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1

Introduction

IN THE 1930s, France, like much of Western Europe, battled an economic depression. Growing inequality exacerbated an ideological divide between the right and the left. Far-right, proto-fascist movements in France and elsewhere in Europe perpetrated violence targeting Jews and other immigrant populations. In neighboring Germany, fascist dictator and leader of the far-right Nazi Party, Adolf Hitler, had come to power. To counter the influence of the French far right, a coalition of leftist and centrist groups formed the Popular Front, led by Léon Blum. In the 1936 French national election, the Popular Front was victorious, and Blum became both the first Jewish and the first socialist prime minister in France.

Extreme polarization deepened a sense of political crisis in France during this period. As one historian summarized, “the political polarization brought on by the fascist challenge and counterattack by the Popular Front in particular created an atmosphere of civil war.”¹ During the 1936 French election, as German troops reoccupied the Rhineland demilitarized zone, which bordered France, right-wing French leaders adopted a chilling slogan: “Plutôt Hitler que Blum” or “Better Hitler Than Blum.”² The slogan exemplified the depths of partisan animus between left-wing and right-wing groups. In retrospect, the sentiment was both prescient and chilling: Nazi Germany would begin its occupation of France less than five years later.

Episodes of extreme polarization, like that of 1930s France, are uncharacteristic of healthy democracies. However, the large majority of advanced democracies have experienced at least one period of markedly high polarization in their histories. Anecdotes about these periods of intense polarization

1. Irvine 1996, 78.

2. Richards 2006.

from prior eras have resurfaced in the twenty-first century, as researchers and policymakers perceive a growing threat of political polarization in many democracies. For instance, commentators drew unsettling parallels between the partisan tribalism of France in the 1930s and the United States in the 2020s.³

Contemporary political polarization is “a widespread phenomenon, with common negative consequences for democracy across diverse national contexts.”⁴ In Israel, under the polarizing leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a 2018 poll found that Israelis increasingly cited the right–left divide as the “strongest tension in Israeli society.”⁵ In Venezuela, a growing ideological divide reinforced by class divisions accompanied the rise of left-wing populism under President Hugo Chávez and President Nicolás Maduro.⁶ In South Korea, polarization in the South Korean National Assembly rose abruptly following the 2016 impeachment of President Park Geun-hye and continued to increase in the years that followed.⁷ In the United States, as the ideological and cultural divide between Republicans and Democrats grew, polarization became the “defining characteristic of modern American politics.”⁸ And, in an analysis of electoral polarization across forty-seven European countries from 1848 to 2020, researchers conclude that “politics in the continent have never been so polarized.”⁹

Party-based or *partisan polarization* represents an increasing divergence between major political parties or party coalitions. Polarization can be the result of substantive differences in policy positions. Preference polarization occurs when the policy preferences of parties diverge in one or more areas. A common form of preference polarization is *ideological polarization*: parties on the right become increasingly conservative and parties on the left become increasingly liberal. But divergence between parties can also be social, an artifact of negative affect and mutual dislike between political groups. The increasing tendency of people to like their political in-group but strongly dislike or even hate their political out-group is called *affective*

3. Applebaum 2020.

4. Carothers and O’Donohue 2019, 1.

5. Wootliff 2018.

6. Pilar, García-Guadilla, and Mallen 2019.

7. Han 2022.

8. Campbell 2016, 117.

9. Bértoa and Rama 2021.

polarization.¹⁰ These two forms of polarization are conceptually distinct, but they often co-occur. Political environments in which ideological and affective polarization coincide are characterized by *extreme polarization*. In such contexts, both forms of polarization reinforce one another. Partisan animus rooted in identity politics can fuel disagreement over policy, and vice versa.

In the study of comparative politics, there is an exceptionally rich literature on political parties and polarization. Yet, we know surprisingly little about how polarization affects how countries relate to one another in international relations. What explains this disconnect? For one, many modern theories of international relations originated in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. This was a unique time in American history. As Senator Arthur Vandenberg famously quipped, partisan politics was thought to “stop at the water’s edge.”¹¹ During the Cold War, there was arguably far more bipartisanship in U.S. foreign affairs than there is today. While partisan and particularistic interests at time trickled into foreign policy,¹² politicians generally united against the Soviet threat. In the 1990s, as liberal democracies triumphed over communism, a shared perception emerged that democracies had many advantages in foreign affairs relative to nondemocracies. Much research in international relations followed from this “democratic triumphalist” or “democratic advantage” tradition of thought.

In the study of American politics, much ink has been spilled on the causes and consequences of polarization.¹³ However, this body of work overwhelmingly focuses on polarization’s effects on domestic politics and society. Scholarship on the effects of polarization on foreign policy is much thinner. One reason for this discrepancy is the common perception that, unlike in some democracies, foreign affairs is pretty insulated from partisan politics in the United States. The executive branch—including the president, their advisors, and a set of foreign policy institutions responsible for security and defense policy—has a lot of discretion over national security.¹⁴ The sensitivity

10. Druckman and Levendusky 2018; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018.

11. Vandenberg 1945.

12. For more nuanced perspectives on the Cold War consensus see, e.g., Fordham 2010; Krebs 2015; Wittkopf and McCormick 1990.

13. For overviews of polarization in American politics see, e.g., Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Lee 2015; McCarty 2019; Persily 2015.

14. Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis 2008; Wildavsky 1966.

of intelligence gathering and necessity of maintaining state secrets give the executive branch far more information about foreign relations than the public or even legislators in Congress have.¹⁵ This information gap is sustained by the technical expertise required to manage foreign relationships, which has entrenched a bipartisan foreign policy bureaucracy in Washington, D.C.¹⁶ During times of crisis, these information asymmetries stymie polarization by suppressing criticism from the political opposition.¹⁷ During more peaceful times, instruments of national security policy (e.g., militarization) are still less likely than other foreign policy tools (e.g., trade, immigration, foreign aid) to elicit partisan debate.¹⁸

Yet, increasing polarization in the United States and many peer democracies compels us to revisit how the phenomenon poses problems for democratic politics, both historically and presently. An explosion of research on extreme polarization highlights the challenges it poses for democratic governance. And today scholars of US foreign policy and international relations debate whether these deepening political and societal divisions truly “stop at the water’s edge.”¹⁹ The objective of this book is to link the effects of polarization on democratic governance to theories of international relations. In doing so, the book integrates work across the fields of international relations, comparative politics, and American politics to explore how patterns of domestic polarization shape the international system.

1.1 The Argument in Brief

The primary question this book asks is: *How does extreme polarization affect the way democracies behave in international politics?* A central finding in international relations is that democratic countries have advantages in international politics when compared to nondemocratic countries. Democracies tend to keep foreign policy relatively stable across time,²⁰ credibly signal

15. Colaresi 2012, 2014.

16. Flynn 2014; Porter 2018.

17. Brody 1991; Brody and Shapiro 1989.

18. Milner and Tingley 2015.

19. Bryan and Tama 2022; Busby and Monten 2008; Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2010; Friedman 2022; Friedrichs 2021; Friedrichs and Tama 2024; Kertzer, Brooks, and Brooks 2021; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2010; Milner and Tingley 2015; Musgrave 2019; Schultz 2018; Tama 2023.

20. See, e.g., McGillivray and Smith 2008; Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015; Leeds and Mattes 2022.

information to adversaries,²¹ and reliably maintain commitments to allies.²² These advantages come from systems of constraint and accountability that check political power and provide incentives for democratic leaders to be responsive to the public and receptive to criticism.

The main argument of this book is that extreme partisan polarization reshapes the nature of these constraints on democratic leaders, which in turn erodes the advantages democracies have in foreign affairs. First, extreme polarization negatively impacts the *stability advantage*, or the ability of democracies to maintain consistent foreign policy. In highly polarized environments, politicians have incentives to undo policies of their out-party predecessors and politicize the foreign policy bureaucracy, creating volatility with leader turnover. Second, extreme polarization undermines the *credibility advantage*, or the ability of democracies to issue credible threats and promises to foreign adversaries. Polarization provides incentives for the political opposition to oppose or obstruct democratic leaders. In polarized environments, bipartisan consensus, which makes threats from democracies credible, is difficult to attain, and opposition to the executive becomes less informative to adversaries in international negotiations and crisis bargaining. Third, extreme polarization erodes the *reliability advantage*: the ability of states to make and keep international commitments to allies and partners. The combination of a polarized electorate and an obstinate political opposition makes it easier for democratic leaders to bypass institutional constraints to secure political wins. This means that international commitments in polarized democracies are more likely to be made without bipartisan support, increasing the chance democratic leaders will renege on existing agreements in the future.

The book begins by providing a cross-national perspective on polarization and the erosion of democratic advantages in foreign affairs. Using data on party platforms²³ from executive and opposition parties and coalitions in fifty-five countries, I provide preliminary evidence that democracies experiencing periods of extreme polarization likely behave differently than other democracies in international politics. On average, they tend to be more volatile in their foreign policymaking, less credible in interstate²⁴ disputes, and more likely to violate alliance commitments.

21. See, e.g., Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001a; Tomz 2007.

22. See, e.g., Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009; Martin 2000.

23. Lehmann et al. 2018.

24. International relations scholars use the term *interstate* to describe disputes between countries, or sovereign states.

While cross-national analyses are useful in characterizing descriptive patterns of polarization and foreign policy, within-country analysis provides a better understanding of how polarization impacts policy processes. In the second half of this book, I focus on the case of contemporary U.S. foreign policy. The United States is an ideal starting point given its history of political polarization, its status as a powerful and consequential democracy, and its importance in international politics. Across three empirical chapters, I examine the pathways through which polarization erodes each of the democratic advantages in contemporary U.S. foreign policy. These empirical chapters follow a similar structure. They first focus on the public, using original survey experiments and historic public opinion polling to show how a polarized electorate reshapes the nature of democratic accountability in foreign policymaking. Then, they analyze the strategic behavior of politicians that follows from changing electoral incentives and a hyper-partisan political environment. Finally, each chapter illustrates the potential downstream implications of these behaviors for democratic advantages in foreign affairs.

Collectively, the theory and evidence provided in this book advance our understanding of the relationship between partisan polarization and international politics. I argue that polarization negatively impacts the ability of democracies to negotiate effectively and credibly signal information to adversaries. Moreover, extreme polarization in democracies can undermine democratic constraints, which in turn affects the stability of the countries' foreign policy and the reliability of their international commitments.

1.2 Democratic Advantages in Foreign Affairs

This book is grounded in a large body of research in international relations that explores how democratic countries interact with one another and with non-democracies. Most of this research focuses on what political scientists term *liberal democracies*. At a minimum, democracies must have free and fair elections to determine their political leaders. But elections alone are not enough to create a liberal democracy. Liberal democracies have institutions designed to prevent leaders from improperly exercising their power or infringing on the rights of citizens. These include, for example, institutions that facilitate checks and balances, divide power between different branches of government, and protect civil liberties. An insight that emerged from the field of international relations is that liberal democracies enjoy a number of advantages in making

foreign policy when compared to countries with other regime types.²⁵ This book focuses on three of these democratic advantages: a stability advantage, a credibility advantage, and a reliability advantage.²⁶

First, democracies have a stability advantage in that they are able to maintain relatively consistent foreign policy over time. Democracies hold routine elections that bring new leaders into power. Yet, despite frequent leader turnover, the foreign policy of democracies does not tend to abruptly shift. Leader turnover in democracies does not usually dramatically change a country's trade relations or alter the willingness of foreign investors to hold its sovereign debt.²⁷ In fact, leader turnover in democracies does not have large impacts on a country's foreign policy preferences in general.²⁸ By contrast, in nondemocracies, leader turnover can produce more volatile and unpredictable foreign policy outcomes. Political instability creates problems in foreign policy when, for example, a new autocrat comes to power through a coup or revolution.²⁹

Second, democracies have a credibility advantage in that they can effectively signal information to foreign adversaries. Accountability to democratic publics and a visible political opposition restrain democratic leaders from initiating conflicts or crises they are unlikely to win,³⁰ and from making promises or issuing threats they do not intend to keep. This makes the threats and promises they do issue more credible.³¹ The ability of democracies to credibly signal information gives them an advantage in crisis bargaining and makes them better able to resolve disputes peacefully relative to nondemocratic countries.³² Moreover, domestic constraints on democratic leaders give them advantages in forms of bargaining that happen outside of crisis situations, such as when leaders negotiate international agreements with foreign adversaries.³³

25. A country's *regime type* is its form of government. There are many ways to classify regime types, but the most basic distinction is between democracies and autocracies.

26. While the "democratic advantage" perspective is a dominant tradition of thought in contemporary international relations scholarship, not all political scientists agree with it. The main critiques of this tradition are discussed in chapter 2.

27. McGillivray and Smith 2008.

28. Leeds and Mattes 2022; Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015; Smith 2016.

29. Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009; McGillivray and Smith 2008.

30. Reiter and Stam 1998, 2002.

31. Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001a; Tomz 2007.

32. Schultz 1998.

33. Putnam 1988.

Democratic leaders can credibly say that they will not be able to accept the terms of a negotiation if it will be unpopular back home. In short, constraints at home make democracies more credible adversaries.

Third, democracies have a reliability advantage because they are better able to commit to and comply with international agreements made with foreign partners. Democracies tend to be more cooperative than nondemocratic countries, and they are especially likely to cooperate with one another.³⁴ Democratic countries also typically follow through on their security commitments. They form durable military alliances with one another and maintain these alliance commitments even when a new leader comes to power.³⁵ Beyond security cooperation, democracies are also thought to be more cooperative in general. They are more likely to join and comply with the international trade and international monetary regimes.³⁶ They are better at making environmental policy commitments,³⁷ complying with international humanitarian law,³⁸ and adhering to a rules-based international order.³⁹ This contributes to the perception that democratic countries are reliable allies.

These three advantages are interrelated and can at times reinforce one another. They each arise from two important systems of constraint on political power within liberal democracies. *Vertical constraints*, or electoral accountability, make democratic leaders responsive to their publics. *Horizontal constraints*, or checks on executive power that arise from within government, make democratic leaders accountable to other political actors and institutions, including an active political opposition. Collectively, these constraints ensure that democratic leaders prioritize national welfare over special interests, abide by established democratic procedures when making foreign policy, and follow through on threats and promises they issue in international politics.

On the whole, democracies may have these advantages over nondemocracies. The argument of this book, however, is that we have underappreciated an important source of variation in democratic foreign policymaking: the degree to which politics and society are polarized. This book focuses on the impacts that extreme polarization has on systems of vertical and horizontal constraints

34. Leeds 1999; Martin 2000.

35. Gaubatz 1996; Leeds and Savun 2007; Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009; Reed 1997.

36. Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff 2002; Milner and Kubota 2005; Simmons 2000.

37. Battig and Bernauer 2009; Payne 1995; Neumayer 2002; von Stein 2008.

38. Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Hathaway 2007; Neumayer 2005.

39. Slaughter 1995.

and, in turn, the democratic advantages. I argue that as polarization becomes more extreme, its effects are largely (although not exclusively) negative for democracies in international politics.

1.3 Defining Partisan Polarization

The term polarization is invoked in many different ways by scholars, analysts, and policymakers. This book characterizes polarization with respect to three simple questions. First, who are the relevant *actors*? Political scientists tend to investigate polarization among two sets of actors: politicians and the public. These phenomena are referred to as *elite polarization* and *mass polarization*, respectively. This book discusses polarization among both sets of actors because they jointly impact systems of constraint in democratic countries. Politicians are the main actors involved in making foreign policy. Politicians leading the executive are often responsible for major foreign policy decisions, while politicians from opposition parties play a critical role in horizontally constraining these leaders. The public is also relevant for foreign policymaking because, in democracies, leaders are vertically constrained by the electorate. Public opinion can also be a useful barometer for understanding the extent to which certain issues are polarized. To explore how polarization impacts foreign policy attitudes and outcomes, this book draws on a combination of attitudinal data from the public and behavioral data from politicians.

Second, what are the relevant *groups* that these actors form? Describing a national public as polarized only makes sense if we have a shared understanding of the cleavage along which polarization occurs. This book focuses on party-based or *partisan polarization* and the relevant groups are political parties. *Political parties* are organized groups that seek political power through elections. They campaign on defined platforms that provide insight into their foreign policy positions. Parties are the main emphasis of this book because they compete for control of the executive, largely responsible for foreign policymaking.

Of course, partisan polarization is just one of many forms of political and societal polarization. In American politics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a regional divide between the North and South, rooted in attitudes toward slavery and, later, racial segregation, has at times been much more salient than the partisan divide. At the start of the twenty-first century, some scholars argue that the root cause of polarization in Venezuelan politics was a cleavage between two different ideas of democracy. Supporters

of participatory democracy (exemplified by Hugo Chávez and his supporters) believed in direct participation in government and collective rights, while supporters of representative democracy (mainly Chávez's opponents) believed in representative government and individual rights.⁴⁰ The question of the United Kingdom's status with respect to the European Union (EU) created a polarized cleavage in the 2010s between "Leavers" who advocated for withdrawing from the EU and "Remainers" who advocated against it.⁴¹ But the advantage of studying partisan polarization rather than, for example, polarization in the UK between Remainers and Leavers, is that the former is visible across time and space while the latter reflects one historical moment. Some of the theoretical dynamics described in this book could be applied to other politically salient groups of actors. However, this book focuses on political parties because, while their composition and positions evolve over time, they remain a central organizing feature of democratic politics with important implications for foreign policy.

Third, what is the relevant *distance* between these groups? To say a political system is characterized by polarization implies distance or divergence between political groups. One form of divergence is preference based or ideological. *Preference polarization* occurs "when (a) the preferences of members become more distinctly bimodal and (b) the two modes move farther apart."⁴² Polarization in advanced democracies that occurs on a right-left dimension is known as *ideological polarization*. A conservative or rightist ideology reflects economic commitments to the promotion of free markets and social commitments to traditional morals and values. By contrast, a liberal or leftist ideology reflects economic commitments to redistributing wealth and strengthening the welfare state and social commitments to protecting civil liberties.⁴³ While polarization on a right-left dimension has been the main focus of scholarship on political parties, there are an infinite number of issues or dimensions over which parties could diverge. Polarization in foreign policy, for example, is often measured on a hawk-dove dimension. This dimension captures the relative hawkishness of political parties, defined as their willingness to use coercive force in foreign policy.

40. Pilar, García-Guadilla, and Mallen 2019.

41. Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021.

42. Lee 2015, 263.

43. See, e.g., the categorization of right-left policy positions proposed by Laver and Budge (1992).

A different form of divergence between groups is identity based, emphasizing social distance between groups. This form of polarization, known as *affective polarization*, is a tendency to like members of one's in-party and to dislike members of one's out-party.⁴⁴ The phenomenon is driven by the fact that, in many contexts, affiliation with a political party is a social identity.⁴⁵ Attachment to one's political party shapes how individuals develop relationships, create social community, consume media, and perceive others around them.⁴⁶ In affectively polarized societies, partisan identity is a highly salient aspect of one's community. It often correlates with other social identities. Where there are higher levels of affective polarization, partisans feel stronger affinity with people who belong to the same political party. In some cases, partisans may even be hostile toward members of the opposite party. I refer to cases in which high levels of both ideological and affective polarization co-occur as cases of *extreme polarization*.⁴⁷

1.4 Extreme Polarization and Democratic Erosion

In the early twenty-first century, with prospects for accession to the EU on the horizon, Turkey was a “beacon of success in a volatile neighborhood.”⁴⁸ Straddling Europe and Asia, the predominantly Muslim nation was relatively secular and democratic. Yet, less than two decades later, Turkey was “one of the most politically and socially polarized countries in the world.”⁴⁹ Polarization in Turkish politics reflected a political and social cleavage between Islamists and secularists who proposed alternative visions for Turkey's future. The major political Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), arose in the early 2000s as an outsider party opposed to the secular establishment. As the promise of EU accession faded, the party and its polarizing leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, began to take more aggressive actions. After

44. The tendency to dislike members of one's out-party is also called *negative partisanship* (Abramowitz and Webster 2016).

45. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002.

46. Iyengar et al. 2019.

47. Other terms used to describe similar environments are “severe polarization” (see, e.g., Carothers and O'Donohue 2019) and “pernicious polarization” (see, e.g., McCoy and Somer 2019).

48. Kirişçi and Sloat 2019.

49. Somer 2019, 42.

assuming the presidency in 2014, Erdoğan enacted antidemocratic reforms to strengthen his own political power. These included crackdowns on political dissent, censorship of media organizations, and a constitutional referendum that further expanded Erdoğan's executive power.⁵⁰ In 2018, the polarization of Turkish politics negatively impacted the health of its democracy. Freedom House's annual "Freedom in the World" index, which measures protections of civil liberties and political rights in every country, downgraded Turkey from "Partly Free" to "Not Free."⁵¹

The experience of Turkey serves as a cautionary tale. Even relatively strong democracies are not immune to processes of democratic backsliding. Across the world, following many decades of democratic transition and consolidation, democracy is now in decline. By 2023, Freedom House reported that "global freedom declined for the 17th consecutive year."⁵² This broad trend helps us understand why so many people express concern about rising polarization. At its extremes, polarization can contribute to the erosion—or even the breakdown—of democracy.⁵³

A few features distinguish environments of extreme polarization (those characterized by both high levels of ideological and affective polarization) from more moderate forms of polarization typical of a healthy liberal democracy. First, in extremely polarized countries, the stakes of winning become exceptionally high. Politics is more likely to be zero sum: gains for one party are losses for the opposite party, and vice versa. Environments characterized by high-stakes, zero-sum politics are among the most susceptible to democratic erosion.⁵⁴ This is because in extremely polarized contexts, parties and their leaders have greater incentives to "tilt the playing field"⁵⁵ to their advantage in order to see their own candidates win or their preferred policies enacted. Sometimes these changes are dramatic, but, more often, they happen incrementally.⁵⁶ In *Crises of Democracy*, for instance, political scientist Adam

50. Aydın-Düzgit 2019.

51. Freedom House 2018.

52. Freedom House 2023.

53. Carothers and O'Donohue 2019; Jee, Lueders, and Myrick 2022; Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Kurd 2019; Mudde 2019; Pirro 2015; Polyakova 2015; Svoboda 2020; Weyland and Madrid 2019.

54. See arguments and evidence from: Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021; Clayton et al. 2021; Fossati, Muhtadi, and Warburton 2022; Goodman 2022; Kingzette et al. 2021; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Miller 2021; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022.

55. Graham and Svoboda 2020, 407.

56. See, e.g., Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018.

Przeworski warns of “a gradual, almost imperceptible, erosion of democratic institutions and norms, subversion of democracy by stealth.”⁵⁷

Incremental changes characteristic of democratic backsliding can be hard to identify and respond to. In their book *How Democracies Die*, political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt discuss how many democratic governments, including the U.S. government, rely on systems of “unwritten democratic norms.”⁵⁸ The researchers argue that extreme polarization is especially dangerous because, in such environments, political parties are more likely to disregard such norms, which are foundational to a functioning democracy. One could imagine that this dynamic could be problematic in foreign affairs, where executives tend to already have considerable discretion over policymaking.

Second, in contexts of extreme polarization, ideological and affective polarization tend to reinforce one another. Policy disagreements can fuel affective polarization, and vice versa.⁵⁹ It becomes difficult to disentangle whether disagreements between parties are a function of sincere differences in ideological beliefs (“I am deeply committed to this policy”) or a function of negative partisanship (“I dislike this policy because it’s championed by the other party”). A theme of this book is that this inability to distinguish between principled and partisan disagreement can mute some of the advantages democracies have when making foreign policy.

Third, when a country is highly polarized, partisan conflict begins to spill into more policy domains. Political scientists Geoffrey Layman and Thomas Carsey term this process *conflict extension*.⁶⁰ In the United States, for example, over time, party activists extended partisan conflict from economic issues to social, cultural, and racial issues.⁶¹ This means that extreme polarization is likely to beget more polarization. With respect to foreign affairs, this implies that even policies that are not central to a partisan cleavage *ex ante* can become politicized. This is especially likely to occur when such issues coincide with contentious electoral cycles or are championed by party activists or polarizing leaders.

Finally, in environments of extreme polarization, other democratic constraints—such as those from the public, media, and other government

57. Przeworski 2019, 15.

58. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 8.

59. See, e.g., Algara and Zur 2023; Dias and Lelkes 2022.

60. Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Layman et al. 2010.

61. Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006.

institutions—that in theory should “check” political officials tend to be less effective. A highly polarized public is less able to hold leaders accountable because partisans are unlikely to acknowledge situations when their own team does something wrong or the other team does something right. Likewise, the political opposition is a less reliable check on executive power because it has incentives to consistently oppose or undermine the executive.

This book argues that the combination of these features of extremely polarized societies—the incentives to circumvent democratic norms, the inability to distinguish between principled and partisan disagreement, the extension of partisan conflict to new policy domains, and the erosion of constraints on executive power—collectively undermine the advantages that democracies have in foreign affairs. In developing this argument, a core contribution of this book is to connect scholarship on polarization and democratic erosion to foreign policymaking.

1.5 Partisan Polarization in the United States

In 1856, U.S. House Representative Preston Brooks, a Democrat from South Carolina, walked into the Old Senate Chamber and smashed a metal-tipped cane onto Republican Senator Charles Sumner’s head, beating him unconscious. The infamous incident was prompted by a passionate speech Senator Sumner gave in favor of admitting Kansas to the Union as a free state. Sumner, an antislavery Republican, hurled a series of insults at Democrats advocating to admit Kansas as a slave state.⁶² While Sumner recovered from his injuries, the physical violence that occurred inside the Senate was emblematic of the extreme polarization that gripped Congress and the rest of the nation in the years preceding the American Civil War. In his book *With Ballots and Bullets*, political scientist Nathan Kalmoe argues that partisanship tied to attitudes toward slavery plunged the United States into civil war.⁶³ This episode is widely cited as an example of how extreme polarization was at other points in America’s history. Polarization is clearly a problem in contemporary U.S. politics. But compared to the mid-nineteenth century, the partisan antics of the present seem far less grim.

Why, then, is there growing concern about extreme polarization and democratic erosion in the United States today? To contextualize contemporary

62. Pierson 1995.

63. Kalmoe 2020.

TABLE 1.1. Evidence for contemporary partisan polarization in the United States

RELEVANT ACTORS		
POLARIZATION	Politicians	Public
	Ideological Strong evidence	Mixed evidence
	Affective Mixed evidence	Strong evidence

polarization, it is useful to characterize trends related to various types of polarization in the United States over the last century. In describing partisan polarization in the United States, the relevant groups are the two major political parties: the Republican Party and the Democratic Party.⁶⁴ The Republican Party, also nicknamed the GOP (“Grand Old Party”), is considered to be more to the right and ideologically conservative, whereas the Democratic Party is considered more to the left and ideologically liberal. Table 1.1 summarizes research on polarization in American politics with respect to two dimensions: the actors (politicians or the public) and the source of the divergence between the groups (either ideological or affective polarization). This section briefly describes trends related to each of the four types of polarization in table 1.1. The main takeaway is that there is strong scholarly consensus that elite, ideological polarization and mass, affective polarization in the United States have substantially increased in recent decades. However, there is more debate and less consensus about other forms of polarization.

Beginning with elite, ideological polarization, it is well documented that ideological polarization has increased over the past few decades among politicians. Most measures of elite polarization in the United States focus on *congressional polarization*: the growing ideological divide between Republican and Democratic legislators. The main measure of congressional polarization is constructed from congressional roll-call votes that compare the (dis)similarity

64. On the development of the two-party system in the United States, see Aldrich 2011.

of legislators' voting records across parties.⁶⁵ A scaling procedure called DW-NOMINATE (Dynamic Weighted Nominal Three-Step Estimation) represents legislators on a common ideological space across time. The difference between the estimated ideological position of the median congressional Republican and Democrat is a measure of congressional polarization. Figure 1.1 illustrates the distribution of legislators' ideological positions in the House of Representatives and the Senate using DW-NOMINATE scores.⁶⁶

Figure 1.1 shows that congressional polarization began gradually in the 1970s, with a sharper increase beginning in the mid-1990s as more ideologically extreme legislators enacted institutional reforms in Congress that incentivized greater party cohesion.⁶⁷ Other common measures of elite polarization—for example, measures of party unity constructed from roll-call votes,⁶⁸ ratings of legislators from special interest groups,⁶⁹ ideology scores calculated from campaign contributions,⁷⁰ and measures of partisanship of congressional rhetoric⁷¹—show similar trends.

Political scientists offer many explanations for the increase in congressional polarization. The most prominent explanations are multifaceted, combining discussions of changes in the electorate with insights about changing institutional rules in Congress. A major change in the electorate since the 1970s was the “Southern realignment”: the movement of White Southern voters with largely conservative social values to the Republican Party.⁷² Partisan realignment made the parties more distinctive and ideologically coherent, leading to new generations of more ideologically extreme legislators.⁷³ As these legislators assumed leadership positions in Congress, they enacted procedural reforms that gave the majority party considerable power and facilitated greater party cohesion.⁷⁴

65. Poole and Rosenthal 1985, 1991, 1997; Lewis et al. 2019.

66. Lewis et al. 2019.

67. Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Theriault 2008.

68. Bond and Fleisher 2000; Crespín, Rohde, and Wielen 2011. A party unity vote is when at least half of one party votes against at least half of the opposing party.

69. Charnock 2018.

70. Bonica 2013.

71. Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Taddy 2017.

72. Rohde 1991; Roberts and Smith 2003.

73. Campbell 2016.

74. Cox and McCubbins 1993; Rohde 1991; Sinclair 2014; Theriault 2008.

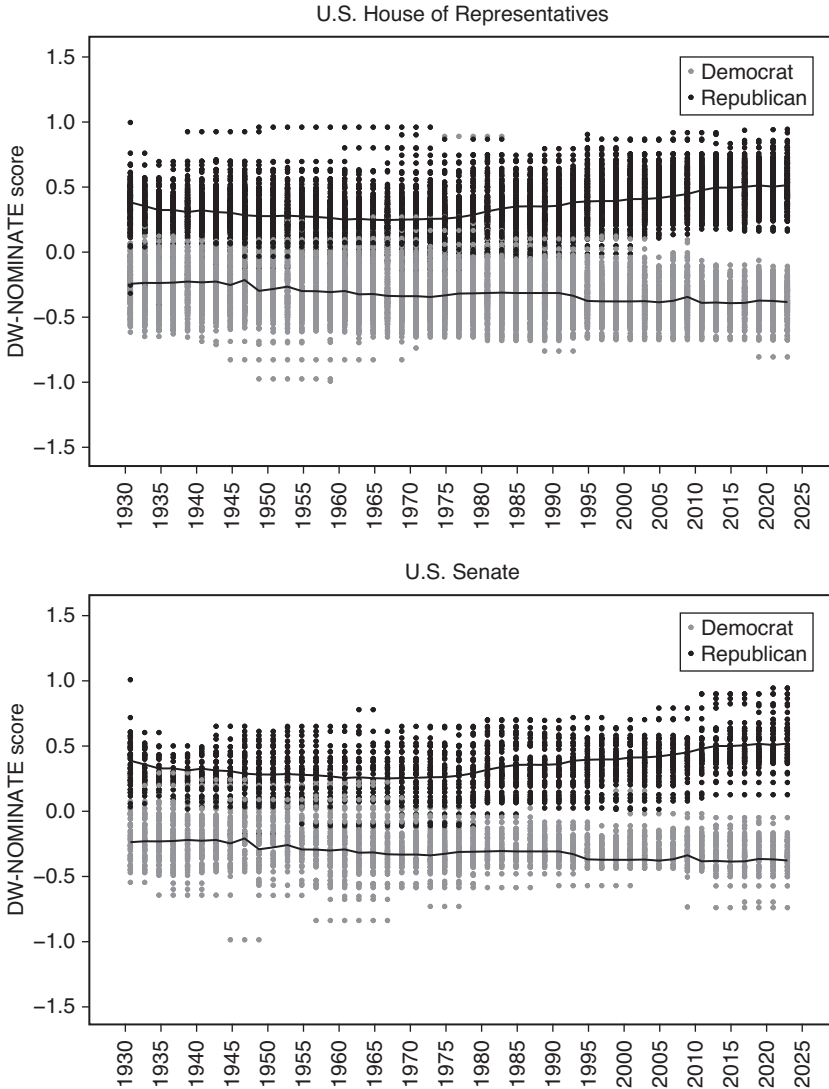


FIGURE 1.1. Ideological polarization of legislators in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate using DW-NOMINATE scores

Some political scientists argue that elite polarization has been “asymmetric” since the 1990s. What this means, as suggested in figure 1.1, is that Republican legislators have moved further rightward than Democratic legislators have moved leftward. In their book *Asymmetric Politics*, Matt Grossman and David Hopkins argue this trend occurs because the Republican

Party has become more ideologically driven than the Democratic Party.⁷⁵ The researchers attribute this asymmetry to the rise of conservative media, the prominence of right-wing legislators and politicians, and the establishment of far-right movements like the Tea Party movement, founded in 2009. A chief concern is that more ideologically extreme politicians will be more likely to break democratic norms in order to see their preferred policies enacted or to stop legislation championed by the opposite party. Political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson write, “In the past two decades—since asymmetric polarization has entered a new and more intense phase with the rise to power of [speaker of the House of Representatives] Newt Gingrich—the GOP has repeatedly violated established norms (without breaking legal restrictions) to gain partisan advantage.”⁷⁶ Hacker and Pierson point to examples from Democratic President Barack Obama’s administration (2009–2017), during which congressional Republicans used, or threatened to use, the filibuster or to shut down the government in order to stop legislation, and led efforts at the state level to restrict voting access.

Turning to mass polarization, evidence for ideological divergence among the American public is more mixed. One camp believes that ideological polarization among the mass public has not necessarily increased over time.⁷⁷ Political scientist Morris Fiorina and his collaborators, for example, argue that most Americans are relatively centrist and that politicians overestimate ideological polarization within the electorate. Similarly, in their book *The Other Divide*, Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan argue that polarization is concentrated among a minority of Americans who are very engaged in politics.⁷⁸

However, other researchers provide compelling evidence for growing ideological polarization in the American public.⁷⁹ The fact that the average Republican is more conservative and the average Democrat is more liberal than in generations past is difficult to dispute. Figure 1.2 shows the distribution of conservative and liberal attitudes among self-identified Republicans and Democrats using data from the American National Election Studies

75. Grossman and Hopkins 2016.

76. Hacker and Pierson 2015, 60.

77. Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2004; Levendusky 2009.

78. Krupnikov and Ryan 2022.

79. Abramowitz 2010; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Campbell 2016; Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006.

(ANES).⁸⁰ Respondents rate their ideology on a seven-point scale with 1 indicating “Very Liberal” and 7 indicating “Very Conservative.” Snapshots of this data in twenty-year intervals—in 1976, 1996, and 2016—reveal that, over time, there has been greater coherence between party and ideology: Republicans have become more conservative and Democrats have become more liberal. However, it is possible these patterns are a function of the electorate sorting into parties more consistent with their ideology rather than moving to the ideological extremes, *per se*.⁸¹

While the extent of ideological polarization in the public is contested, there is strong evidence that the American public exhibits higher levels of affective or social polarization relative to the past.⁸² A key explanation for affective polarization in the United States is the decline in “cross-cutting” social identities.⁸³ Lilliana Mason’s book *Uncivil Agreement* explains how other social identities are increasingly correlated with partisan identity, which can contribute to resentment and prejudice.⁸⁴ For example, gender,⁸⁵ race,⁸⁶ religion,⁸⁷ and geography⁸⁸ are strongly associated with partisanship, furthering social divisions between the parties. Other factors that could contribute to affective polarization include internet penetration and the rise of partisan news media,⁸⁹ as well as cues from ideologically polarized politicians.⁹⁰

Affective polarization in the American public is linked to problematic political and social outcomes. Citizens who exhibit higher levels of affective polarization are unlikely to prioritize democratic principles over partisan identity and are more vulnerable to manipulation by partisan elites.⁹¹ In

80. American National Election Studies 2020. The ANES is a national public opinion data collection effort around elections funded by the National Science Foundation in collaboration with social scientists at Duke University, University of Michigan, University of Texas at Austin, and Stanford University.

81. Levendusky 2009.

82. Iyengar et al. 2019.

83. Klein 2020; Mason 2015, 2018.

84. Mason 2018.

85. Box-Steffensmeier, Boef, and Lin 2004; Gillion, Ladd, and Meredith 2020.

86. Jardina 2019; White and Laird 2020; Wamble et al. 2022.

87. Campbell, Green, and Layman 2011.

88. Chen and Rodden 2013; Rodden 2010, 2019.

89. Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017.

90. Banda and Cluverius 2018; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Webster and Abramowitz 2017.

91. Graham and Svobik 2020; McCoy and Somer 2019; Svobik 2019.

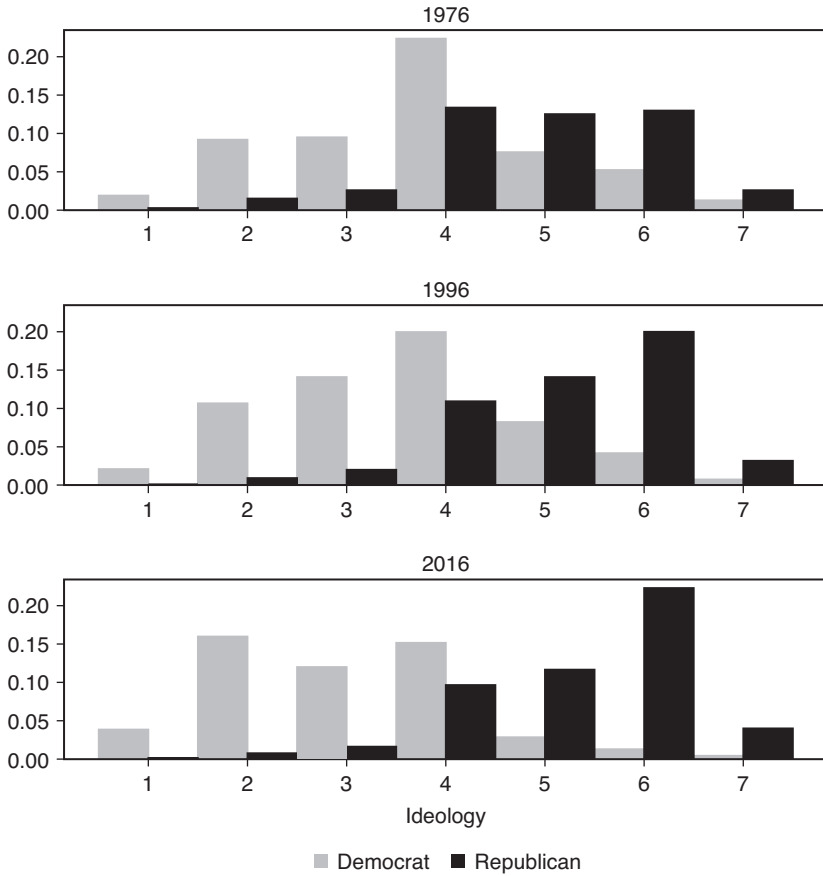


FIGURE 1.2. Trends in ideological polarization among the American public using data on party and ideology from the American National Election Studies

their book *Radical American Partisanship*, political scientists Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason warn that polarized societies can even breed intergroup hostility and partisan violence.⁹² Although some researchers dispute the evidence for this overarching finding,⁹³ in the 2020s, Americans clearly witnessed deeply concerning episodes of escalating partisan hostility. On January 6, 2021, following Republican President Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election, his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building in an attempt to overturn Democratic President-elect Joe Biden's victory. The

92. Kalmoe and Mason 2022.

93. See, e.g., Westwood et al. 2022.

resulting riots culminated in at least four deaths, emphasizing troubling links between societal polarization and extreme partisanship.⁹⁴ In the summer of 2024, Donald Trump survived two known assassination attempts while competing as the Republican presidential candidate. The Trump campaign placed blame on Democrats for using “inflammatory language” to incite partisan violence.⁹⁵

Worryingly, public opinion surveys show that affective polarization has increased over time. The standard way to measure affective polarization in American politics is to use a feeling thermometer that captures attitudes toward one’s in-party and out-party on a scale from 0 (“highly unfavorable”) to 100 (“highly favorable”). Affective polarization is measured as the difference between a person’s average feeling toward their in-party and out-party. Figure 1.3 shows average attitudes toward the Republican Party and the Democratic Party among self-identified Republicans (dashed lines) and self-identified Democrats (solid lines) with data from the American National Election Studies.⁹⁶ As the figure illustrates, the increase in affective polarization is driven by negative partisanship—dislike or hostility toward the out-party—rather than increasing favorability toward one’s own party.

Since affective polarization has mainly been studied as a mass rather than an elite phenomenon, it is unclear whether politicians are also more affectively polarized. Growing party cohesion and “teamship” dynamics are readily apparent in Congress today.⁹⁷ However, these could be attributed to political strategy or to ideological differences rather than to negative partisanship. Members of the political opposition have become more likely to oppose issues championed by an out-party president.⁹⁸ They are also more likely to grandstand in congressional hearings, particularly when they lack political power.⁹⁹ Likewise, politicians increasingly express negativity toward the opposite party on social media platforms and through political attack advertisements.¹⁰⁰ It is unclear, however, whether these trends reflect sincere partisan animus. The lack of consensus around affective polarization among politicians illustrates the difficulties of disentangling whether manifestations of polarization come

94. Cameron 2022.

95. Gold and Astor 2024.

96. American National Election Studies 2020.

97. Lee 2008, 2009; Theriault 2008.

98. Lee 2009.

99. Park 2021.

100. Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1996; Lau and Rovner 2009; Messing and Weisel 2017.

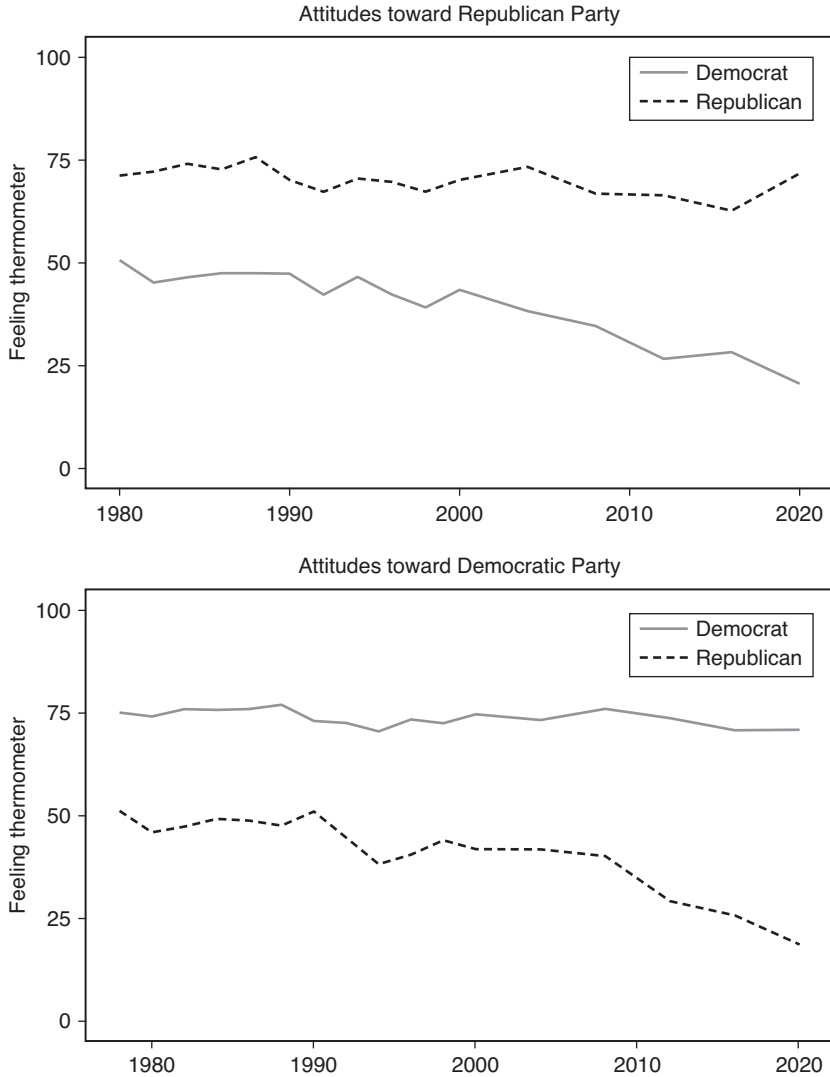


FIGURE 1.3. Trends in affective polarization among the American public using feeling thermometer data from the American National Election Studies

from ideological differences, partisan animosities, or both. Ultimately, if the observed behavior of politicians—greater party cohesion, more ideologically extreme legislators elected to Congress, increasing partisanship on roll-call votes, and heightened legislative gridlock—is the same, then understanding why these trends are occurring may not be as important as assessing their consequences.

Overall, partisan polarization has become a more salient feature of U.S. politics in the twenty-first century relative to much of twentieth-century U.S. politics. At the elite level, Republican and Democratic politicians increasingly disagree along party lines. This trend started in the late 1970s and has increased more sharply since the 1990s. Congressional voting patterns from the 1990s to the 2020s suggest the trend has been somewhat asymmetric, with Republican legislators exhibiting stronger ideological commitments relative to their Democratic counterparts. Whether politicians exhibit high levels of affective polarization is less well understood. However, teamship dynamics and forms of visible hostility in Congress point to a concerning trend. With respect to mass polarization, the evidence tells us that Republicans are increasingly conservative in terms of their economic and social values and Democrats are increasingly liberal. This trend may be a function of Americans sorting into parties over time rather than changing their attitudes. Finally, growing affective polarization among the public is widely recognized as problematic. The increase in partisan hostility is related to the fact that many social identities no longer cut cleanly across party lines.

1.6 Empirical Approach of the Book

Before detailing the argument of this book, it is useful to understand its overarching empirical approach. This book asks how extreme polarization affects international politics. This is a *causal* question. Causal questions ask how an explanatory or independent variable (partisan polarization) affects an outcome or dependent variable (the stability, credibility, and reliability of a country's foreign policy). Social scientists are often interested in identifying and estimating causal effects. But, in this application, establishing causality is very difficult for two reasons.

One challenge is that the variables of interest in this book are hard to conceptualize and measure. The independent variable, polarization, itself is a fuzzy concept. As chapter 3 will explain, there is a lot of debate about how best to measure polarization across countries. Democracies have different electoral systems, various numbers of political parties, and differing beliefs about what constitutes a left-wing or right-wing party.¹⁰¹ As this chapter discussed, there are also many types of polarization: polarization relating to partisanship versus

101. There is also a lot of scholarly debate over which countries can be classified as democracies in the first place (see, e.g., Boese 2019; Giebler, Ruth, and Tanneberg 2018; Lueders and Lust 2018).

other social identities, ideological versus affective polarization, polarization among politicians versus the public, and so forth. The dependent variables in this book, which capture various foreign policy outcomes, are equally hard to measure. Concepts like credibility of a country's threats or the reliability of a country's commitments are not purely observable. Rather, they depend on the perceptions of other countries.

Even if scholars agree on how to conceptualize and measure the key variables in this book, there is a second major challenge with identifying the "effect" of polarization. To establish causality, we would need to isolate variation created by polarization independent of other factors that influence foreign policy outcomes. The problem is that, in the real world, polarization co-occurs with many other factors that affect foreign policy. For instance, in the example of 1930s France used at the outset of this book, politics were clearly very polarized. However, France was also experiencing an economic crisis, growing economic inequality, an influx of migration, and a changing security environment—all of which plausibly influenced its foreign policy.

Scientists can estimate causal effects by conducting an experiment or randomized controlled trial. In an experiment, the unit of interest is randomly assigned to either a treatment group or a control group. Researchers recover the causal effect of the treatment (the independent variable) on an observed outcome of interest (the dependent variable) by measuring the difference in outcomes between the treated and control groups. Social scientists also conduct experiments to answer questions about politics. Some experiments in political science have asked: Does social pressure increase voter turnout?¹⁰² Do cash transfers affect support for combatants?¹⁰³ Does foreign aid improve social cohesion in postconflict societies?¹⁰⁴ The researchers of these studies randomized mailers that publicized people's voting status (Michigan, USA), job training and cash transfers (Kandahar, Afghanistan), and development aid programs (Northern Liberia), respectively.

Unfortunately, many questions in international relations cannot be answered by randomized control trials. International relations scholars ask questions like: Are nuclear weapons effective tools of coercion?¹⁰⁵ How does

102. Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008.

103. Lyall, Zhou, and Imai 2020.

104. Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2009.

105. Sechser and Fuhrmann 2017.

a country's reputation affect its behavior in international politics?¹⁰⁶ Do individual leaders impact war outcomes?¹⁰⁷ Why are some authoritarian regimes more conflict prone or better at fighting than others?¹⁰⁸ Nuclear weapons, reputations, leaders, and regime types are all factors that cannot be randomly assigned. Nevertheless, these questions are extremely important. Similar to other international relations books, the approach this book takes is to combine many research strategies and sources of descriptive evidence. This means that no one piece of evidence is conclusive, but, rather, when different pieces of evidence are taken collectively, they demonstrate an overarching pattern.

Before diving into the evidence, the first (and arguably most important) step is to theory build. Chapter 2 begins with a theoretical discussion of existing literature in international relations about the advantages that democracies have relative to nondemocracies. It then lays out the institutional features of democracies that confer each of those advantages. Finally, it theorizes about how extreme polarization interacts with those institutional features, and what the likely impact is on foreign policy outcomes. This leads to a set of observable implications that are explored in the empirical chapters.

The empirical analyses in chapter 3 examine descriptive patterns of polarization and foreign policy using cross-national regression analyses, or a "large-N" quantitative approach. For this book, I construct measures of extreme polarization in foreign policy and introduce them into existing analyses of democratic stability, credibility, and reliability. Although these types of regression analyses have limitations, they are an appropriate starting point because much of the evidence from the democratic advantage tradition in international relations is rooted in this approach.

The remaining empirical chapters take a deep dive into one country case: the case of contemporary U.S. foreign policy. The main justification for focusing on a single case is practical. Simply put, within-country analysis provides a more complete picture of the ways in which polarization impacts policy processes. As explored in chapter 3, the variety of electoral systems found in modern democracies make measuring cross-national polarization challenging. Many foreign policy outcomes of interest in this book are difficult to understand without examining specific cases. For example, in order to explore how polarization affects the construction of an international agreement, it

106. Crescenzi 2018.

107. Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015; Saunders 2014.

108. Weeks 2012, 2014; Talmadge 2015.

is necessary to understand the domestic constraints faced by a country's negotiators and how these impact their decision-making calculus. Ultimately, while this book draws on cross-national evidence (chapter 3) to demonstrate patterns associated with polarization, within-country analyses (chapters 4 through 6) are better suited to the development of richer data sources for both explanatory and outcome variables.

Within the U.S. case, I again rely on multiple methods to illustrate how polarization has impacted democratic stability, credibility, and reliability. To investigate how polarization reshapes vertical constraints from the public, the book draws on public opinion data both from historic polls and original surveys. I use survey experiments fielded online to samples of U.S. adults to explore how partisanship conditions people's assessments of their leader's foreign policy decision-making. To understand how polarization reshapes horizontal constraints, I focus on patterns of behavior from politicians. The book relies on descriptive data from a variety of sources, including qualitative evidence (e.g., interviews with policymakers), text data (e.g., analyses of congressional speech), and other quantitative data from the executive branch and U.S. Congress (e.g., data on roll-call votes and international treaties).

Taken together, the evidence from this book suggests that the consequences of more extreme forms of polarization for foreign policymaking are largely negative. Of course, the conclusions that this book draws are probabilistic rather than deterministic. There will almost certainly be exceptions to the rule—that is, instances in which polarization benefits foreign policymaking, a possibility discussed in greater detail in chapter 7. On average, however, we should expect that as polarization becomes more extreme within a given democracy, its foreign policy will become less stable, and the country will be perceived as a less credible adversary and a less reliable ally.

1.6.1 Why Focus on Polarization in U.S. Foreign Policy?

The latter half of this book focuses on polarization and foreign policy in one primary case: the United States. Of course, polarization is neither unique to the United States nor to the current political moment, so why study its impacts on contemporary U.S. foreign policy? For one, while prior periods of extreme polarization in U.S. history are well known, the United States and the international system it belongs to today look extremely different. The most polarized period of American history was the mid-nineteenth century, when extreme internal divisions over the practice of slavery led to a deadly civil war. At this

time, American economic and military power were dwarfed by the expansive British Empire. Throughout much of this era, U.S. foreign relations were characterized—at least formally—by a policy of noninterventionism. This means that the United States sought to avoid major entanglements on the European continent.

Contemporary American foreign policy looks very different. Sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, the United States is incredibly influential in international politics. The country is an economic superpower, constituting roughly a fourth of the global economy.¹⁰⁹ The United States invests more in research and development than any other country, making up a quarter of global R&D expenditures.¹¹⁰ The American military is the most powerful in the world, and the United States makes up close to 40 percent of the global military expenditures.¹¹¹ And major decisions in American foreign policy—for example, about whether or not to intervene militarily in conflict, invest in peacekeeping or humanitarian operations, support controversial regimes, and join or withdraw from international organizations—all have consequential ripple effects.

Beyond its economic and military power, the United States wields considerable influence in the international system because it was a chief architect of the rules-based international order that arose after World War II. *International order* is a set of “governing arrangements that establish fundamental rules and principles in international politics and settle expectations among states.”¹¹² The system that the United States and its democratic allies developed in the mid-twentieth century is commonly called the *liberal international order*, or LIO. Political scientist John Ikenberry, who writes extensively on the LIO, summarizes: “The liberal international order is not just a collection of liberal democratic states but an international mutual-aid society—a sort of global political club that provides members with tools for economic and political advancement. Participants in the order gain trading opportunities, dispute-resolution mechanisms, frameworks for collective action, regulatory agreements, allied security guarantees, and resources in times of crisis.”¹¹³

109. Silver 2020.

110. Khan, Robbins, and Okrent 2020.

111. O’Hanlon 2024.

112. Lissner and Rapp-Hooper 2020, 14.

113. Ikenberry 2011, 61–62.

Bipartisan support for the principles underlying LIO—including emphasis on the rule of law, international cooperation over trade and security issues, and the promotion of liberal democratic values—has been central to contemporary American foreign policy. In the post–Cold War era, however, the widening partisan gap between the Republican and Democratic Parties spurred debates about whether the United States would continue to pursue a bipartisan, liberal internationalist agenda in the future.¹¹⁴ Moving deeper into the twenty-first century, politicians on both the far right and far left have advocated for American retrenchment from foreign affairs. These partisan debates within the United States are intimately connected to other global trends. Alongside growing political polarization, many democracies are facing new challenges like growing dissatisfaction with globalization, the rise of populist movements, and a resurgence of authoritarianism globally.

Despite growing awareness of polarization, its impact on foreign policy remains contested. Some policymakers see polarization as a “national security threat,”¹¹⁵ but its precise consequences are poorly understood. Scholars of American foreign policy continue to debate whether or not partisan politics is extending “beyond the water’s edge.”¹¹⁶ On the one hand, many researchers believe there is substantial bipartisan cooperation on foreign policy issues and agreement about underlying principles of American grand strategy.¹¹⁷ Scholars from this perspective see foundational elements of the LIO as intact, and some are critical of alarmist discourse about the dangers of polarization. Another group of researchers, however, express deep concern about how partisan politics encroaches on foreign affairs and the implications this may have for how the United States relates to the world.¹¹⁸

114. Hoffman 1995; Kurth 1996.

115. Rice 2020.

116. Debates about the extent to which U.S. foreign policy is polarizing tend to resurface after high-profile partisan events like the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007; Ikenberry 2009; Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2010) and the 2016 election of Donald Trump (Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2017; Friedrichs and Tama 2022, 2024; Jervis et al. 2018; Musgrave 2019; Schultz 2018).

117. See, e.g., Bryan and Tama 2022; Busby and Monten 2008; Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2010, 2017, 2018; Hurst and Wroe 2016; Friedman 2024; Kertzer, Brooks, and Brooks 2021; Tama 2023.

118. See, e.g., Beinart 2008; Drezner 2021; Friedrichs 2021; Jeong and Quirk 2019; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007, 2010; Musgrave 2019; Pillar 2023; Schultz 2018; Trubowitz and Burgoon 2023.

To adjudicate between these perspectives, this book characterizes the trajectory of polarization in U.S. foreign affairs. It argues that while foreign policy is much less polarized than domestic policy in the United States, aspects of foreign policy are becoming more partisan. This trend has worrying downstream consequences. Given the position of the United States in the international system, substantial shifts in its foreign policy that result directly or indirectly from polarization have important consequences for multilateral security, economic, environmental, and human rights regimes. Debates about the effect of polarization on U.S. foreign policy speak not only to questions in international relations theory about democratic advantages, but also to critical policy questions about the United States' role in global affairs and the future of the liberal international order.

As any observer of American politics will tell you, the United States has unique political institutions. Therefore, this book comes with the important caveat that, while many of its themes will apply elsewhere, evidence from the United States is not fully generalizable. In fact, extrapolating far beyond this context risks exacerbating a well-known American bias in international relations theory.¹¹⁹ The concluding chapter, chapter 7, speaks to possibilities for the extension of this work beyond American politics. While the depth required to do so is beyond the scope of this book, comparative work on how different types of polarization are shaping foreign policy is an exciting and incredibly important area for research.

1.7 Argument and Outline of the Book

In many democracies in the 2020s, internal political divisions substantially impact foreign affairs. In India, analysts worry that societal polarization gives leaders from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party electoral incentives to escalate tensions with neighboring Pakistan.¹²⁰ In Taiwan, substantial divisions between the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party mean leader turnover could dramatically reshape cross-strait relations with mainland China.¹²¹ In Israel, high levels of polarization “left Israel unprepared”¹²² to anticipate and respond to terror attacks conducted by Hamas in October

119. Colgan 2019.

120. Mondal 2019.

121. Grossman 2023.

122. Applebaum 2023.

2023. And, in the United States, following the March 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, heavily partisan debates over continuing U.S. military assistance to Ukraine introduced questions about the reliability of American commitments.¹²³ Despite critical links between domestic and international politics, research on polarization overwhelmingly focuses on how it affects domestic politics and society. This book argues that extreme partisan polarization has important and underappreciated effects on international relations. In large part, these consequences are negative for polarized democracies.

Chapter 2 outlines a theory of partisan polarization and democratic advantage. I start by identifying three interrelated advantages democracies enjoy in foreign affairs based on existing international relations literature. Democracies maintain relatively stable foreign policies (stability advantage), make for more credible adversaries (credibility advantage), and act as more cooperative and reliable allies (reliability advantage) relative to nondemocracies. Two systems of constraint in liberal democracies confer these advantages. Vertical constraints make democratic leaders accountable to their publics, while horizontal constraints make democratic leaders accountable to other actors within government, including the political opposition. These constraints provide democratic leaders with incentives to make foreign policy choices that lead to good outcomes in international politics. In liberal democracies, democratic leaders are more likely to be responsive to the public, follow agreed upon procedures when making foreign policy, and uphold liberal principles—such as peaceful dispute resolution and commitment to the rule of law—in foreign affairs. Chapter 2 then introduces partisan polarization as an underexplored source of variation in explaining foreign policy outcomes in democracies. It traces how extreme polarization interacts with vertical and horizontal constraints in democracies to undermine each of the three advantages.

Chapter 3 provides descriptive, cross-national evidence for the relationship between polarization and foreign policy with new data on foreign policy positions of executive and opposition parties or coalitions in fifty-five democratic countries from 1945 to 2020. After characterizing contemporary patterns of polarization, this chapter incorporates measures of extreme polarization into well-known, existing models of democratic advantages in foreign affairs.¹²⁴ The analyses show that, on average, democracies appear to be

123. Clement, Balz, and Guskin 2023.

124. Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009; Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll 2015; Schultz 2001a.

(continued...)

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