



The prevalence of bipartisanship in U.S. foreign policy: an analysis of important congressional votes

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Abstract

To what extent are U.S. elected officials polarized on foreign policy? And how do patterns of polarization and bipartisanship differ across policy areas? Using an original data set of nearly 3000 important congressional votes since the end of the Cold War, we find that severe polarization remains the exception rather than the norm in U.S. foreign policy debates and that the U.S. Congress is still less polarized on international than on domestic issues. We also show that foreign policy bipartisanship regularly takes several forms, including bipartisan agreement in support of the president's policies, cross-partisan coalitions, and even bipartisan opposition to the president's policies. Collectively, our findings provide a more nuanced portrait of the politics of U.S. foreign policy than many recent accounts, point to persistent differences in the political alignments associated with different policy areas, and highlight the importance of conceiving of polarization and bipartisanship as more than binary categories.

Keywords Polarization · Bipartisanship · U.S. foreign policy · Congress · Presidency

Over the past 50 years, partisan polarization has steadily increased in American politics, becoming the dominant feature of political life in the USA (Theriault 2008; Jacobson 2013; McCarty et al. 2016; Klein 2020). In this context, a large body of research examines the extent to which partisan polarization affects U.S. foreign policy making. The prevailing perspective in this scholarship is that polarization has become the norm on foreign policy, making bipartisanship largely a relic of the past (McCormick and Wittkopf 1990; DeLaet and Scott 2006; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007; Snyder et al. 2009; Schultz 2017; Jeong and Quirk 2019). But some research points to the persistence of foreign policy bipartisanship in recent years (Chaudoin

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et al. 2010; Tama 2020; Kertzer et al. Forthcoming), leaving the actual relationship between Democrats and Republicans on foreign policy somewhat unclear.

In this paper, we advance this debate by analyzing an original data set of important U.S. congressional votes from 1991 to 2017. The data set includes more than 1200 foreign policy votes and over 1600 domestic policy votes in the House and Senate. In addition to examining whether bipartisanship has declined over time, we use these new data to compare the prevalence and strength of bipartisanship on foreign policy with its prevalence and strength on domestic policy. We also compare the strength of bipartisanship across different areas of foreign policy. At the same time, we expand the conceptual understanding of bipartisanship by developing a typology that highlights how bipartisanship can take different forms, and investigate the frequency of these different bipartisan alignments.

We find that a majority of Democratic legislators and a majority of Republican legislators have actually lined up on the same side on most important foreign policy votes since the end of the Cold War. We also find that strong polarization, in which more than 90 percent of the members of the two parties vote on opposite sides, is rare on foreign policy, characterizing less than one out of every ten important foreign policy votes. We further find that congressional bipartisanship is more common on international than on domestic issues. Most strikingly, strong polarization characterizes congressional votes 2 ½ times more often on important domestic policy matters than on important foreign policy matters. These findings indicate that international affairs remain a domain of weaker partisanship than domestic affairs.

We further show that three kinds of bipartisanship occur with some regularity on foreign policy. The first of these, which we call *pro-presidential bipartisanship*, represents the classic conception of bipartisanship: a majority of members of Congress in both parties lining up in support of presidential positions. The second, which we label *anti-presidential bipartisanship*, may be more surprising: a majority of members in both parties joining together to challenge presidential positions. The third, which other scholars have called *cross-partisanship*, involves cases where one or both parties in Congress are internally split, generating legislative coalitions that span the two parties.¹ We find that cross-partisanship is very common on important foreign policy votes, with at least 10 percent of the members of a party voting against their party's dominant position more than half of the time. In addition, we find that pro-presidential bipartisanship characterizes about one in every three foreign policy votes on which the president takes a position, whereas anti-presidential bipartisanship characterizes about one out of every seven such votes. While the latter figure may seem low, it is striking that a majority of Democrats and majority of Republicans would join together in opposition to the president even that often.

We also find that bipartisan consensus tends to be greater on international security than on international economic issues. This pattern is consistent with earlier analyses comparing bipartisanship across foreign policy issue areas (McCormick and Wittkopf 1992; Meernik 1993; Prins and Marshall 2001), and suggests that some international issues have remained more insulated from partisan pressures than others.

¹ Cross-partisanship is not mutually exclusive with pro-presidential or anti-presidential bipartisanship.



While we find more foreign policy bipartisanship than one might expect, we also find that polarization is gradually increasing on international issues over time. In particular, rates of congressional bipartisanship on foreign policy have been lower under Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump than under Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Yet across these presidencies, congressional polarization increased more slowly on foreign policy than on domestic policy.

Collectively, our findings suggest that polarization in U.S. foreign policy is more limited than a lot of scholarship suggests, while highlighting the importance of understanding the multiple forms of bipartisanship (Tama 2018). To be sure, the votes we analyze do not represent the totality of foreign policy activity by U.S. elected officials. Higher levels of polarization may be evident in other contexts, such as campaign rhetoric or congressional hearings. But the persistence of bipartisanship in congressional voting provides an important corrective to claims that foreign policy bipartisanship has disappeared.

These findings are also important because the existence or absence of bipartisanship can greatly affect the ability of the USA to address international challenges effectively. Without bipartisanship, the USA would struggle to make credible commitments to other countries, sustain international agreements, convey international resolve, pursue expensive but necessary initiatives, or learn important lessons from foreign policy mistakes (Martin 2000; Schultz 2001, 2017; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007; Peake et al. 2012; Kelley and Pevehouse 2015; Goldgeier and Saunders 2018; Lee 2019; Trubowitz and Harris 2019; Myrick 2020; Friedrichs 2021). Yet the prevalence of cross-partisanship and anti-presidential bipartisanship means that not all cooperation implies complete consensus across the U.S. government. Bipartisanship can therefore coexist with some of the dysfunctions typically associated with polarization.

Prior research on polarization and bipartisanship

Scholars of American politics have documented a steady increase in partisan polarization in the USA since the 1970s. Whereas about one-quarter of members of Congress voted more often with members of the other party than with members of their own party during the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter, only a handful of legislators have had such voting records during the twenty-first century (Theriault 2008; McCarty et al. 2016; Drutman 2020; Klein 2020). Like members of Congress, the public has also become more polarized, with the vast majority of citizens strongly and consistently preferring one party over the other. Most Democratic and Republican voters even now have cold feelings toward fellow citizens of the other party, reflecting affective polarization (Mason 2018; Iyengar et al. 2019).

In a similar vein, many scholars of U.S. foreign policy have found an increase in partisan polarization over international issues. Focusing largely on the behavior of members of Congress, some studies highlight a rise in polarization on international issues over the past several decades that mirrors the broader changes in American politics (McCormick and Wittkopf 1990; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007; Lapinski 2013; Alduncin et al. 2017; Jeong and Quirk 2019; Friedrichs 2021). Other work points to particular inflection points that involved an erosion of bipartisan consensus, such as the Vietnam War or the end of the Cold War (Meernik 1993; Prins and



Marshall 2001; DeLaet and Scott 2006; Lee 2009; Snyder et al. 2009). Scholars have also documented how polarization and partisanship affect the foreign policy actions, appointments, and rhetoric of lawmakers and the president, contrary to the old adage that politics stops “at the water’s edge” (Howell and Pevehouse 2007; Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Hildebrandt et al. 2013; Flynn 2014; Kriner 2014). Recent research has found that even major crises or security threats no longer bring Democrats and Republicans together (Myrick 2019).

A main takeaway from much of the work on polarization and foreign policy is that foreign policy bipartisanship is now nearly extinct. As Daniel Drezner has written, “Foreign policy discourse was the last preserve of bipartisanship, but political polarization has irradiated that marketplace of ideas” (Drezner 2019).

Yet some other scholarship points to persistent bipartisanship on foreign policy. One study finds that congressional votes on international issues have not actually become more polarized when one controls for whether a vote concerned an amendment or procedural matter, rather than the final passage of legislation (Chaudoin et al. 2010). Another study finds an increase in foreign policy polarization during the 1970s and 1980s, but no further rise in polarization after that (Hurst and Wroe 2016). Other research shows that foreign policy votes are less polarized than domestic policy ones (Jochim and Jones 2013; Harbridge 2015; Wagner 2020). Some research even calls into question the notion that Congress is dominated by polarization on domestic matters, finding that most major legislation passed by Congress enjoys some support from both parties (Curry and Lee 2020). Given these differing perspectives in the literature, we see a need for new research designed to shed light on the prevalence of polarization and bipartisanship today.

Why foreign policy bipartisanship might persist

Key features of the political environment beyond Congress, such as the ideological and interest group landscape of American politics, provide reasons to expect strong polarization to be relatively uncommon on foreign policy and less prevalent on international than on domestic issues. With respect to ideology, there certainly exist important left–right divides over foreign policy, on issues ranging from multilateral cooperation to defense spending (Rathbun 2012; Gries 2014; Jeong and Quirk 2019; Wenzelburger and Böller 2019; Bendix and Jeong 2020; Haesebrouck and Mello 2020; Raunio and Wagner 2020; Smeltz et al. 2020; Flynn and Fordham 2021). But overall liberals and conservatives do not have opposing views on international issues to the same extent that they do on domestic matters. Studies of elite and public opinion have found that liberal or conservative ideologies are larger drivers of domestic policy differences than of foreign policy differences (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Noel 2013). Recent studies have also found that the American public sees relatively little difference in the foreign policy positions of the two parties (Kertzer et al. Forthcoming), and that most foreign policy elites across the two parties share broadly similar internationalist outlooks (Smeltz et al. 2015; Hicks et al. 2018; Busby et al. 2020). In addition, many foreign policy debates are marked by both intra- and inter-party divisions (Prather 2016; Rathbun 2016). Moreover, the foreign policy views of liberals and conservatives have



evolved over time to a greater extent than is commonly realized, pointing to a degree of fluidity in attitudes on international issues (Cronin and Fordham 1999; Lewis 2019).

A similar reality characterizes the interest group landscape. Compared to their counterparts focused on domestic policy, interest groups focused on foreign policy issues are more likely to make campaign contributions to centrist politicians or to politicians in both parties (Bonica 2013; Hafner-Burton et al. 2015). Since interest groups can have great influence on the positions of elected officials (Berry and Wilcox 2009; Leech 2011; Rozell et al. 2012), this pattern should facilitate more frequent bipartisanship on international issues.

At the same time, it is unlikely that foreign policy debates have been immune to the rising polarization that characterizes American politics generally. Congressional behavior is increasingly driven by a highly competitive brand of partisan warfare or teamism in which lawmakers feel drawn or compelled to vote with their co-partisans regardless of their own policy views (Lee 2009, 2016; Theriault 2013). As politics becomes more polarized generally, lawmakers also have an increased incentive to try to deny policy victories to the other party or to amplify differences between the parties as a campaign tactic. These powerful forces should generate a rise in polarization across the board, particularly on salient issues that can be used in political campaigns. We therefore expect foreign policy polarization to be increasing over time, even as we expect it to be less pronounced than many studies suggest.

These ideas and patterns generate the following expectations:

Hypothesis 1 Foreign policy issues are more likely than domestic policy issues to involve bipartisanship.

Hypothesis 2 Foreign policy issues are characterized by bipartisanship more often than by strong polarization.

Hypothesis 3 Bipartisanship on both foreign and domestic policy is declining over time.

Types of bipartisanship

While prior studies have focused on whether polarization is increasing over time, much less attention has been given to ways in which bipartisanship can take different forms. For the most part, the literature on polarization and bipartisanship tends to define these concepts solely as binary categories—i.e., a vote is either polarized or it is bipartisan, with the threshold most often set at whether a majority of lawmakers in the two parties vote together or on opposite sides. This approach obscures two important distinctions that merit greater attention.

First, bipartisan agreement in Congress can coexist with either interbranch agreement or interbranch disagreement. Many scholars have argued that the president is increasingly dominant in foreign policy, with Congress largely acquiescing to presidential control (Rudalige 2006; Marshall and Haney 2010, 2020; Fowler 2015; Edelson 2016; Goldgeier and Saunders 2018). This perspective would lead to an expectation that anti-presidential



bipartisanship would be quite rare. As difficult as it can be to foster bipartisanship in Congress, it should be even harder to generate bipartisan challenges to presidential positions.

But other work points to persistent legislative activism, assertiveness, or entrepreneurship on foreign policy (Carter and Scott 2009; Scott and Carter 2014; Lantis 2019; Tama 2020). Congressional challenges to the president on foreign policy can be enabled by the differing political incentives that lawmakers face compared to the president. For instance, legislators are generally incentivized to advance the preferences of constituencies that are important in their states or districts, whereas presidents are generally incentivized to advance overall national interests (Krasner 1978; Meernik and Oldmixon 2008; Howell et al. 2013; Thurber and Tama 2018). Anti-presidential bipartisanship on foreign policy might therefore occur more often than one might expect.

Second, the two parties are often internally divided on foreign policy. The Republican Party has long been split between internationalist and nationalist factions, and each party has sometimes been divided in use of force debates between leaders who favor intervention and a more non-interventionist wing. For instance, Democrats were split in 2002 over whether to go to war in Iraq, while both parties were divided over intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s and in Libya and Syria after the Arab Spring, reflecting the cross-cutting character of many humanitarian intervention debates (Zelizer 2010; Böller and Müller 2018; Maxey 2018, 2020; Homan and Lantis 2020a). Notably, similar dynamics characterize use of force debates outside the USA, as support for military intervention tends to be greatest among center-right elected officials, with support for the use of force dropping both on the left and the far right (Haesebrouck and Mello 2020; Wagner 2020). In the USA, where party control over lawmakers is relatively limited, these types of intra-party divisions can allow lawmakers to act as “free agents,” forming strange bedfellow coalitions across party lines (Homan and Lantis 2020b).

Yet interest group and constituency pressures should lead intra-party divisions to be greatest on international economic, rather than international security, issues. Whereas some important foreign policy debates involve little interest group advocacy (Wildavsky 1966), other foreign policy issues involve intense lobbying by powerful groups. Overall, interest group activity tends to be greater on issues that can generate large and concentrated gains or losses for portions of American society (Milner and Tingley 2015). Foreign policy issues with these kinds of large distributive effects often involve economic matters, such as trade. On such issues, politicians have an incentive to act based on the distributive effects a policy is likely to have on constituents and groups that are important to their electoral prospects (Fordham and McKeown 2003). Since the economic characteristics of states and districts do not correlate perfectly with the partisan orientations of their senators and representatives (Baldwin and Magee 2000; Hiscox 2002), cross-partisanship should be especially common on international economic issues and bipartisan consensus should occur less often on these issues than on national security ones. These expectations are consistent with other research finding stronger bipartisanship on international security issues than on international economic issues (McCormick and Wittkopf 1992; Meernik 1993; Prins and Marshall 2001), and finding high levels of intra-party division in trade debates (Friedrichs 2020).

These ideas and patterns generate the following expectations:



Hypothesis 4a Anti-presidential bipartisanship occurs more often on foreign policy than on domestic policy.

Hypothesis 4b Cross-partisanship occurs more often on foreign policy than on domestic policy.

Hypothesis 5a Strong bipartisanship occurs more often on international security issues than on international economic issues.

Hypothesis 5b Cross-partisanship occurs more often on international economic issues than on international security issues.

The data

We test our hypotheses with an original data set of important congressional votes. We created this data set, rather than basing the analysis on all congressional votes, because many votes deal with issues of minimal substantive significance (Mayhew 2005, 202–203). While the alignment of elected officials on trivial votes is of little consequence, their actions on important issues can influence the welfare and security of populations within the USA and overseas.

To create the data set, we coded congressional votes that were highlighted as important votes by *CQ Almanac*—a highly regarded, annual publication that summarizes congressional activity—between 1991 and 2017.² (The data set stops at 2017 because *CQ Almanac* stopped publishing articles summarizing congressional activity in various issue areas in its 2018 edition, preventing us from applying the same data collection method after the 2017 edition.)

The data set includes all such votes that dealt with foreign policy, as well as all such domestic policy votes from every third year.³ We classified a vote as a foreign policy vote if the Congressional Research Service (CRS) categorized the legislation in one of the following policy areas: armed forces and national security, international

² *CQ Almanac* articles highlight important congressional votes in a given year in two ways—first, in a list of about 20–30 “key votes,” which represent the most important votes of the year; and second, in articles summarizing congressional activity in various issue areas during that year, which typically list the most important votes in each issue area in a text box labeled “Box Score.” The data set includes any votes listed as “key votes” or directly referenced in one of these box scores. For articles lacking a box score, the data set includes any votes directly referenced in the body of the article. We incorporate all of these important votes into our analysis, rather than only examining the CQ “key votes,” because the number of foreign policy “key votes” is relatively small.

³ We only coded domestic policy votes from every third year because of the amount of time involved in coding a large number of votes. Given that constraint, coding votes from every third year, rather than every other year or every fourth year, prevents the introduction of bias that could be associated with overrepresentation or underrepresentation of presidential or congressional election years, which might feature different patterns of bipartisanship than non-election years. Accordingly, the tabulations presented in this chapter incorporate important domestic policy votes from 1992, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013, and 2016. We started this set of years in 1992, rather than 1991, so that the set as a whole would be temporally balanced between the start and end of the full data set, which runs from 1991 to 2017.



affairs, or foreign trade and international finance. A fourth CRS category—immigration—also involves foreign policy, but we excluded votes in this category from most of the tabulations that we present in the chapter because a close examination of these votes revealed that they concerned legislation that dealt with domestic aspects of immigration policy, such as pathways to citizenship for immigrants residing within the USA, as much as cross-border aspects of immigration policy.⁴ It therefore did not seem sensible to classify them as either foreign or domestic policy votes. But we include immigration votes in the foreign policy category as a robustness check.

This method identified a total of 1216 important foreign policy votes and 1681 important domestic policy votes in the House and Senate. Among these votes, 63 percent of the foreign policy votes and 67 percent of the domestic policy votes were roll call votes, in which votes were recorded for individual legislators. The remaining votes were voice votes or unanimous consent votes, in which votes were not recorded for individual legislators. Seventeen percent of the foreign policy votes and 19 percent of the domestic policy votes were procedural or amendment votes, which involved the legislative process or changes to bills, rather than votes on the final passage of legislation.

Most quantitative analysis of congressional votes is based solely on roll call votes. But excluding voice votes or unanimous consent votes can result in underestimations of bipartisanship since legislation considered via voice or unanimous consent votes almost always possesses strong bipartisan support (Mayhew 2005; Harbridge 2015). By including voice and unanimous consent votes in many of our analyses, we are able to generate a more accurate understanding of the true prevalence of congressional bipartisanship. When we do include these votes in our analyses, we treat them as involving majorities of both parties voting together because these voting procedures are typically used only for legislation that has strong bipartisan support (Harbridge 2015).

Bipartisanship across foreign and domestic policy

We first consider differences in voting patterns across foreign and domestic policy issues. We find that, across all votes in the data set, bipartisanship occurred on a greater percentage of votes on international issues than on domestic issues, consistent with Hypothesis 1. We define bipartisan votes as ones where a majority of Democrats and a majority of Republicans vote together, and define polarized votes as ones where at least half of the members of each party vote on opposite sides. Table 1 shows that, by this standard, 76 percent of the foreign policy votes and 63 percent of the domestic policy votes in the data set were bipartisan.⁵

⁴ Among a random sample of 25 of the 72 immigration votes in the data set, we found that 12 principally concerned domestic dimensions of immigration policy, 10 principally concerned cross-border dimensions of immigration policy, and 3 concerned both to a large degree.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, differences in all comparisons presented in this chapter are statistically significant at the 1 percent level. We determined the statistical significance of differences for dichotomous measures using chi-squared tests. We determined the statistical significance of differences for continuous measures using t-tests.



Table 1 Bipartisanship and polarization

	Domestic policy issue	Foreign policy issue
Polarization	629 (37%)	286 (24%)
Bipartisanship	1052 (63%)	930 (76%)
Total votes	1681	1216

Polarization refers to cases where at least half of the members of a party voted against at least half of the members of the other party. *Bipartisanship* refers to cases where a majority of the members of each party voted together

This relationship between foreign policy and bipartisanship holds when controlling for other variables that might influence congressional voting. The first column in Table 2 presents the average marginal effects from a logistic regression that controls for the Congress in which a vote took place, the president's public approval rating, whether the vote was on an amendment, and whether the vote was procedural. The Congress variable accounts for changes in the political landscape that have occurred over time and aspects of the political context that might affect the behavior of lawmakers, including whether there exists divided or unified control of government (Howell and Pevehouse 2007; Kriner 2010). The average marginal effects, which are displayed in the first column of Table 2, indicate that a vote taking place on a foreign policy issue increases the estimated average probability of the vote being bipartisan by 11 percentage points.

Appendix Table 9 shows that this gap between estimated average effect of foreign and domestic policy votes on the probability of bipartisanship remains substantial in a variety of different model estimations, including when immigration votes are included among the set of foreign policy votes; the tabulations are restricted to roll call votes; procedural and amendment votes are dropped from the tabulations; House votes are tabulated separately; or the foreign policy vote tabulations, like the domestic policy ones, are limited to data from every third year. The average marginal effect lost its significance at the one percent threshold only when the model was limited to Senate votes.

Limiting the analysis to roll call votes enables a more precise examination of the extent of support for legislation within each of the two parties. These votes reveal that bipartisanship is not just more common, but is also stronger, on foreign policy than on domestic policy. We created a strength of bipartisanship measure that is defined on a continuous scale of 0 to 1 in which 1 represents an instance where the proportion of Democrats voting for a bill is the same as the proportion of Republicans voting for a bill and 0 represents an instance where every Democrat votes on the opposite side as every Republican.⁶ On this measure, the average strength of bipartisanship for foreign policy roll call votes is 0.68, while the average strength of bipartisanship for domestic policy roll call votes is 0.52.

⁶ More specifically, *strength of bipartisanship* represents $1 - \left| \frac{\text{proportion of Democrats voting in favor of the legislation} - \text{proportion of Republicans voting in favor of the legislation}}{\text{proportion of Democrats voting in favor of the legislation} + \text{proportion of Republicans voting in favor of the legislation}} \right|$.



Table 2 Contributors to political alignments

	Bipartisanship	Strong bipartisanship	Strong polarization	Cross-partisanship
Foreign policy issue	0.11*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.18)	0.04 (0.03)
Public approval of president	0.001 (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.016*** (0.003)
Procedural vote	-0.47*** (0.01)	-0.22*** (0.02)	0.20*** (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)
Amendment vote	-0.31*** (0.09)	-0.16*** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.13*** (0.03)
Total votes	2897	1901	1901	1901

Table entries are average marginal effects from a logistic regression, with standard errors in parentheses. Each model also includes a dummy variable for each Congress, which ranges from the 102nd Congress (1991–1992) to the 115th (2017–2018). The heading of each column represents the dependent variable for that model estimation. Each dependent variable is a dichotomous variable. *Bipartisanship* takes a value of one in cases where a majority of the members of each party voted together. *Strong bipartisanship* takes a value of one in cases where at least 90 percent of the members of a party voted with at least 90 percent of the members of the other party. *Strong polarization* takes a value of one in cases where at least 90 percent of the members of a party voted against at least 90 percent of the members of the other party. *Cross-partisanship* takes a value of one in cases where more than 10 percent of the members of a party vote against their party's dominant position. The estimations reported in the second, third, and fourth columns are based only on roll call votes

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$ for two-tailed tests

The data also indicate that strong polarization is the exception rather than the norm in congressional voting on important foreign policy legislation, consistent with Hypothesis 2. Only 8 percent of the foreign policy roll call votes in the data set involved at least 90 percent of Republicans and at least 90 percent of Democrats voting on opposite sides. (See Table 3.) By contrast, this threshold for strong polarization was reached in 20 percent of domestic policy roll call votes. This difference remains pronounced when controlling for important elements of the broader political context, with the average estimated probability of strong polarization remaining 10 percentage points higher on domestic than on international issues (See Table 2).

Table 3 also shows that intra-party divisions often generate cross-party coalitions, with more than 10 percent of the members of a party voting against their party's dominant position in 63 percent of foreign policy roll call votes and 60 percent of domestic policy roll call votes. The difference between the two policy domains is not statistically significant, however, when controlling for other factors. (See Table 2). The results therefore do not offer clear support for Hypothesis 4b.

A different subset of the data further reveals that anti-presidential bipartisanship occurs with some regularity on international issues and more often on foreign than on domestic policy—consistent with Hypothesis 4a. The president took a clear public position on 830 of the votes in the data set.⁷ Among these votes—commonly called presidential position votes—a majority of Republican legislators and a

⁷ *CQ Almanac* lists votes on which the president took a clear public position in tables entitled “Presidential Position Votes,” which are located within an “Appendix” section entitled “Presidential Support.”



Table 3 Strong polarization, strong bipartisanship, and cross-partisanship

	Domestic policy issue	Foreign policy issue
Strong polarization	227 (20%)	59 (8%)
Strong bipartisanship	225 (20%)	227 (29%)
Cross-partisanship	679 (60%)	484 (63%)
Total votes	1131	770

This table only reports tabulations from roll call votes. *Strong polarization* refers to cases where at least 90 percent of the members of a party voted against at least 90 percent of the members of the other party. *Strong bipartisanship* refers to cases where at least 90 percent of the members of a party voted with at least 90 percent of the members of the other party. *Cross-partisanship* refers to cases where more than 10 percent of the members of a party voted against their party's dominant position

Table 4 Pro- and anti-presidential bipartisanship

	Domestic policy issue	Foreign policy issue
Polarization	361 (71%)	181 (56%)
Pro-presidential bipartisanship	104 (21%)	94 (29%)
Anti-presidential bipartisanship	43 (8%)	48 (15%)
Total votes	508	323

This table presents data for votes on which the president took a public position. *Polarization* refers to cases where at least half of the members of a party voted against a majority of the members of the other party. *Pro-presidential bipartisanship* refers to cases where a majority of the members of both parties voted in support of the president's position. *Anti-presidential bipartisanship* refers to cases where a majority of the members of both parties voted against the president's position

majority of Democratic legislators voted against the president's position in 15 percent of the foreign policy votes and 8 percent of the domestic policy votes. (See Table 4). It is striking that lawmakers in both parties would band together against the president in 15 percent of important foreign policy votes, especially given the strong influence of the president on international issues and high overall levels of polarization today. This figure is all the more impressive considering that the president is more likely to take a position on legislation when it is more likely that Congress will back the president's stance (Marshall and Prins 2007). This gap also holds when controlling for other key variables, with the average marginal effect indicating that foreign policy issues are 10 percentage points more likely than domestic policy issues to result in anti-presidential bipartisanship on a presidential position vote. (See Table 5).

Pro-presidential bipartisanship was also more common on international than on domestic issues, with a majority of lawmakers in both parties voting with the president 29 percent of the time on foreign policy and 21 percent of the time on domestic policy. However, when controlling for other factors, the gap in rates of



Table 5 Contributors to pro- and anti-presidential bipartisanship

	Pro-presidential bipartisanship	Anti-presidential bipartisanship
Foreign policy issue	0.03 (0.04)	0.10*** (0.03)
Public approval of president	0.008 (0.0004)	-0.004* (0.003)
Procedural vote	-0.13*** (0.05)	N/A
Amendment vote	-0.16*** (0.03)	-0.07*** (0.02)
Total votes	830	830

Table entries are coefficients of a logistic regression, with standard errors in parentheses. Each model also includes a dummy variable for each Congress, which ranges from the 102nd Congress (1991–1992) to the 115th (2017–2018). The heading of each column represents the dependent variable for that model estimation. Each dependent variable is a dichotomous variable. *Pro-presidential bipartisanship* takes a value of one in cases where a majority of the members of both parties voted in support of the president's position. *Anti-presidential bipartisanship* takes a value of one in cases where a majority of the members of both parties voted against the president's position

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$ for two-tailed tests

pro-presidential bipartisanship across the two policy domains is not statistically significant, though it remains in the expected direction. (See Table 5).⁸

Collectively, these findings on pro-presidential and anti-presidential bipartisanship provide an important supplement to prior research on the “two presidencies,” which has examined whether the president generally receives more support from Congress on foreign than on domestic policy (Wildavsky 1966; Sigelman 1979; Fleisher et al. 2000; Canes-Wrone et al. 2008). The data presented here are not conclusive regarding whether pro-presidential bipartisanship is in fact more common on international than on domestic issues, as Aaron Wildavsky first argued more than 50 years ago (Wildavsky 1966), but they strongly suggest that it is more likely for Congress to challenge the president in the former domain.

⁸ We separately compared patterns of bipartisanship when the chamber of Congress where the vote occurred was controlled by the President's party with patterns when it was controlled by the opposition party. Interestingly, as can be seen in Appendix Table 10, the percentage of foreign policy votes that are bipartisan is almost identical when the chamber is controlled by the President's party and when it is not. Appendix Table 11, however, shows that anti-presidential bipartisanship is far more likely when the chamber is controlled by the opposition party. In other words, party control does not alter the likelihood of foreign policy bipartisanship within the chamber, but it does impact the chamber's relationship with the President.



Table 6 Bipartisanship across areas of foreign policy

	Armed forces and national security	Foreign trade and international finance	International affairs
Polarization	164 (23%)	43 (28%)	79 (23%)
Bipartisanship	546 (77%)	112 (72%)	272 (77%)
Total votes	710	155	351

Polarization refers to cases where at least half of the members of a party voted against at least half of the members of the other party. *Bipartisanship* refers to cases where a majority of the members of each party voted together

Bipartisanship across areas of foreign policy

The data also indicate that bipartisanship occurs regularly across major areas of foreign policy, but bipartisan consensus exists most often in national security debates and substantial intra-party divisions are the norm in international economic debates. Of the 1216 foreign policy votes in the data set, 58 percent concerned legislation classified by the Congressional Research Service as involving armed forces and national security, 13 percent concerned legislation classified by CRS as involving foreign trade and international finance, and 29 percent concerned legislation classified by CRS in the more amorphous category of “international affairs.”

Bipartisanship was quite common in each of these three areas. A majority of Democrats and Republicans voted on the same side in 77 percent of armed forces and national security votes, 72 percent of foreign trade and international finance votes, and 77 percent of international affairs votes. (See Table 6.) Each of these rates exceeds the rate of bipartisanship on domestic policy issues (63 percent). Appendix Table 12 further shows that bipartisanship was common on both appropriations and non-appropriations foreign policy votes (84 percent and 75 percent, respectively). The higher rate of bipartisanship on appropriations than non-appropriations foreign policy legislation differs from a study that found the opposite from 1953 to 1998 (Prins and Marshall 2001).

Table 7 Other political alignment measures across areas of foreign policy

	Armed forces and national security	Foreign trade and international finance	International affairs
Strong polarization	36 (8%)	0 (0%)	23 (10%)
Strong bipartisanship	148 (33%)	10 (10%)	69 (31%)
Cross-partisanship	265 (59%)	87 (90%)	132 (59%)
Total votes	449	97	224

This table only reports tabulations from roll call votes. *Strong polarization* refers to cases where at least 90 percent of the members of a party voted against at least 90 percent of the members of the other party. *Strong bipartisanship* refers to cases where at least 90 percent of the members of a party voted with at least 90 percent of the members of the other party. *Cross-partisanship* refers to cases where more than 10 percent of the members of a party voted against their party’s dominant position



Table 8 Contributors to political alignments across areas of foreign policy

	Bipartisanship	Strong bipartisanship	Cross-partisanship	Strength of consensus
Armed forces and national security	0.18*** (0.05)	0.29*** (0.04)	-0.34*** (0.04)	0.24*** (0.03)
International affairs	0.17*** (0.05)	0.30*** (0.05)	-0.38*** (0.05)	0.22*** (0.04)
Public approval of president	0.003* (0.004)	0.02*** (0.004)	-0.02*** (0.004)	0.007** (0.003)
Procedural vote	-0.32 (0.08)	-0.27*** (0.04)	0.04 (0.07)	-0.25*** (0.05)
Amendment vote	-0.41*** (0.04)	-0.22*** (0.03)	0.16*** (0.04)	-0.30*** (0.03)
Total votes	770	770	770	770

The results reported in this table are based only on votes on foreign policy legislation. Foreign trade and international finance represents the omitted category. For the first three columns, table entries are coefficients of a logistic regression, with standard errors in parentheses. For the fourth column, table entries are coefficients of an OLS regression, with standard errors in parentheses. Each model also includes a dummy variable for each Congress, which ranges from the 102nd Congress (1991–1992) to the 115th (2017–2018). The heading of each column represents the dependent variable for that model estimation. *Bipartisanship* is a dichotomous variable that takes a value of one in cases where a majority of the members of each party voted together. *Strong bipartisanship* is a dichotomous variable that takes a value of one in cases where at least 90 percent of the members of a party voted with at least 90 percent of the members of the other party. *Cross-partisanship* is a dichotomous variable that takes a value of one in cases where more than 10 percent of the members of a party voted against their party's dominant position. *Strength of consensus* is a continuous variable that represents the absolute value of the difference between the number of yea votes and number of nay votes on a piece of legislation, divided by the total number of lawmakers voting on the legislation

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$ for two-tailed tests



Although majorities of the two parties voted together at high rates across different areas of foreign policy, strong bipartisanship characterized national security issues more frequently than international economic issues. Whereas at least 90 percent of Republicans and Democrats voted together in about one out of three armed forces and national security roll call votes, they did so in just one out of ten foreign trade and international finance roll call votes (see Table 7). Conversely, cross-partisanship was considerably more common on international economic than on security issues, as more than 10 percent of the members of a party voted against their party’s dominant position in nine out of ten trade and international finance roll call votes, but in only about six out of ten military and national security roll call votes. Strong bipartisanship is also much more likely on security issues and cross-partisanship is far more likely on economic issues when controlling for key features of the political context (see Table 8).

An additional measure further highlights the stronger degree of consensus in Congress on international security than on international economic issues. We created a strength of consensus measure for roll call votes, which is a continuous measure from 0 to 1 that represents the portion of lawmakers that voted on the same side, regardless of their partisan affiliation. The variable is calculated by taking the difference between the number of lawmakers that voted yea and the number of lawmakers that voted nay, and then dividing the difference by the total number of lawmakers voting on the bill. Armed forces and national security votes scored an average of 0.74 on this measure, whereas trade and international finance votes scored an average of 0.65. The strength of consensus associated with security votes also remains greater than that associated with economic votes when incorporating controls into the analysis (see Table 8). These findings are consistent with Hypotheses 5a and 5b.

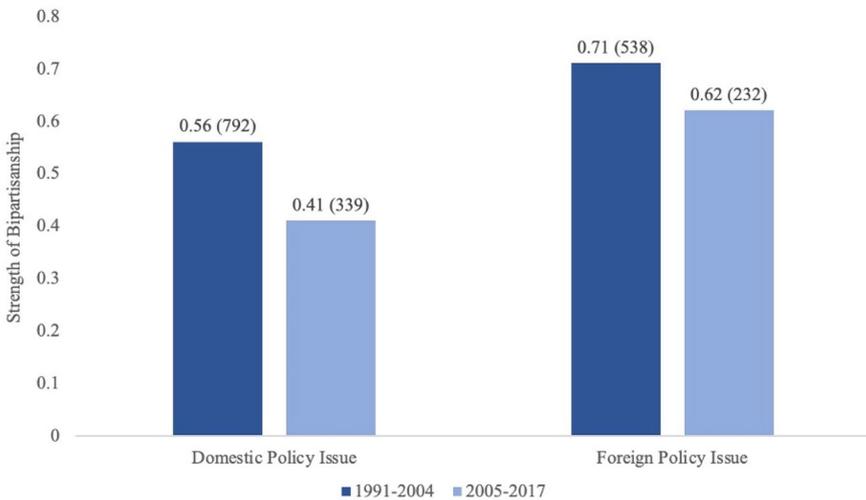


Fig. 1 Average strength of bipartisanship over time. *Note:* This graph only includes tabulations from roll call votes. The bars represent the average *strength of bipartisanship* measure for votes during a given period of years, with the total number of votes in parentheses. *Strength of bipartisanship* represents 1—[the absolute value of (the proportion of Republicans voting in favor of the legislation—the proportion of Democrats voting in favor of the legislation)]



Bipartisanship over time

The data further show a trend of declining bipartisanship in both foreign and domestic policy over the past three decades, but with a larger drop on domestic issues. Figure 1 breaks down the data into two time periods of roughly equivalent length, using the end of George W. Bush's first term as the cutoff point: 1991–2004 and 2005–2017. The figure shows that the average strength of congressional bipartisanship on roll call votes declined between these periods more on domestic issues than on international issues. While the average score for our strength of bipartisanship measure was 0.56 on domestic policy votes during the first period, it fell to 0.41 during the second period—a drop of 0.15. Meanwhile, the average strength of bipartisanship score on foreign policy votes dropped from 0.71 during the first period to 0.62 during the second—a drop of 0.09. Put another way, the gap between foreign and domestic policy in the average strength of bipartisanship actually grew between these two periods. Appendix Fig. 3 shows that these patterns remain the same—with bipartisanship declining in both domains but doing so to a greater extent on international issues—when procedural and amendment votes are excluded from the data, suggesting that the increase over time in polarization was not simply an artifact of the increased use of more divisive legislative processes.

Figure 2 breaks down the data temporarily in a different way, depicting the average strength of congressional bipartisanship for domestic and foreign policy votes for each presidency in the data set. For this graph, we incorporate all important domestic policy votes from the 2017 edition of *CQ Almanac*, to enable a domestic versus foreign policy comparison for the first year of the Trump administration. This resulted in the inclusion of 99 important domestic policy votes from 2017.

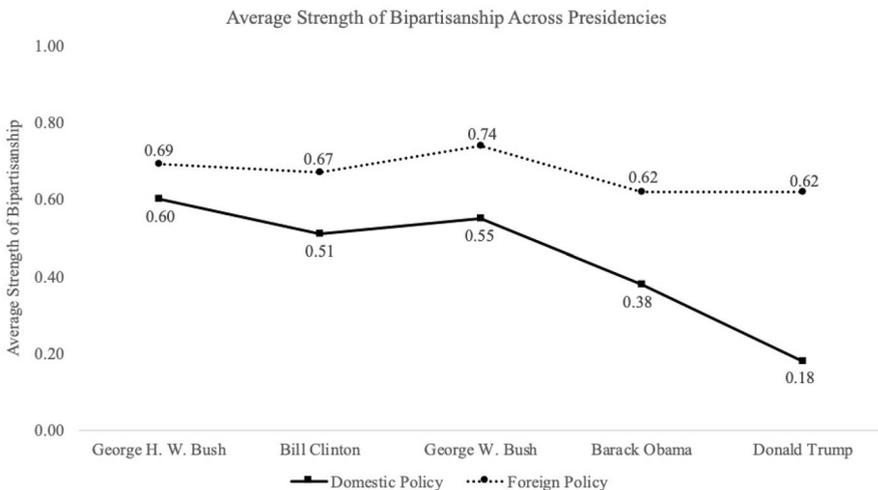


Fig. 2 Average strength of bipartisanship across presidencies. *Note:* This figure only reports tabulations from roll call votes. Points on the graph represent the average *strength of bipartisanship* measure for domestic or foreign policy during a given presidency. *Strength of bipartisanship* represents 1—[the absolute value of (the proportion of Republicans voting in favor of the legislation—the proportion of Democrats voting in favor of the legislation)]



Across all roll call votes, the average strength of bipartisanship dropped on domestic policy from 0.60 under George H. W. Bush to 0.38 under Obama and 0.18 under Trump. On foreign policy, it fell much less, from 0.69 under Bush to 0.62 under both Obama and Trump. Strikingly, these figures also indicate that foreign policy debates have been about as polarized under Obama and Trump as domestic policy debates were nearly a generation earlier, pointing to a lag of about 25 years in the intensity of foreign policy polarization relative to domestic policy polarization. Yet the data suggest too that differences between the politics of foreign policy and the politics of domestic policy might actually be growing over time, despite the overall trend of increased polarization.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper call into question the prevailing perspective that foreign policy bipartisanship has largely disappeared in recent decades. Yes, foreign policy debates are growing more polarized, but polarization is increasing at a relatively modest rate and bipartisanship remains quite common. Most strikingly, strong polarization, which should be of greatest concern, is remarkably rare in major foreign policy debates. In fact, divisions within the parties and between the executive and legislature occur at least as often as sharp divides between the two parties on Capitol Hill. These patterns further suggest the importance of understanding political alignments, such as cross-partisanship and anti-presidential bipartisanship, that are more subtle than the binary categories of polarization and bipartisanship allow.

To be sure, the data and results presented in this paper do not necessarily reflect the true overall frequency and strength of agreement between Republican and Democratic legislators on foreign policy. On the one hand, these results might overstate the prevalence of bipartisanship in Congress. Since bipartisan support for legislation makes its approval by Congress more likely, and legislation that is approved by Congress is more likely than other legislation to be considered important by journalists, legislation highlighted in a publication such as *CQ Almanac* might have more bipartisan backing than other bills. On the other hand, the results might understate the prevalence of bipartisanship. Since highly salient issues tend to be more polarized than less salient ones (Baumgartner et al. 2009) and legislation attracts more media attention when it is controversial, bills considered important by journalists might be more likely to involve polarization. Regardless of any such effects, it is clear from the results that bipartisanship remains common in foreign policy and that it is more prevalent and stronger on international than on domestic issues.

Beyond these specific findings, the paper's analysis suggests several takeaways for future research. First, analyses of congressional voting should take into account voice votes and unanimous consent votes, rather than drawing conclusions about rates of polarization or bipartisanship solely based on roll call votes. Our data set shows that approximately one-third of important congressional votes involve voice votes or unanimous consent votes. Since these voting procedures are almost always used on legislation with strong bipartisan support, excluding them from analyses results in systematic underestimations of the prevalence of bipartisanship.



Second, it is important to distinguish between moderate and severe polarization. It is common in studies of congressional voting to classify a vote as polarized if more than 50 percent of Democrats vote on the opposite side as more than 50 percent of Republicans. But if just a bare majority of Democrats vote against a bare majority of Republicans, the internal party splits on the issue are at least as notable as the fact that majorities of the two parties fall on opposite sides. Distinguishing more clearly between cases of moderate polarization and cases of severe polarization will shed more light on the extent to which polarization is actually reaching highly dysfunctional levels.

Third, further research is needed to consider possible changes in the politics of U.S. foreign policy due to the Trump presidency. Trump adopted a number of unorthodox foreign policy positions for a Republican leader—on issues from NATO to trade—and employed a harder-edged form of partisan politics than previous presidents. While our data source does not allow us to extend our data set beyond 2017, analyzing congressional voting and interbranch politics on foreign policy since 2018 is necessary to understand whether and how patterns of polarization and bipartisanship may have shifted more recently.

Fourth, more research is needed to consider variation in political alignments across types of foreign policy issues aside from the broad distinction between security and economics that we highlight. We focused on that distinction in part because security and economics represent the two substantive foreign policy categories used by the Congressional Research Service when classifying legislation. But further work could investigate how patterns of bipartisanship and polarization vary across more specific foreign policy issues, such as arms control, military intervention, international aid, or economic sanctions.

Appendix

See Fig. 3 and Tables 9, 10, 11, and 12.

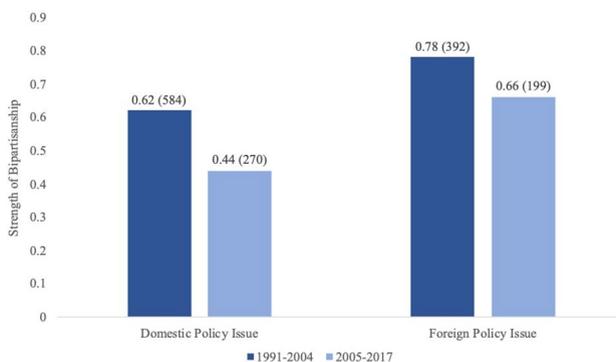


Fig. 3 Average strength of bipartisanship over time—procedural and amendment votes excluded. *Note:* This graph only reports tabulations from roll call votes and excludes procedural and amendment votes. The bars represent the average *strength of bipartisanship* measure for votes during a given period of years, with the total number of votes in parentheses. *Strength of bipartisanship* represents 1—[the absolute value of (the proportion of Republicans voting in favor of the legislation—the proportion of Democrats voting in favor of the legislation)]



Table 9 Contributors to bipartisanship—alternative model specifications

	Immigration votes included	Roll call votes only	Amendment and procedural votes excluded	House votes only	Senate votes only	Every third year only
Foreign policy issue	0.10*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.09*** (0.02)
Public approval of president	-0.001 (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.000 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.003)	Dropped
Procedural vote	-0.49*** (0.04)	-0.33*** (0.04)	N/A	-0.46*** (0.07)	-0.54*** (0.05)	-0.47*** (0.04)
Amendment vote	-0.31*** (0.03)	0.26*** (0.03)	N/A	0.34*** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.04)	0.25*** (0.03)
Total votes	2969	1901	2383	1627	1270	2121

Table entries are average marginal effects from a logistic regression, with standard errors in parentheses. Each model also includes a dummy variable for each Congress, which ranges from the 102nd Congress (1991–1992) to the 115th (2017–2018). The dichotomous dependent variable for each model estimation is *bipartisanship*, which takes a value of one in cases where a majority of the members of each party voted together. The public approval of the president variable was dropped when only examining every third of votes because the Congress variable captures all yearly variation



Table 10 Bipartisanship and polarization by party control

	Foreign policy under unified control	Foreign policy under divided control	Domestic policy under unified control	Domestic policy under divided control
Polarization	108 (23%)	178 (24%)	124 (45%)	505 (36%)
Bipartisanship	353 (77%)	577 (76%)	154 (55%)	898 (64%)
Total votes	461	755	278	1403

Polarization refers to cases where at least half of the members of a party voted against at least half of the members of the other party. *Bipartisanship* refers to cases where a majority of the members of each party voted together. Unified control refers to cases where the president's party controlled the chamber where the vote occurred. Divided control refers to cases where the president's party did not control the chamber where the vote occurred

Table 11 Pro- and anti-presidential bipartisanship by party control

	Foreign policy under unified control	Foreign policy under divided control	Domestic policy under unified control	Domestic policy under divided control
Polarization	61 (54%)	120 (57%)	82 (74%)	279 (70%)
Pro-presidential bipartisanship	47 (42%)	47 (22%)	25 (23%)	79 (20%)
Anti-presidential bipartisanship	4 (4%)	44 (21%)	4 (4%)	39 (10%)
Total votes	112	211	111	397

This table presents data for votes on which the president took a public position. *Polarization* refers to cases where at least half of the members of a party voted against a majority of the members of the other party. *Pro-presidential bipartisanship* refers to cases where a majority of the members of both parties voted in support of the president's position. *Anti-presidential bipartisanship* refers to cases where a majority of the members of both parties voted against the president's position. Unified control refers to cases where the chamber where the vote occurred was controlled by the president's party. Divided control refers to cases where the chamber where the vote occurred was not controlled by the president's party

Table 12 Bipartisanship across appropriations and non-appropriations legislation

Political alignment	Foreign appropriations	Foreign non-appropriations	Domestic appropriations	Domestic non-appropriations
Polarization	36 (16%)	250 (25%)	137 (42%)	492 (36%)
Bipartisanship	183 (84%)	747 (75%)	191 (58%)	861 (64%)
Total	219	997	328	1353

Polarization refers to cases where at least half of the members of a party voted against at least half of the members of the other party. *Bipartisanship* refers to cases where a majority of the members of each party voted together



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Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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