polarization manifests only at the elite level, scholars argue that the U.S. electorate is more efficiently ‘sorted’ by party. Party sorting is defined as “an increased correlation between policy views and partisan identification.”²⁴ Both Democrats and Republicans have sorted geographically into more homogeneous communities that can be thought of as “partisan segregation” or “geographic polarization.”²⁵ Fiorina and Abrams argue that individuals’ sociocultural characteristics and their changes in worldview are not correlated with polarization.²⁶ Their overarching argument is that scholars conflate polarization with party

²¹ Levendusky, Matthew S. “The Microfoundations of Mass Polarization.” *Political Analysis* 17, no. 2 (2009), 163.

²² Abramowitz, and Saunders, “Is Polarization a Myth?,” 545.

²³ Ibid, 552.

²⁴ Fiorina, and Abrams, “Political polarization in the American public,” 563.

²⁵ Abramowitz, and Saunders, “Is Polarization a Myth?,” 41-42. & Fiorina, and Abrams, “Political polarization in the American public,” 563.

²⁶ Fiorina, and Abrams, “Political polarization in the American public,” 568-569.

sorting.²⁷ Partisan sorting of the electorate reinforces views held by individuals' partisan in-group while limiting the amount of contrasting information they receive, resulting in incomplete information and confirmation bias. It is plausible for both sides of the polarization argument to be correct. As polarization increases, individuals tend to sort themselves into their preferred camps more efficiently, a trend that is exacerbated by the rise of negative partisanship.

A form of polarization that has risen concurrently with ideological polarization is 'affect' polarization, or 'negative' partisanship. Affect polarization occurs when individuals' feelings of animosity towards the opposition party or out-group lead to exacerbated social divisions and distrust.²⁸ Negative partisanship is also considered distinct from ideological polarization, rooted in social identity rather than issue positions.²⁹ As Democrats and Republicans hold greater prejudice and anger towards each other, this behavior discourages compromise and encourages the escalation of conflict in the name of partisanship.³⁰ However, this does not mean that affective and ideological polarization are not closely connected within the political divide.³¹ One effect affective polarization has on voters' decision-making is an increase in straight-ticket voting. As straight-ticket voting becomes more prevalent, office-seekers and leaders have fewer incentives to provide policies that appeal to a cross-section of voters.

As ideological polarization, negative partisanship, and party sorting continue to increase, United States' domestic politics will split into ever more divisive camps that could have

²⁷ Ibid, 854.

²⁸ Abramowitz, and Webster, "Rise of Negative Partisanship," 14. & Mason, Lilliana. *Uncivil agreement: How politics became our identity*. University of Chicago Press, (2018), 4. & Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, and Westwood, "Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," 130. & Leeds and Mattes, *Domestic Interests, Democracy, and Foreign Policy Change*, (2022), 66.

²⁹ Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, and Westwood, "Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," 130.

³⁰ Mason, *Uncivil agreement*, 4.

³¹ Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, 111.

profound effects on foreign policy credibility. Since the end of the Cold War, elite and mass ideological polarization have increased to the largest disparity witnessed in modern times. Heightened senses of partisan identity also result in the rise of affective polarization, leading to greater animosity and distrust between the two parties. Increased polarization and partisanship have made it easier for members of the electorate to sort themselves into alignment with the party to which they are most loyal.

Partisan sorting is an important driver for U.S. polarization since partisanship and identity are arguably two of the most crucial factors that shape voters' perceptions of the world.³² Throughout this period of study, the U.S. has experienced an increased level of polarization, and the electorate has also sorted itself into groups based on culture, values, race, and politics.³³ In the next section, I describe how these factors affecting the functions of the domestic political process often have negative consequences for the accountability of those seeking or holding office. Then, I argue that a decline in the accountability of political leaders and office-seekers can lead to less credible foreign policies carried out across administrations.

Accountability in an Age of Polarization

To accurately evaluate polarization's influence on foreign policy, it is essential to employ a model that describes how domestic political dynamics translate population support to elected officials and their policy choices. The type, as well as the size of the coalition of support that a leader receives, is strikingly different between democratic and non-democratic states and in part

³² Levendusky, Matthew S., and Michael C. Horowitz. "When Backing Down Is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs." *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 2 (2012), 325.

³³ Mason, *Uncivil agreement*, 41.

dictates the system structure of the state. In *The Logic of Political Survival*, Bueno de Mesquita et al. define the “selectorate” as the portion of the population that is viable to the political process.³⁴ For both types of systems, there is a section of the polity whose support is required for the office-seeker to obtain and maintain power, this subset of the selectorate is referred to as the “winning coalition.”³⁵

Though the size of the winning coalition can differ, democratic states require a larger winning coalition than non-democratic states. Because the selectorate and winning coalitions are larger in democracies, leaders traditionally tend to focus on policies that benefit a wider range of the population.³⁶ In other words, democratic leaders provide more public goods and policies that affect a wider base of the population to maintain support for public office. Leaders of non-democracies rely on a smaller winning coalition who are provided private goods to maintain legitimacy. Within non-democratic systems, it is often much more costly for members of the selectorate to oppose the incumbent, creating a chilling effect, and leading to smaller winning coalitions. The size of the winning coalitions helps dictate the system structure of democracies versus non-democracies, and in turn, decides the level of potential audience costs facing a leader.

Traditionally, scholars argue that foreign policy signaling has a higher level of credibility among democracies in comparison to non-democracies because democratic systems produce larger audience costs. Since democracies require larger winning coalitions, the result is a stronger audience (and greater audience costs) when compared with non-democracies. Audience costs are understood broadly as the punishments imposed on state leaders if they fail to follow

³⁴ Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, et al. *The Logic of Political Survival*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, (2003), 38.

³⁵ Ibid, 39.

³⁶ Bueno de Mesquita, *Logic of Political Survival*, 54. & Leeds, and Mattes, *Domestic Interests, Democracy, and Foreign Policy Change*, 13.

through on their commitments.³⁷ In states with democratic regimes, leaders can more easily generate these audience costs via escalation in a crisis which makes their foreign policy signals more credible to foreign adversaries.³⁸ The larger winning coalitions required in democratic state systems lead to the heightened credibility of democracies' foreign policy signaling.

What leads to the electorate imposing audience costs on those in power is less certain in political science literature. The traditional understanding is if a leader appears weak by making a public threat or policy, then subsequently backs down or reneges on the policy or agreement the electorate will impose audience costs.³⁹ However, scholars point out that audience costs are not only about policy inconsistencies.⁴⁰ They find that audiences are not fully homogeneous, some people are hawkish (conservative), while some are more dovish (liberal).⁴¹ Those who are more hawkish tend to punish leaders when they are inconsistent during foreign policy signaling.⁴² Dovish portions of the electorate predominately impose audience costs for the belligerence of the leader, and for making any threats in general.⁴³ Overall, domestic audiences impose costs for different reasons and this can complicate foreign policy signaling internationally.

³⁷ Debs, Alexandre, and Jessica Chen Weiss. "Circumstances, Domestic Audiences, and Reputational Incentives in International Crisis Bargaining." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no. 3 (2016), 404. & Weeks, Jessica L. "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve." *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (2008), 35 & Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, 43. & Kurizaki, Shuhei, and Taehee Whang. "Detecting Audience Costs in International Disputes." *International Organization* 69, no. 4 (2015), 953. & Kertzer, Joshua D., and Ryan Brutger. "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory." *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 1 (2016), 234.

³⁸ Fearon, James D. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994), 578.

³⁹ Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," 578. & Levendusky, and Horowitz, "When Backing Down Is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs," (2012), 323. & Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs," 35.

⁴⁰ Kertzer, and Brutger, "Decomposing Audience Costs," 234.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 245.

⁴² *Ibid*, 245.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 235.

While greater audience costs are produced for democratic leaders, the severity of such costs also differs between democratic and non-democratic states. While democratically elected leaders can face harsher punishments, it's likely that in a democracy the leader will incur blame and punishment for domestic or foreign policy failure, but the punishment is often capped at losing the benefits of holding office.⁴⁴ The opposite is true for rulers of nondemocratic regimes, they are less likely to incur audience costs for political mishaps due to a smaller winning coalition.⁴⁵ However, when they do, the punishments are severe; often resulting in prison, exile, or death.⁴⁶ Audience costs for leaders differ by type and severity depending on whether the state is democratic or not. As a state becomes more polarized this in turn will have effects on the features of winning coalitions and therefore the audience costs that are produced.

Political candidates build the base of a winning coalition and when polarization is high, I argue that candidates are shielded from the potential defection of their supporters. In other words, polarization reduces the potential audience costs a democratic leader could face for foreign policy failure. Thus, instead of an electorate consisting of a standard normal distribution, it should depict a bimodal distribution with the majority of voters in two distinct peaks further right or left rather than in the center.⁴⁷ More emphasis is therefore placed on mobilizing candidates' bases' to turn out to vote, rather than trying to attract a 'median' voter. The parties' winning coalitions are 'stabilized' and largely vote in line with their partisan identification. In other words, intensified partisanship and sorting leads to a bimodal distribution of the electorate and results in less accountability for leaders.

⁴⁴ Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, 18.

⁴⁵ Leeds, & Mattes, *Domestic Interests, Democracy, and Foreign Policy Change*, 5.

⁴⁶ Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, 18 & 24.

⁴⁷ Fiorina, and Abrams, "Political polarization in the American public," 566.

Polarization has negative effects on domestic accountability for officeholders and candidates. As domestic polarization increases in the U.S., this will lower audience costs imposed on those holding public office. Party sorting among the electorate makes partisanship more influential, so voters are less likely to punish candidates for taking on more extreme rhetoric or policy positions. Previous research supports this notion; since partisans' preferences are heightened, audiences aligned with the same party as the president will impose smaller audience costs.⁴⁸ Audience costs are also not paid by the opposition party for resisting a successful policy put forth by the incumbent. The size of winning coalitions is still larger in democracies and may be more stable due to increased mass polarization. The moderate bloc of the electorate that constrains leadership, incentivizing more moderate policies is less prevalent and elites are free to take up more extreme policies with fewer repercussions. Polarization's effect on audience costs, effectively lowering them, creates less accountability for officeholders.

The size of winning coalitions is an important feature in democratic systems, allowing for greater audience costs that constrain the decision-making of the executive. In democratic states, the costs paid are generally losing the benefits of holding public office. Traditionally, democratic leaders have incentives to advance policies that benefit a wider range of the population, thus collecting support from a larger winning coalition. As polarization increases, winning coalitions move away from the center and become more stable, this incentivizes officeholders to take cues from the most politically engaged and more extreme segments of their supporters. Audiences impose costs for various reasons, notably, imposing significantly smaller costs when their party is holding office. Thus, increasing polarization not only has domestic effects but also influences foreign policy signaling.

⁴⁸ Levendusky, and Horowitz, "When Backing Down Is the Right Decision," 325.

Polarization and Foreign Policy Signaling

Domestic political polarization has profound influences on foreign policy decisions and specifically affects the credibility of U.S. foreign policy signaling. I argue that the effects of heightened domestic polarization can undermine the credibility of the United States' foreign policy. As polarization increases, the differences in foreign policy approaches become more apparent between the two parties. Reneging on previous foreign policies is more likely with each incoming presidential administration if the incumbent is not re-elected. As policy adjustments diverge from administration to administration, they create greater inconsistencies in foreign policy across U.S. presidential administrations. These inconsistencies can lead to the decline of U.S. credibility on the global stage, resulting in allies questioning the reliability of the U.S. and as well as rivals questioning U.S. resolve.

Democratic states can send credible foreign policy threats or commitments. One way that occurs is democratic governments obtain support from the opposition party and are better able to signal their resolve than a non-democratic government.⁴⁹ Schultz refers to this process as “confirmatory signaling,” and it makes threats more likely to be successful.⁵⁰ Since democracies are less likely to make commitments they do not plan to fulfill they are less likely to be resisted.⁵¹ When the incumbent and opposition parties simultaneously express their support for a policy commitment or threat it confirms its credibility.

When the opposition party does not support the incumbent's foreign policies this undermines the credibility of the government's decisions. Traditionally, when the opposition

⁴⁹ Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, 163.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 113 & 163.

⁵¹ Ibid, 2.

party resists the government's use of force, it raises the electoral risks for the party in power.⁵² Threats that are made by a democracy with opposition support are certainly more credible than threats by a non-democracy. However, threats made by democratic governments without opposition support are no less credible than those by non-democratic states.⁵³ As bipartisanship declines and opposition parties take more opportunities to oppose the incumbent's decisions, signaling to allies or rivals becomes convoluted. Partisan division within the government becomes increasingly adversarial and can signal a lack of resolve to the international community.

Increasing domestic polarization results in less consistent foreign policy commitments across differing administrations, creating commitment issues and therefore undermining the credibility of U.S. agreements. Commitment problems occur due to the uncertainty of the anarchic system of international politics when states are unable to commit to an agreement or have incentives to renege on it.⁵⁴ When states withdraw from treaties or agreements they signal that their commitments are not credible, making it more difficult to form deals with possible strategic partners.⁵⁵ Domestic polarization causes a multitude of issues to become divisive including international treaties or even less formal agreements. As an international agreement becomes more salient and highly politicized, it's more likely to be terminated once the opposition party wins office.

Consequently, possible future partners may be able to find agreements from the U.S. credible in the short-term, approximately 4-8 years, however, during heightened polarization medium to long-term foreign policy arrangements are less probable. The negative repercussion

⁵² Ibid, 100.

⁵³ Ibid, 114.

⁵⁴ Powell, Robert. "War as a Commitment Problem." *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (2006), 170.

⁵⁵ Schmidt, "Damaged Relations", 1.

of increasing polarization has received notice from world leaders, most notably, from leaders of the United States closest allies. In 2017, German Chancellor Angela Merkel gave a public statement in which she stated that the United States was no longer a reliable partner and that Germany (and Europe) must take their “fate” into their own hands.⁵⁶ In 2018, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave remarks on U.S.-Canadian trade and diplomatic relations after finding themselves the “target of punitive tariffs,” and called such tariffs “unacceptable” considering the partnership between the two nations.⁵⁷ Lastly, in 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that NATO allies were experiencing “the brain death of NATO,” amid U.S. threats not to uphold its commitments to the treaty.⁵⁸ Changes in U.S. foreign policy commitments due to polarization in the U.S. have become apparent to other world leaders and can lead to other nations adopting alternative foreign policy strategies.

As foreign leaders observe the heightened U.S. polarization and question the reliability of partnership with the U.S., one alternative policy states may adopt is ‘hedging’ when engaging with great powers. Hedging can be thought of as “signaling that generates ambiguity over the extent of a secondary state’s shared security interests with great powers.”⁵⁹ When states can no longer rely on superpowers they will turn to other strategic partners and hedge between them. Scholars have found that East Asian states are hedging both economically and politically with China, while simultaneously strengthening security measures with the United States.⁶⁰ One way that states may hedge, specifically politically, is by voting differently at the United Nations.

⁵⁶ “Merkel: Europe can no longer rely on US & UK,” *DW News*, (05/28/2017).

⁵⁷ Justin Trudeau, “Prime Minister Trudeau responds to steel and aluminum tariffs imposed by the United States,” Ottawa, Canada, (5/31/2018).

⁵⁸ “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead,” *The Economist*, (11/07/2019).

⁵⁹ Lim, Darren J., and Zack Cooper. “Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia.” *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015), 696.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 697.

States hedging may align themselves with other regional or great powers such as China at the UN, this should be observable through states' voting patterns at the UN.

What previous bargaining theory models do not account for is the effects of increasing polarization among democratic states. Heightened domestic polarization lowers audience costs, decreasing accountability for those holding or seeking public office. Lower audience costs make it more likely that executives will adopt more extreme policy positions. In other words, polarization complicates foreign policy signaling to rivals or allies internationally. Lastly, polarization creates long-term foreign policy inconsistencies across administrations. All of these institutional changes compound in democracies during heightened polarization and decrease the credibility of a state's foreign policy signaling on the international stage.

Therefore, I propose that as domestic polarization increases, we will witness a divergence between the United States and other nations on the international stage. Specifically, I hypothesize the following:

H1: An increase in elite polarization in the United States Congress is associated with a decline in foreign policy alignment between the United States and other states.

H2: An increase in mass polarization in the United States electorate is associated with a decline in foreign policy alignment between the United States and other states.

I expect that as leaders become less accountable for their actions and foreign policy signaling becomes complicated by heightened polarization, foreign leaders will question the credibility of the United States' commitments. In the next section, I test this theory empirically by combining multiple datasets to show the international effects of increasing U.S. domestic polarization since the end of the Cold War.

Chapter 3 - U.S. Political Polarization and Foreign Policy

Alignment, 1989-2020

Since the end of the Cold War era, polarization has risen steadily among the United States Congress and other political elites. Rising polarization in the U.S. electorate also occurred in recent decades, however, scholars debate the level of heightened mass polarization and its effects. During times of increased polarization, it results in a decline of domestic accountability for leaders and those seeking public office due to lower audience costs. Heightened polarization can complicate foreign policy signaling and create less consistent policies across administrations. The confluence of issues resulting from increased polarization affects the United States' credibility when making commitments abroad. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how other nations adapt their foreign policies as polarization increases in the United States.

This chapter will examine the international effects of heightened domestic polarization by testing the hypotheses laid out in the previous chapter. In international relations, states foreign policy preferences are often not directly observable and must be inferred by a proxy.⁶¹ A common parameter used among scholars is United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voting data to reflect state preferences on global issues.⁶² In comparison to the UNGA, the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) tend to vote on the same side of issues brought forth.⁶³ There are various sets of United Nations data that could be utilized, but for

⁶¹ Bailey, Michael A, Anton Strezhnev, and Erik Voeten. "Estimating Dynamic State Preferences from United Nations Voting Data." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 2 (2017), 431.

⁶² Voeten, Erik, "Resisting the Lonely Superpower: Responses of States in the United Nations to U.S. Dominance," (2004), 733. & Flores-Macías, Gustavo A, and Sarah E Kreps. "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade: China's Commercial Relations with Africa and Latin America, 1992–2006." *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013), 358.

⁶³ Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten, "Estimating Dynamic State Preferences," 444.

answering the questions regarding states' reactions to heightened polarization in the U.S. I will use UNGA voting data since general assembly voting is strategic and more efficiently reveals states' preferences.

Data and Statistical Estimation

The testing of the hypotheses will require the operationalization of elite and mass polarization and U.S. foreign policy credibility. To do so, I have constructed a sample dataset of all dyads involving the United States from 1989 to 2020. To test the effects of polarization on U.S. foreign policy credibility, the unit of analysis is the U.S.- dyad year. I will be estimating the models using Prais-Winsten feasible Generalized Least Squares (fGLS) regression on the panel data. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression is used for homoscedastic models, and after running a Breusch-Pagan test there was a significant amount of heteroscedasticity within the model. Durbin-Watson tests for identifying autocorrelation revealed significant autocorrelation within the dataset. Using a Prais-Winsten fGLS regression model with robust standard errors will correct for heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation across the data.

I argue that as polarization increases in the United States it lowers the foreign policy credibility of the U.S. abroad. Observing intangibles and beliefs such as credibility held by foreign leaders is difficult since they are often opaque. Leaders have strategic incentives to not be forthcoming about their foreign policy concerns. As U.S. foreign policy credibility declines, I anticipate that foreign policy alignment with the U.S. and other nations should also decline. Therefore, I choose to use UNGA roll-call voting data as a proxy to measure the United States

credibility in a cross-sectional, time-series regression.⁶⁴ The UNGA voting dataset uses ideal point estimates which more effectively identify meaningful shifts in foreign policy preferences than other spatial models.⁶⁵ The ideal point distance is calculated by finding the absolute difference between the United States' ideal points with each other UN member for each UN session from 1989 to 2020. Thus, increases in the ideal point distance represent greater divergence between the voting patterns of the United States and the other UN members.

Operationalizing elite and mass polarization variables is less difficult due to U.S. Congressional scholars' efforts, specifically, VoteView's multidimensional DW-NOMINATE dataset and the American National Election Studies.⁶⁶ Both are often used for measurements in scholarship relating to the debate over political polarization in the United States.⁶⁷ The elite polarization measure was calculated by finding the median ideology score for each political party, and then taking the absolute distance between the party medians for each year from 1989 to 2020. The mass polarization variable was quantified by finding the average of the percentage of each question that responded with the most extreme answer from 1990 to 2020. To account for the years missing data, the even-numbered years' values were interpolated, to create average scores across the missing years of the dataset. I expect that increases in the elite and mass polarization measures correlate positively with UNGA voting. As polarization increases, the difference in voting between the United States and other members of the United Nations subsequently increases.

⁶⁴ All statistical analysis used R (version 4.1.3): <https://www.r-project.org/>.

⁶⁵ Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten, "Estimating Dynamic State Preferences," 431.

⁶⁶ Voeten, Erik; Strezhnev, Anton; Bailey, Michael, 2009, "United Nations General Assembly Voting Data", Harvard Dataverse, V31. & American National Election Studies. 2022. ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File. September 16, 2022, version.

⁶⁷ Schultz, "Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy," 8. & Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, 2. & Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*, 3.

The ANES survey questions that were selected from their cumulative dataset, were selected because they were the best fit for examining mass polarization. First, rather than yes or no, the questions being asked needed to have a range of possible responses for the respondents to depict a change in attitudes on issues over time. Second, the questions selected covered a range of domestic issues that have been relevant across the electorate during the years examined. Lastly, the questions were selected since they were asked consistently throughout the time series in an attempt to limit missing data. Together, the questions cover issues of government spending, abortion, immigration, the rights of LGBTQ individuals, and feelings toward traditional family norms. A more in-depth breakdown of the survey questions is available in the Appendix below.

I include four control variables that may influence how states interpret the credibility of the United States.⁶⁸ First, since the 1980s, bilateral defense cooperation agreements (DCAs) have become the most common form of defense cooperation.⁶⁹ Since DCAs are less formal than traditional treaties that must seek ratification through Congress, this makes them easier to negotiate and implement. DCAs are not alliances as they “contain no mutual defense or nonaggression obligations,” which makes it easier for states to renege on them.⁷⁰ Since these agreements can be withdrawn more easily, they require a considerable amount of credibility and trust from the states involved.⁷¹ Therefore, if states are engaged in a DCA with the United States, I expect they will diverge less frequently from the U.S. voting at the UNGA.

⁶⁸ Miller S (2022). “peacesciencer: An R Package for Quantitative Peace Science Research.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 39(6), 755–779.

⁶⁹ Kinne, Brandon J. "Defense cooperation agreements and the emergence of a global security network." *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018), 799.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 800.

⁷¹ Ibid, 801-802.

Second, I introduce a control variable for regime type. Democratic states have shared institutions and norms leading to more international cooperation to resolve conflicts.⁷² The democratic peace is a long-standing theory in international relations. The fact that democracies are less likely to resolve their conflicts with one another through violent means, makes it more probable that they will vote similarly on issues at the United Nations. I utilize the Polity Project's index for categorizing nations into levels of autocracy, anocracy, and democracy.⁷³ States that are scored at a six or above for the respective year are considered a democracy and coded one, all others are coded zero.

Third, a control variable is included for economic interdependence. Scholars have found that economic interdependence is correlated with UNGA voting.⁷⁴ The economic interdependence variable is necessary because nations that develop trade relations are more likely to adopt similar foreign policy positions.⁷⁵ For example, states that have higher exports to China are more likely to have closer diplomatic ties to China and are more willing to adjust their policy to vote alongside China in the UNGA.⁷⁶ The more dependent states' economies are on trade partners the higher incentives there are to follow similar foreign policies since disruption to trade relations will be more costly.⁷⁷ The economic interdependence control variable is from the

⁷² Russett, Bruce M. *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, (1993), 4.

⁷³ Marshall, M. G., & Gurr, T. R. (2020). *Polity v project, political regime characteristics and transitions, 1800-2018*. Center for Systemic Peace.

⁷⁴ Flores-Macías, Gustavo A., and Sarah E. Kreps. "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade: China's Commercial Relations with Africa and Latin America, 1992–2006." *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013), 369.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 358.

⁷⁶ Brazys, Samuel, and Alexander Dukalskis. "Canary in the Coal Mine? China, the UNGA, and the Changing World Order." *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 4 (2017), 742.

⁷⁷ Flores-Macías, and Kreps, "Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade," 358.

Correlates of War (COW) Trade (v4.0) dataset.⁷⁸ It measures interdependence as the total amount of trade between the dyads divided by the gross domestic product (GDP) of the non-U.S. states in the dyad.⁷⁹

Lastly, the model includes a control variable for distance from China. States that are in closer proximity to a superpower rival of the U.S., such as China, may be more likely to develop more foreign policy alignment with China. In other words, one consequence of states' hedging strategies may be to pursue closer relationships with China, including voting more frequently in accordance with China's preferences. Hence, I control for a state's distance from China to minimize the chance of a spurious correlation between U.S. polarization and UNGA voting due to China's rise. The variable records the distance between the capital city of the non-U.S. state in each dyad and Beijing.

Prais-Winsten Regression Results

I estimate two models to examine the hypotheses above that polarization negatively influences the credibility of U.S. foreign policy signaling. This reduction in foreign policy credibility is observed as a divergence between the U.S. and other members of the UNGA. The polarization coefficients are expected to be positive, suggesting that increases in U.S. polarization are correlated with a divergence in UN voting within dyads. The DCA coefficient is

⁷⁸ Barbieri, Katherine and Omar M. G. Omar Keshk. 2016. Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set Codebook, Version 4.0. Online: <https://correlatesofwar.org>. & Barbieri, Katherine, Omar M. G. Keshk, and Brian Pollins. 2009. "TRADING DATA: Evaluating our Assumptions and Coding Rules." *Conflict Management and Peace Science*. 26(5), 471-491. & Anders, Therese, Christopher J. Fariss, and Jonathan N. Markowitz. 2020. "Bread Before Guns or Butter: Introducing Surplus Domestic Product (SDP)" *International Studies Quarterly* 64(2), 392–405.

⁷⁹ Stoelzel Chadwick, Christina M, and Andrew G Long. "Foreign Policy Alignment and Russia's Energy Weapon." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 19, no. 2 (2023), 10.

expected to be negative: a DCA between the U.S. and another country should reduce the ideal point distance in their voting pattern. The geographic distance from China coefficient is expected to be negative as states located further from China will feel less pressure to hedge and thus vote more consistently with the U.S. The democracy variable is expected to be negative, thus if a dyad is two democratic states it should produce less divergence when voting at the UN. The democracy variable is expected to be negative; two democratic states should produce less divergence when voting at the UN. The economic interdependence coefficients are also expected to be negative because states that share economic ties with the U.S. should vote in a similar position to the U.S. To account for the party of the administration in control of the executive branch of government, I introduced a dichotomous variable for partisanship. The variable was operationalized by coding the years with a Republican presidential administration a one and coding the years with a Democratic administration with a zero. This variable controlling for partisanship is intended to help isolate changes in foreign policy alignment due to polarization.

In Table 1, I display the results of the elite polarization model using the ideal point estimates. Crucially, the elite polarization coefficient was positive and statistically significant at the five percent level. The positive coefficients suggest that as elite polarization increases, on average, the distance between ideal points also tends to increase. None of the control variables other than partisanship were statistically significant in the elite polarization model. It can be inferred that an increase in elite polarization in the U.S. is correlated, on average, with a greater divergence in foreign policy alignment between the U.S. and other states at the UN.

Table 1. Elite Polarization and U.S. Foreign Policy Alignment

Table 1: Elite Polarization and Ideal Point Estimate Distance	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Ideal Point Distance from U.S.
Elite Polarization	0.340* (0.153)
Defense Cooperation Agreements	0.0003 (0.020)
Distance from China	0.00003 (0.00001)
Democracy	-0.029 (0.019)
Economic Interdependence	-0.00002 (0.00001)
Partisanship	0.083*** (0.008)
Constant	2.455*** (0.183)
<i>Note:</i> ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; ·p<0.1	

The second model includes the same variables except for substituting the mass polarization hypothesis. The mass polarization explanatory variable is expected to have the same relationship with the UN voting coefficient as the previous model. The negative mass polarization coefficient is statistically significant, at the one percent level. These coefficients suggest that increasing mass polarization in the U.S., on average, is correlated with a decrease in the voting distance between the U.S. and other UNGA members. In Table 2, all control variables

behave in the same manner as the first model, all coefficients are statistically insignificant except for the partisanship dummy variable. The results in the mass polarization model are in contrast to the mass polarization hypothesis. Thus, it can be inferred that increasing mass polarization in the U.S. is not correlated, on average, with a greater divergence in foreign policy alignment between the U.S. and other states at the UN.

Table 2. Mass Polarization and U.S. Foreign Policy Alignment

Table 2: Mass Polarization and Ideal Point Estimate Distance	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Ideal Point Distance from U.S.
Mass Polarization	−0.006*** (0.001)
Defense Cooperation Agreements	0.003 (0.020)
Distance from China	0.00003 (0.00001)
Democracy	−0.028 (0.019)
Economic Interdependence	−0.000008 (0.00001)
Partisanship	0.069*** (0.008)
Constant	2.973*** (0.152)
<i>Note:</i> ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; ·p<0.1	

It is important to note that these models do hold high significance levels overall, however, they provide contrary conclusions to polarization's negative effect on the credibility of U.S. foreign policy signaling. Due to the economic interdependence control variable, the number of observations is limited in the models. The COW trade data ends after the year 2014, during the decade when polarization is expected to increase exponentially. The models below have the economic interdependence variable removed to extend the observations through the year 2020.

Table 3. Elite Polarization and U.S. Foreign Policy Alignment Absent Economic Interdependence

Table 3: Elite Polarization without Economic Interdependence	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Ideal Point Distance from U.S.
Elite Polarization	0.140 (0.169)
Defense Cooperation Agreements	-0.012 (0.024)
Distance from China	0.00003* (0.00001)
Democracy	-0.019 (0.027)
Partisanship	0.082*** (0.008)
Constant	2.471*** (0.182)
<i>Note:</i> ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; ·p<0.1	

The elite polarization model above without including the economic interdependence control variable behaves similarly to the first model. However, the elite polarization coefficient is no longer statistically significant. The control variable coefficients were all insignificant other than partisanship and the geographic distance from China. For the elite polarization model, removing the interdependence variable did not improve the explanatory power of the modeling.

The fourth model below is practically identical to the full mass polarization model above rather than the control variables. The significance levels remained the same for mass polarization and ideal point distance from the U.S., drawing the same conclusion from the first mass polarization model. The model suggests mass polarization may be a more relevant predictor of ideal point distance from the U.S. than elite polarization. However, while mass polarization may have a significant effect on UN voting, it implies that as polarization increases the ideal point distance between the U.S. and other states decreases.

Table 4. Mass Polarization and U.S. Foreign Policy Alignment Absent Economic Interdependence

Table 4: Mass Polarization without Economic Interdependence	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Ideal Point Distance from U.S.
Mass Polarization	−0.007*** (0.001)
Defense Cooperation Agreements	−0.011 (0.024)
Distance from China	0.00003* (0.00001)
Democracy	−0.016 (0.027)
Partisanship	0.070*** (0.008)
Constant	2.933*** (0.142)
<i>Note:</i> ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; ·p<0.1	

Table 5 below is a comparison of both elite and mass models, with and without the economic interdependence control variables. Across models, the elite polarization coefficients change, when removing the economic interdependence variable. However, the outcomes of the mass polarization coefficients largely remain stable whether the economic interdependence variable is utilized or excluded.

Table 5. All Polarization and Foreign Policy Alignment Models

	Elite Polarization		Mass Polarization		Elite Polarization without Econ Interdependence		Mass Polarization without Econ Interdependence	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Elite Polarization	0.34*	(0.15)			0.14	(0.17)		
Mass Polarization			-0.01***	(0.00)			-0.01***	(0.00)
Defense Cooperation Agreements	0.00	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)
Distance from China	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)	0.00*	(0.00)	0.00*	(0.00)
Democracy	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.03)	-0.02	(0.03)
Economic Interdependence	-0.00	(0.00)	-0.00	(0.00)				
Partisanship	0.08***	(0.01)	0.07***	(0.01)	0.08***	(0.01)	0.07***	(0.01)
Constant	2.46***	(0.18)	2.97***	(0.15)	2.47***	(0.18)	2.93***	(0.14)

Note: *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; p<0.1

Chapter 4 - Implications of Unilateral Withdrawal from the JCPOA

As polarization has increased since the end of the Cold War, it has had implications for the credibility of U.S. foreign policy. This chapter will focus on a case that highlights the effect of increasing polarization on U.S. foreign policy. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is a case study showing how domestic political polarization affects foreign policy and international credibility. I chose this case because the Iran nuclear deal illustrates how heightened domestic polarization led to the fracturing of a multilateral agreement through a unilateral withdrawal by the U.S., damaging U.S. foreign policy credibility with other states moving forward. The deal was contentious among American politics throughout its formation, but deterring the Iranian nuclear weapons program and improving security in the Middle East region was a multilateral achievement for the U.S. The emergence of the Iran Nuclear Deal was largely due to the credibility the U.S. held internationally during its formation.⁸⁰ The coalition of rival and allied states that adopted the multilateral agreement invested their trust in the U.S. to uphold its end of the agreement.

This case demonstrates how states are viewing the U.S. as less credible and do not trust future agreements with the U.S. On July 20th, 2015 the UNSC adopted Resolution 2231 endorsing the JCPOA, seeking to ensure Iran's nuclear program would be operating for exclusively peaceful purposes.⁸¹ The implementation of the JCPOA was one of many attempts to ensure the peaceful nature of a nuclear program controlled by Tehran.⁸² This case displays the real-world implications of increased domestic polarization on the credibility of U.S. foreign

⁸⁰ Serim, A. Esra. "A Rare Successful Nonproliferation Policy: The JCPOA." *Middle East Policy* 29, no. 4 (2022), 49.

⁸¹ Rosenthal, Michael D. "United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 & Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action." *International Legal Materials* 55, no. 1 (2016), 100.

⁸² U.S. Department of State Archives. Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA): (07/14/2015).

policy. The JCPOA is a fitting case study since it occurs within the past decade and coincides with the most exponential increase in domestic polarization. The Iran nuclear deal covers multiple transitions between Republican and Democratic presidential administrations. It shows the effects of domestic polarization creating a volatile U.S. foreign policy, shifting from multilateralism to unilateral actions. These policy inconsistencies resulting from increased partisan political dynamics ultimately caused the collapse of the agreement between the U.S., Iran, and other global powers.

Origins of the Iranian Nuclear Program

The Islamic Republic of Iran's contemporary nuclear weapons program has been a long-standing issue of international security throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as globally. Iran's nuclear program origins stem from the 1950s regime under the rule of the U.S.-backed Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. In 1957, the United States agreed to the *Atoms for Peace* agreement, to assist Iran in developing a peaceful nuclear program to increase the state's production of energy.⁸³ Iran also agreed to the multilateral Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) in 1964, which included the U.S. and U.S.S.R., blocking Iran's ability to produce and test nuclear weapons.⁸⁴ After making limited progress during this time, Dr. Akbar Etemad, known as the "father of the Iranian nuclear program," began to lead the Tehran Nuclear Research Center (TNRC).⁸⁵ Dr. Etemad and the TNRC made significant progress in the years ahead, and Iran

⁸³ Gerli, Michele. *Beyond Nuclear Ambiguity : The Iranian Nuclear Crisis and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*. Firenze: Firenze University Press, (2019), 4.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 5.

ratified another multilateral agreement for the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).⁸⁶ Throughout the 1950s and 60s, Iran's nuclear program saw only limited progress due to technical limitations.

This trend changed during the 1970's, resulting in substantial nuclear program development. Iran allocated more resources to the program due to the increase in oil demand and production. The increased profits were due to the 1974 global oil embargo as a result of the Yom Kippur War.⁸⁷ Increased revenue compounded with India's first nuclear tests the same year gave the Shah an increased sense of urgency to develop the program.⁸⁸ By mid-decade, Dr. Etemad had become president of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) and began the development of civilian infrastructure.⁸⁹ At this same time, the United States had agreed to a 15 billion dollar trade agreement with Iran, providing "eight light-water reactors", under the condition that Iran agree to a new bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement.⁹⁰ Multiple times throughout the decades above Tehran offered, under bilateral or multilateral agreements to avoid producing nuclear weapons in exchange for technical or trade assistance.

During the mid-1970s Mohammad Reza Shah's position on acquiring a nuclear arsenal became more ambiguous. On one hand, during interviews, the Shah would reiterate that Iran was not seeking nuclear weapons and was strictly increasing their proficiency with nuclear technologies. Later, the Shah would use India and Pakistan's rhetoric on the possible development of nuclear weapons of their own as a national security issue, and a reason to

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Gerli, *Beyond Nuclear Ambiguity*, 6 & Rosenthal, Michael D. "United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 & Rosenthal, Michael D. "United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 & Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action." *International Legal Materials* 55, no. 1 (2016), 98.

⁸⁸ Gerli, *Beyond Nuclear Ambiguity*, 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

consider further enriching uranium to develop an arsenal.⁹¹ An alternative explanation is that Tehran was merely using the possibility of other nations' development of nuclear technologies as a scapegoat that would provide Iran with more leverage to justify the production of nuclear arms. In either case, the policy direction of the Iranian government had shifted and begun to adopt a more ambivalent tone on the idea of a domestic nuclear weapons program.

This sudden change in posture by Tehran unsettled the U.S. intelligence community, which attempted to deter the Shah and Dr. Etemad from seeking nuclear weapons. In 1975, Gerald Ford's administration threatened to cut off U.S.-supplied nuclear fuel to Iran. Iran concluded that attempts at deterrence by the U.S. were an infringement on Iranian sovereignty, which led to a disagreement between the two nations, until the Carter administration. In 1978, the U.S. and Iran agreed to the US-Iran Nuclear Energy Agreement, which was intended to safely "facilitate nuclear partnership" between the two states by regulating the transferring and reprocessing of technologies and materials. However, the US-Iran Nuclear Energy Agreement was never fully implemented due to the beginning of the Iranian revolution in 1979.

In 1979, during the revolution, the Shah resigned from power and fled the country, and Dr. Etemad had already resigned from his position the year prior. Ruhollah Khomeini's return to Iran from exile in Paris led to significant backtracking on Iranian cooperation in nuclear technologies. Once Khomeini assumed leadership and became the Supreme Leader and Iran was declared a theocratic state, the "westernization" or modernization of the country came to a halt.⁹² The Islamic revolution and resulting hostage crisis, where students and activists seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held 52 American diplomats and citizens hostage for 444 days resulted in

⁹¹ Ibid, 9.

⁹² Ibid, 12-13.

a drastic deterioration of the U.S.-Iranian diplomatic relations. The crisis led to the U.S. freezing Iranian assets and imposing sanctions, drastically hampering the Iranian nuclear program.

Throughout the rest of the 1980s, Iran attempted to broker deals with France, Germany, China, the United States, and Argentina to receive supplies of enriched uranium. Cooperation with the U.S. ended abruptly after the hostage crisis and later the 1983 suicide bombing of U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, carried out by a pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad militia. In 1987, Tehran was able to achieve a deal with Argentina to provide enriched uranium, to the TNRC under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). As foreign relations between Washington and Tehran reached new lows, turning adversarial, the Iranian government's rhetoric on nuclear weapons was much more aggressive. The confluence of the Iranian revolution, U.S. sanctions, the Iran-Iraq war, Western isolation, and the lack of expertise resulted in the 1980s becoming a stagnant period for the nuclear program.

In 1989 there was new Iranian leadership, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khameni, and President Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Under the new regime, progress within the Iranian nuclear program was given a higher priority during the 1990's. The Islamic Republic continued its attempts to gain technical expertise and materials such as reactors for their program but often were curtailed by pressure from the United States. Iran was successful in obtaining support from Beijing, Moscow, and a clandestine Pakistani network to provide necessary components such as centrifuges, uranium, and fuel for the program.⁹³ In 1996, Iran agreed to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), but it was never ratified by the Iranian parliament.⁹⁴ The renewed push for a nuclear arsenal by Iran was seen as necessary by the regime to counter the nuclear progress

⁹³ Ibid, 18-19.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 19.

made by Israel, India, and Pakistan. The incoming Iranian president in 1997, Mohammad Khatami, reorganized the AEOI and it began production of multiple nuclear sites in violation of its agreements with the IAEA.⁹⁵ President Khatami, a reformer, had the goal of normalizing Iran's status within the regional and international community.

Khatami's attempts at normalization became largely unsuccessful after the September 11th attacks on the United States caused U.S.-Iranian relations to deteriorate even further. This led to U.S. President Bush's 2002 State of the Union where he condemned Iran for seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and accused the Iranian regime of the probability of providing WMDs to terrorist organizations.⁹⁶ The longstanding determination of the Islamic Republic to obtain nuclear weapons and the U.S.'s attempts to curtail their efforts ultimately spiraled into the nuclear crises of the 2000s. During the mid-2000s the U.S. gained credibility among the international community for building a consensus among global powers to constrain the Iranian economy to prevent progress on their nuclear program.⁹⁷ In 2002, Iranian dissidents informed the IAEA of Iran's clandestine nuclear program to enrich uranium beyond the previously agreed-upon levels.⁹⁸ Iran also "failed to meet obligations in multiple ways" when it came to addressing the IAEA on the scope of its nuclear program, along with disassembling parts of the facilities to mislead the IAEA.⁹⁹ Agreements to suspend Iran's enrichment of uranium were signed with the European Union (EU), Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (UK),

⁹⁵ Ibid, 20.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁹⁷ Serim, A. Esra. "A Rare Successful Nonproliferation Policy: The JCPOA." *Middle East policy* 29, no. 4 (2022), 47.

⁹⁸ Rosenthal, "United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 & Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action." *International Legal Materials* 55, no. 1 (2016), 99. & Valadbaygi, Kayhan. "Unpacking the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA): Internationalisation of Capital, Imperial Rivalry and Cooperation, and Regional Power Agency." *Politics (Manchester, England)*, (2023), 2.

⁹⁹ Rosenthal, Michael D. "United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 & Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action." *International Legal Materials* 55, no. 1 (2016), 99.

from 2004 to 2006, but these agreements were repeatedly broken.¹⁰⁰ Iran's record of violating the international accords that were agreed upon is ultimately what led to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) addressing the Iranian nuclear issue.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The JCPOA was a multilateral agreement negotiated during the Obama administration through coercive diplomacy.¹⁰¹ The agreement was part of a foreign policy legacy left by the Obama administration.¹⁰² President Obama veered away from the previous decades' containment approach to Iran and engaged in "pragmatic diplomacy with Tehran."¹⁰³ The underlying mechanism was that as Iran worked towards nuclear disarmament, only enriching uranium to peaceful levels, the U.S. would lift the economic sanctions placed upon it.¹⁰⁴ The United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 was adopted with the support of Russia and China whose votes aligned with the U.S. position on the issue.¹⁰⁵ While a multilateral agreement saw passage through the UNSC, the U.S. was a keystone of the JCPOA.

The Iran Nuclear Deal was built upon the credible perception of the United States globally. The Obama administration galvanized the deal to show what it meant for the U.S. to be viewed as a "responsible world leader," and emphasized that backtracking on the deal would

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Serim, "A Rare Successful Nonproliferation Policy," 47.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Belal, Kulsoom. "Uncertainty over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action: Iran, the European Union and the United States." *Policy Perspectives (Islamabad)* 16, no. 1 (2019), 25.

¹⁰⁴ Serim, "A Rare Successful Nonproliferation Policy," 47. & Hager, Lisa, Oindrila Roy, Landon E. Hancock, and Michael J. Ensley. "Selling the Iran Nuclear Agreement: Prospect Theory and the Campaign to Frame the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action." *Congress & the Presidency* 46, no. 3 (2019), 418.

¹⁰⁵ Serim, "A Rare Successful Nonproliferation Policy," 50.

“deal a devastating blow to America’s credibility.”¹⁰⁶ The administration argued that sanctions and diplomatic isolation were not a sufficient long-term solution to the national security concerns regarding Iranian nuclear proliferation.¹⁰⁷ Engaging in a multilateral approach to this security issue required trust and ample credibility to gain commitments from the other states involved. From the revolution to the hostage crisis, there is a longstanding distrustful history between the United States and Iran. The success of the JCPOA was due to the Iranian regime viewing the U.S. as a credible partner when engaging in the deal.

The Iran Nuclear Deal is significant because it reveals the increasingly polarized partisan political dynamic within the U.S. While the agreement was signed by the Obama administration, the JCPOA, “faced significant domestic opposition grounded in concerns that Iran was untrustworthy.”¹⁰⁸ The deal was “inherently unpopular,” specifically among Republican lawmakers and other prominent elected officials, “laying the foundations for Trump to withdraw from the agreement in 2018.”¹⁰⁹ Yet the unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA was also highly unpopular domestically and internationally. For President Donald Trump, domestic audience costs from the dissolution of the agreement were low due to heightened partisan polarization, however, internationally drew questions to the credibility of the United States foreign policy.

During the polarizing creation of the JCPOA, Republican officials who opposed the deal took a partisan stand against the Obama administration. Senator Mitch McConnell argued that the agreement was “designed to go around Congress,” and would “empower Iran...to become a

¹⁰⁶ Rees, Morgan Thomas. “Ontological (in)Security and the Iran Nuclear Deal—Explaining Instability in US Foreign Policy Interests.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 19, no. 3 (2023), 3 & 13.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 9.

recognized nuclear-threshold state.”¹¹⁰ During the negotiations of a deal, Senator Tom Cotton and Republican representatives wrote a formal letter to the public addressing the Iranian regime, where they threatened that any deal brokered by the Obama administration could easily be revoked by the following president.¹¹¹ The letter was an overt partisan attempt to undermine the nuclear deal and the engagement foreign policy being advanced towards Iran. The distrust of Iran was somewhat warranted as Iran had a history of not upholding their international agreements when it came to nuclear non-proliferation. However, the JCPOA explicitly resulted in giving full access to the IAEA for investigating facilities and ensuring compliance covering the entire nation.

In addition to the United States placing its foreign policy credibility on the line for a multilateral agreement, Iran also gambled on the deal mutually trusting the U.S. Throughout its troubled history with the U.S., Iranian leaders often referred to America as the “Great Satan,” an effective narrative used to mobilize the Iranian population.¹¹² Complying with the JCPOA was a risk to the domestic credibility of the ruling Iranian regime that would prove costly for their leadership if the deal did not provide economic relief. The two rival states, along with the other countries involved in the JCPOA were relying on the U.S. credibility to uphold its commitment.

As the Iran Nuclear Deal proved to be divisive and polarizing domestically from the beginning, the threats of abandonment, followed by unilateral withdrawal by the U.S. only added to the partisan divide on the issue. Once the United States withdrew from the agreement the deal

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 14.

¹¹¹ Dorf, Michael C. “The Senators’ Letter to Iran and Domestic Incorporation of International Law.” *Political Science Quarterly* 131, no. 1 (2016), 68.

¹¹² Beeman, William O. *The Great Satan vs. the Mad Mullahs: How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other*. 1st ed. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, (2005), 120.

practically “melted into the air.”¹¹³ Though other members of the JCPOA expressed their will to continue the agreement, unilateral withdrawal by the Trump administration may have jeopardized any future multilateral deal restraining the Iranian nuclear program.

The Presidential administration of Donald Trump distrusted multilateralism on numerous occasions, ending U.S. involvement in agreements and institutions such as the Paris Climate Accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the United Nations Human Rights Council. The administration’s May 8th, 2018, decision to unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA was one of the most drastic policy retractions. The U.S. affirmed that Iran had complied with the JCPOA and Congress had issued extensions to sanctions relief to Iran nine times until this point.¹¹⁴ The Trump administration reverted to the U.S. foreign policy of containment when it came to Iran and its growing influence around the region.

The United States’ unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA resulted in uncertainty of the multilateral agreement for Iran and the other participating members. On numerous occasions, international actors gave statements on the Trump administration’s reneging of the agreement. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed that he was “deeply concerned” immediately following the withdrawal and called on all member states to preserve the deal.¹¹⁵ The UN Chief also released a statement praising the Obama-era agreement that deterred Iranian nuclear proliferation. Mr. Guterres remarked, “The JCPOA represents a major achievement in nuclear non-proliferation and diplomacy and has contributed to regional and international peace and security.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Valadbaygi, “Unpacking the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA),” 2.

¹¹⁴ Belal, “Uncertainty over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” 25.

¹¹⁵ UN News, “UN chief ‘deeply concerned’ by US decision to exit Iran nuclear deal.” *Peace and Security*, (2018).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

The Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal caused even major U.S. allies to perceive the reneging of the Iran Nuclear Deal as driven by domestic partisan politics. In addition to the statements made on behalf of the United Nations, other members of the JCPOA, including U.S. allies, expressed their uncertainty over the unilateral withdrawal. Post-U.S. withdrawal the then Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs of the UK, Boris Johnson, asserted that their government had done its “utmost” to prevent the unilateral decision by the Trump administration, and “made the case for keeping the JCPOA at every level.”¹¹⁷ France and Germany both made statements concerning the “destabilizing effects ensuing the termination of the JCPOA.”¹¹⁸ French President, Emmanuel Macron cautioned President Trump, emphasizing policy consistency, and recommended not abandoning the deal.¹¹⁹ President Macron later referred to the U.S. withdrawal as a “mistake,” and the German government regarded, “Trump’s policy as nothing but a personal issue concerning Obama’s legacy.”¹²⁰ The governments of the E3 released a joint statement from Prime Minister Theresa May, Chancellor Angela Merkel, and President Emmanuel Macron following President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the JCPOA. The leaders expressed their “concern,” and “regret” the U.S. decision to leave the deal unanimously endorsed by the UNSC.¹²¹

On the 2020 campaign trail, Democratic presidential candidate Joseph Biden supported the U.S. rejoining the JCPOA, reversing the previous administration’s policy once again, and

¹¹⁷ House of Commons, *Iran Nuclear Deal*, Volume 640: Column 680. (2018).

¹¹⁸ Adeli, Issa. “Exploring Reactions in Paris and Berlin to the US Withdrawal from the JCPOA.” *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies* 4, no. 2 (2020), 365

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 366.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 365-366.

¹²¹ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon Theresa May. “Joint statement from Prime Minister May, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron following President Trump’s statement on Iran” (05/08/2018).

furthering inconsistency in U.S. foreign policy. After the Biden administration took office and endorsed the idea of a new nuclear deal with Iran, other states expressed their enthusiasm, although thus far nothing has come to fruition. While the United States rejoined agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord, the administration has yet to see progress in attempts to rekindle the Iran Nuclear Deal or forge another bilateral or multilateral agreement that could rival the JCPOA. A State Department spokesperson from the Biden administration stated “We are far from anything like that right now,” referring to a deal similar to the previous nuclear deal.¹²²

Part of Biden’s electoral success in 2020 was his association with Barack Obama and the promises made while campaigning to reverse many of the Trump era's policies.¹²³ Policy reversals across administrations may exacerbate foreign policy inconsistencies across administrations and possibly further draw the United States’ credibility into question. While this campaign strategy may bode well for seeking office, candidates using increased domestic polarization to their advantage can result in questions about the reliability of the U.S.

The JCPOA highlights how increasing domestic partisan polarization can undermine foreign policy credibility, reinforcing the importance of durable foreign policies. Further examination of how polarization affects U.S. foreign policy's credibility and reliability helps further research in a crucial area of political science. The conclusion of this thesis will provide the results and findings from the research as well as the implications for future research on the topic. This thesis attempts to shed light on the international repercussions stemming from a volatile domestic political arena in the United States. Credibility and reputation matter. Leaders

¹²² Shannon K. Kingston, "Biden administration throws cold water on prospect of renewed Iran nuclear talks," *ABC News*, (08/27/2024).

¹²³ Mousavian, S., and Y. Mahmoudieh. “Evolution of the Biden Administration’s Approach to Iran Nuclear Deal and Prospects for Regional Peace.” *Puti k Miru i Bezopasnosti*, no. 2 (2021), 130.

will observe the past actions of states and seek commitments from countries that have honored their previous agreements.¹²⁴ This is observable using the JCPOA case study; as a result of reneging on the multilateral agreement the Islamic Republic of Iran is less inclined to trust a future agreement with the United States.

¹²⁴ Gibler, Douglas M. "The costs of reneging: Reputation and alliance formation." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (2008), 446.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

In recent decades political polarization has become a prominent area of study for political science scholars. Scholars generally agree that polarization among Congressional representatives has increased, and this trend seems to have reached the state level. There is less scholarly consensus on the amount of heightened polarization among the American public. However, the electorate has been sorted into more distinct groups, leading to representatives emphasizing the preferences of more politically active and extreme voters. These diverging ideologies, and subsequently intensifying partisan preferences affect the function of the domestic political process. In the United States, as domestic polarization rises it also has profound negative effects on the credibility of foreign policy signaling.

Generally, democratic states produce greater accountability for their leaders as there are larger winning coalitions and thus greater audience costs from the coalitions. Winning coalitions' possible defection normally constrains political leadership, resulting in more moderate policies that affect larger segments of the electorate. As polarization intensifies, the accountability for those seeking or already holding office declines. Voters are more efficiently sorted into distinct groups making it less likely that they will impose audience costs for inconsistent or more extreme policy positions.

Scholars argue that democracies' greater level of accountability in effect creates more credible signaling when conducting foreign policy. The more credible threats and commitments are due to audience costs, as well as obtaining support from the opposition party in government. The opposition party's support for a foreign policy signal in effect confirms to the target state that the threat or commitment is legitimate and thus carries greater credibility. However, during times of heightened partisan polarization, domestic accountability (and audience costs) are lower

and it is less probable that the opposition will engage in confirmatory signaling. Foreign leaders witness heightened domestic polarization and question the reliability of U.S. partnerships, leading to a decrease in credibility when it comes to foreign policy commitments.

The decrease in credible foreign policy signaling may result in other nations adopting different foreign policies in response. For example, states in East Asia are thought to be strategically hedging between great powers, benefiting from the rise of China through economic and political cooperation, while engaging with the U.S. militarily over security agreements. When states perceive that they can no longer rely on a superpower, they will turn to other strategic partners and hedge between them.

I hypothesize that as elite and mass polarization increase there should also be an increase in divergence between the U.S. and other states in foreign policy alignment. It is challenging to operationalize how states perceive a decrease in the credibility of U.S. foreign policy signaling. However, though the data is noisy, the best method available is possibly roll call voting at the UNGA. After conducting multiple Prais-Winsten fGLS models to account for severe autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity, I can conclude from the quantitative analysis that increasing elite polarization in the U.S. may have a significant effect on the divergence of foreign policy alignment between the U.S. and other states. In addition, I can not conclude that increasing mass polarization in the U.S. has significant effects on the divergence in foreign policy alignment between the U.S. and other nations. Perhaps utilizing another explanatory variable to operationalize polarization effects internationally would yield different results. The qualitative case study on the Iran Nuclear Deal in this thesis depicts heightened polarization and demonstrates its influence on U.S. foreign policy decisions and credibility.

The JCPOA efficiently highlighted the U.S.' domestic partisan division throughout the formation, implementation, and withdrawal of the agreement. Across presidential administrations, the highly polarized political environment led to inconsistent foreign policies regarding the nuclear deal and Iranian nonproliferation. Forming a credible multilateral commitment with the Iranian regime required mutual trust from all the states involved. When the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA it caused states involved in the agreement to question the credibility of the United States' foreign policy commitments. Once the U.S. abandoned the nuclear deal it was unable to gain any traction on a new agreement with Iranian leadership. The inability to forge a deal similar to the JCPOA was due to the Iranians no longer perceiving the U.S. as credibly signaling their foreign policy commitments because of the heightened domestic partisan polarization.

This thesis was written to shed light on the effects that domestic partisan polarization has on the credibility of U.S. foreign policy signaling to international actors. Domestic polarization is an increasingly crucial area of scholarship and understanding polarization may assist in bridging the divide in American politics. Polarization within the U.S. has intensified policy positions and accelerated the decline of bipartisanship in recent decades. Since the United States' political dynamic is so divisive today, it is plausible that further examination of polarization can serve as a preliminary to identifying and possibly solving issues caused by partisan polarization.

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Appendix A - Supplemental Information on Polarization in the United States

This research is conducted to show over the past three decades, there has been an overall increase in political polarization in the United States and the effects it has when conducting foreign policy. To test these theories empirically, I utilized multiple datasets to show changes in U.S. domestic polarization since the end of the Cold War. It shows an increase in elite polarization between the Republican and Democratic members of Congress. It also displays increased mass polarization using public opinion data on various domestic issues to create an index of responses from respondents.

First, to create the figures that depicted growing elite polarization among the chambers of Congress I used VoteView's multidimensional DW-NOMINATE dataset from 1989 to 2023.¹²⁵ Using the dataset to identify elite polarization across Congressional sessions I show the increasing ideological distance between the two parties. I show the median ideology score for each party from each congressional session. Then calculating the absolute difference between the parties per session the plot depicts an increased ideological distance between the two over time. Beginning with the 101st Congress in 1989 the two parties are approximately equal on the ideological scale. The DW-NOMINATE ideology scale ranges from 1 as the furthest rightward, to -1 representing the furthest left ideologically. The average Republican legislator sits at the 0.34 mark at the beginning of the 101st Congress, and the average Democratic legislator is at the same approximate distance at -0.32. From the 101st to the 104th Congress there are members of both parties that lean contrary to their party fairly consistently. After the 105th Congressional

¹²⁵ Lewis, Jeffrey B., Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnet (2023). *Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database*.

Session, the members of Congress that were considered conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans began to disperse, and eventually become non-existent.

Figure 5: U.S. Congressional Ideological Polarization

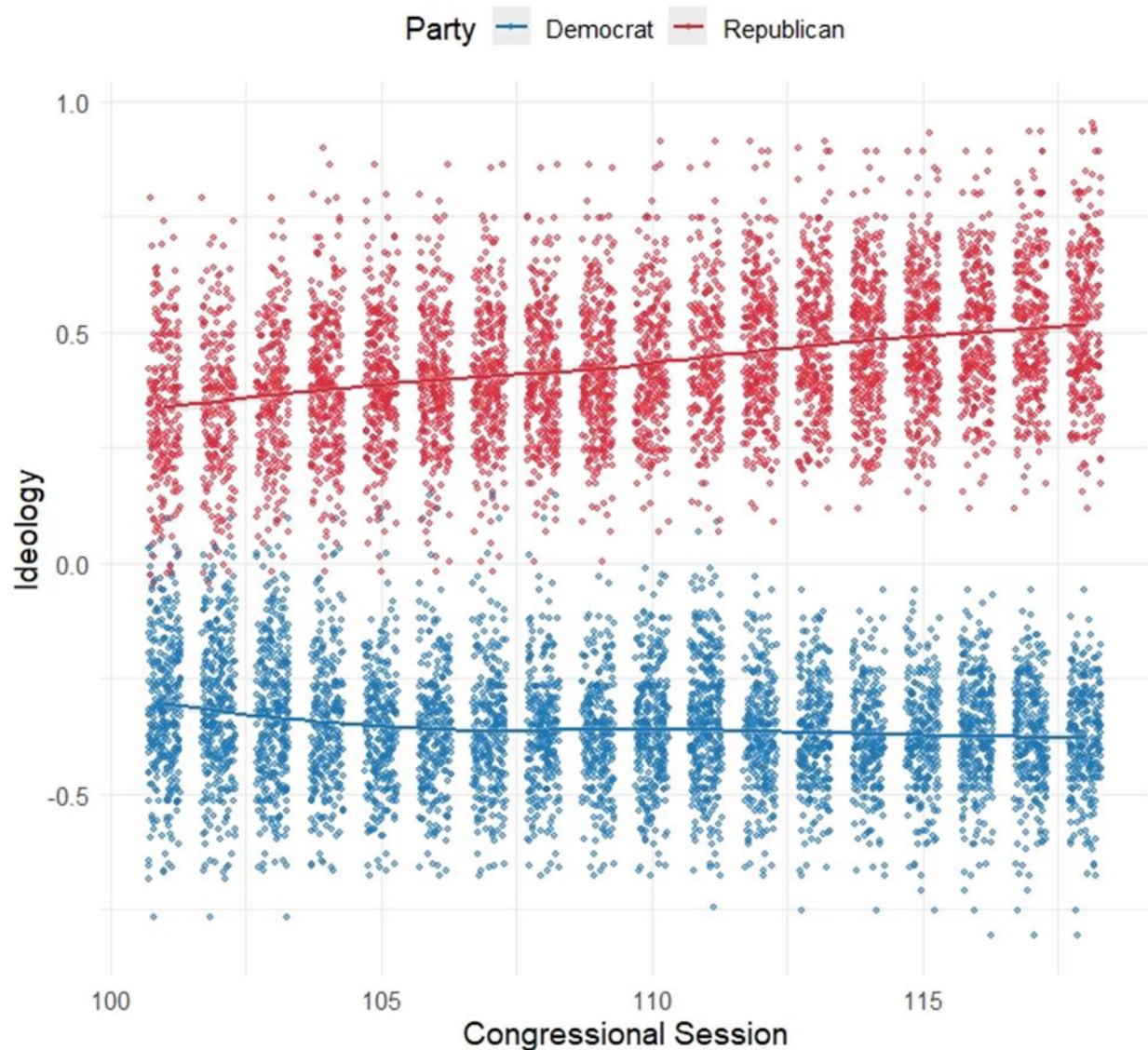


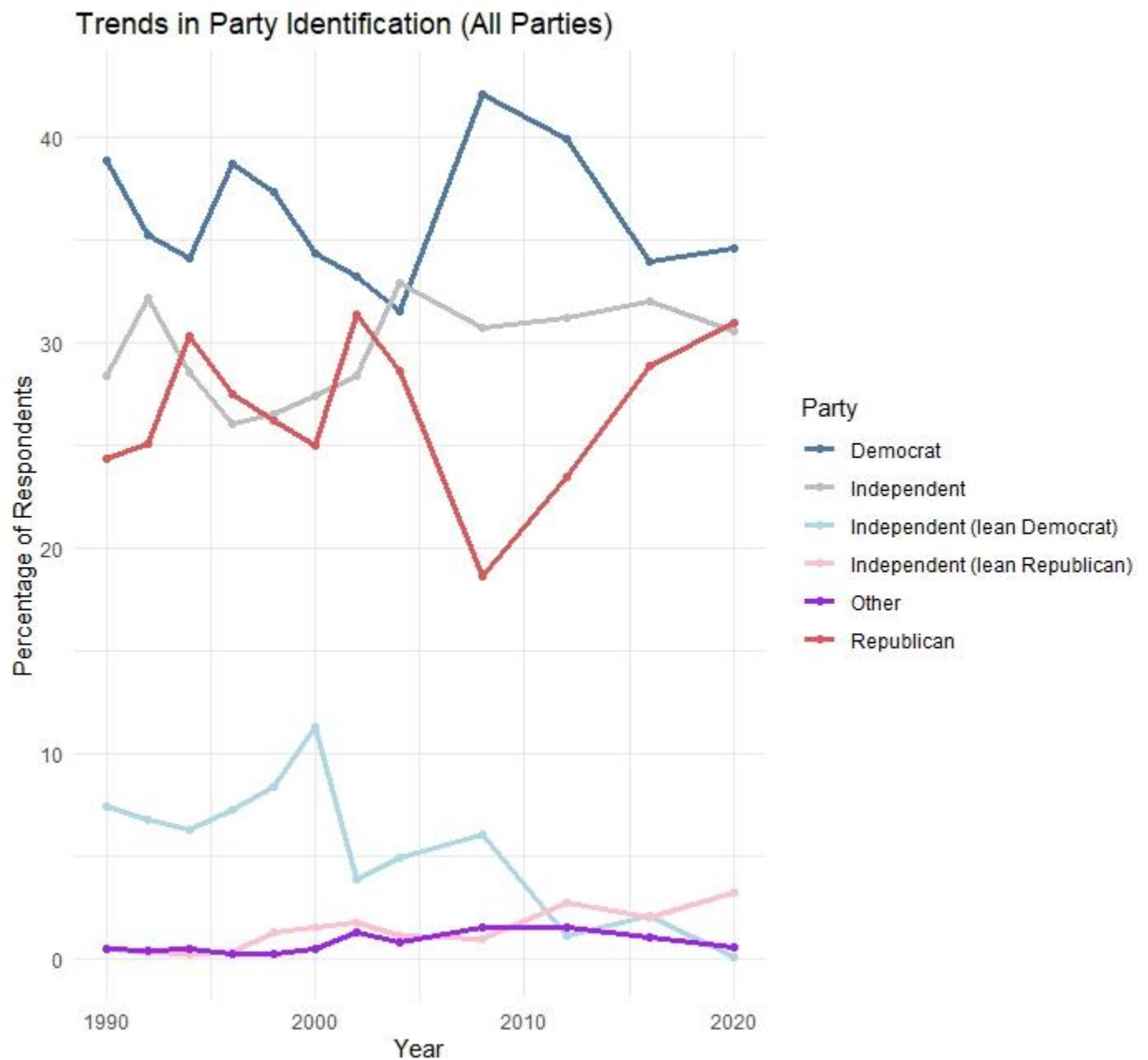
Figure 1 is based on the representatives' ideological score from the 101st session to the 118th, showing the divergence between the two parties. It also shows the trend of the average member of Congress for the respective parties across sessions. The parties begin to distance themselves from each other significantly around the end of the 110th Congress (2009), and from then onward the gap between the most centered representatives grows even larger. By the 118th

Congressional session in 2023, the ideological gap is the most considerable of all years measured. The average Republican legislator moved to 0.51 on the DW-NOMINATE scale, while the average Democrat has only moved slightly leftward to -0.38. The absolute difference in ideology score between the average Republican and Democrat grew from 0.66 in 1989 to approximately 0.89 in 2023, showing the increase in elite polarization in the U.S. during the observed period.

Secondly, I show mass polarization utilizing public opinion survey data from the American National Election Study (ANES) to quantify mass polarization. To examine mass polarization among the United States electorate I created an index. In doing so I utilize five survey questions from the ANES database, these questions will help “rank” respondents over divisive issues in the domestic political arena. The questions utilized were chosen from the ANES cumulative file with the responses from 1990 to 2020. These questions were selected because they offered a range of answers for respondents rather than a “yes/no” option, to more effectively show the partisan intensification in public opinion over time. They were also selected to minimize the number of election cycles that did not have response data for specific questions, aiding the robustness of the index.

Figure 5 shows the partisan identity composition of those who responded to the survey questions. The majority of respondents identified as Democrat, Republican, or Independent, and notably, the majority of those respondents labeled themselves Democrat. There was a minority of respondents who identified as leaning towards one of the major parties, however, it was only around ten percent of respondents during the 1990s and 2000s. After the year 2010, the respondents who did not explicitly express their partisanship were never above five percent of respondents.

Figure 6. ANES Survey Respondents Party Affiliation

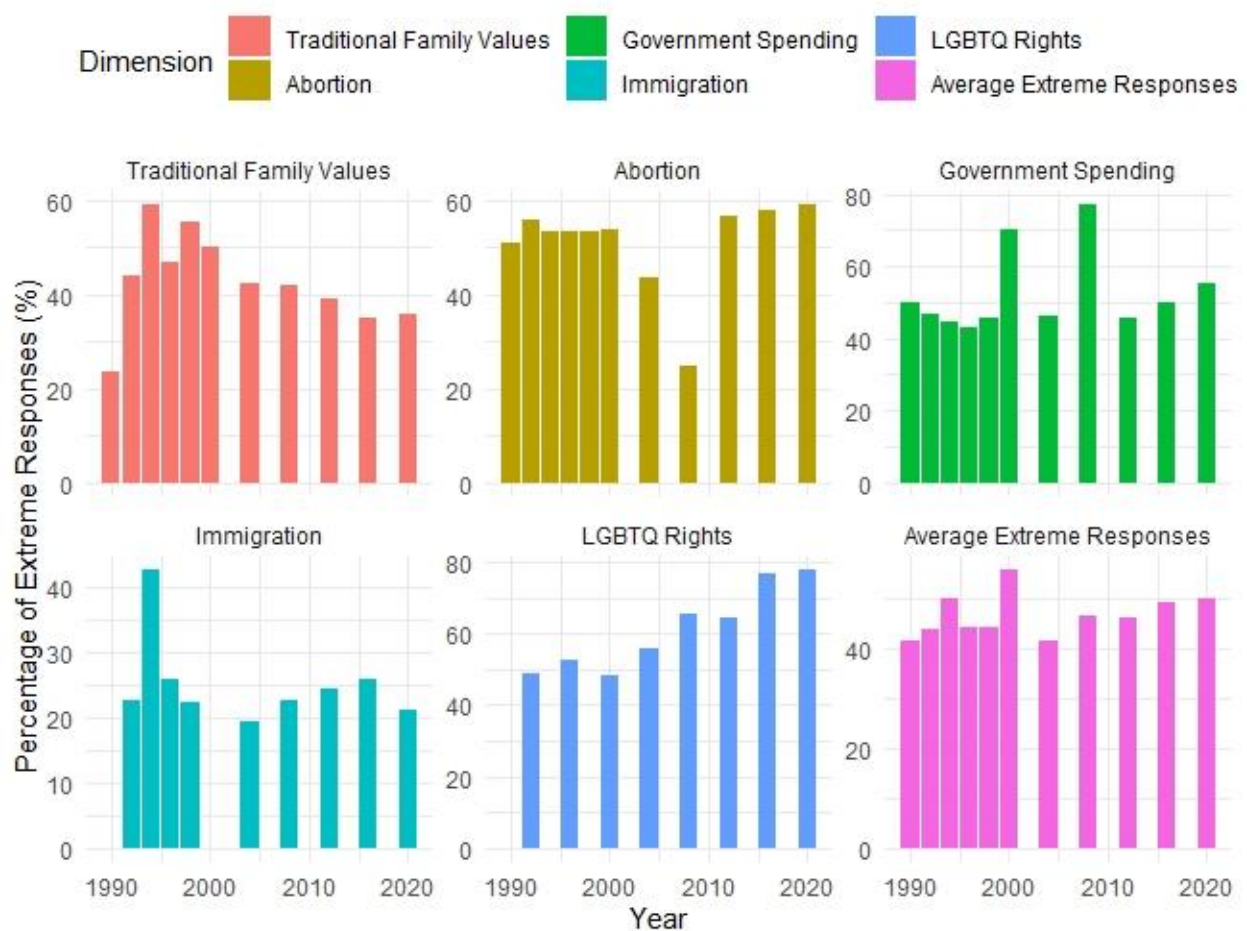


Mass polarization in the U.S. has increased from 1989 to 2023. Utilizing the ANES cumulative dataset I created a public opinion index based on five survey questions that were asked in this period. The questions are chosen to show a range of preferences from the respondents, which intensify over time. The appropriate ANES-provided weights were necessary

for the questions that were chosen for the index. The five questions are divisive issues that have been relevant to voters during the decades examined regardless of the voters' partisan preferences.

Figure 3 shows the five-question breakdown and the number of respondents who chose the most extreme responses. The number of responses varied by the year and by the question, therefore, a percentage of overall extreme responses over time was used for the five questions asked. When the five questions are averaged together, it depicts a modest increase in mass polarization from 1990 to 2020.

Figure 7. Percentage of Extreme Responses Over Time (All Respondents)



The first question refers to traditional family values, asking respondents if they agree with the notion that: ‘This country would have many fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family ties.’¹²⁶ This question is sufficient for the index to capture the partisan split because Republican-leaning respondents should place a much larger emphasis on the importance of traditional family values. While respondents who lean Democrat should be more open to more progressive social norms that are further from these traditional values. The second question selected asks the respondent: ‘By law, when should abortion be allowed?’¹²⁷ Then the respondent is provided with a range of responses they can choose from to depict their preference. Abortion has long been a divisive issue among the American electorate for decades. Still, I suspect that in the most recent decades, this issue has become more polarizing than at any point previously.

The third question used for the index is on government spending on social services. Respondents were provided with prompts and asked where they would place themselves. One prompt was: ‘Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, to reduce spending.’¹²⁸ The second prompt was: ‘Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending.’¹²⁹ When it comes to government spending the Republican party has historically been more opposed, while Democratic respondents should be more lenient with the amount of spending for public goods and services.

¹²⁶ American National Election Studies. 2022. ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File [dataset and documentation]. September 16, 2022 version. 374.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 363-364.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 364.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 364.

The fourth survey question given to respondents was on the issue of immigration. Survey respondents were asked if they thought the number of immigrants from foreign countries permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased or decreased. Respondents were able to answer with increase or decrease a lot, a little, maintain the status quo, or don't know. The final question used for the index was based on laws to protect the LGBTQ community from job discrimination. Respondents were asked if they favored or opposed laws that were put in place to protect "homosexuals/gays and lesbians" against job discrimination. The possible responses were to favor or oppose strongly, not strongly, or don't know.¹³⁰

These five questions were selected due to multiple factors. The five issues that were selected are domestic topics that have been in the public eye since 1989. They are arguably some of the most important domestic issues to members of both parties within the electorate. These questions offered a range of responses for the respondents to choose from, which more efficiently showed the public opinion of the electorate.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 387.