

Correspondence

Of Polarity and Polarization

Joseph M. Parent and
Joseph Bafumi

Charles A. Kupchan
and Peter L.
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To the Editors (Joseph M. Parent and Joseph Bafumi write):

Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz argue that bipartisan support for liberal internationalism in U.S. foreign policy is gone for the foreseeable future, and that the United States should trim its grand strategic ambitions accordingly.¹ Their article is timely and insightful, but has three major flaws: (1) claims that are unsupported by the evidence, (2) endogeneity issues that obscure causal relationships, and (3) pessimistic conclusions that do not follow from the analysis.

First, Kupchan and Trubowitz's claims exceed the evidence with respect to economic forces and gerrymandering. They contend that the rise of foreign policy moderates was caused by economic growth, which acted as a balm to ease tensions, and the economic downturn of the 1970s dealt a heavy blow to moderates (pp. 19, 23).² Contrary to their logic, however, the remarkable economic rallies in the 1980s and 1990s correlate with serious weakening of moderates. So, too, blaming partisan polarization on gerrymandering lacks support. Unaided by redistricting, the Senate has polarized just as the House of Representatives has. Although the number of competitive congressional districts declined in the mid-1960s and generally stayed low in the 1970s and 1980s, this number actually increased in the 1990s, an era of pronounced partisanship.³

Second, the independent variables in the article may be less independent than they

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The authors thank Robert Jervis and Robert Shapiro for their helpful comments.

1. Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, "Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 7–44. Additional references to this article appear in parentheses in the text.

2. See Peter Trubowitz and Nicole Mellow, "'Going Bipartisan': Politics by Other Means," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 120, No. 3 (Fall 2005), pp. 434–438.

3. For the Senate and House polarization data since 1871, see Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), p. 24. On gerrymandering as a cause of polarization, see Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of Polarized America*, 2d ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), pp. 214–215; Thomas E. Mann, "Polarizing the House of Representatives: How Much Does Gerrymandering Matter?" in Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings/Hoover Institution Press, 2006); and Alan Abramowitz, Brad Alexander, and Matthew Gunning, "Don't Blame Redistricting for Uncompetitive Elections," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 2006), pp. 87–90.

appear. Kupchan and Trubowitz account for the decline of foreign policy bipartisanship with a wide array of factors; here we focus on some of the most important: unipolarity, the realignment of the South, ideological sorting, income inequality, and the increasing importance of “values” politics. What the authors do not mention or account for is that all of these factors changed dramatically around 1992.

Specifically, in 1992 the world became unipolar; there was a massive leap in the percentage of Southern conservatives who identified as Republicans (increasing from approximately 45 percent in 1990 to upward of 70 percent in 1994); and the percentages of Americans self-identifying as ideologically liberal or conservative rose significantly.⁴ For decades, inequality in the United States (measured by the income share of the top 0.1 percent) stayed roughly even with Canada and the United Kingdom, that is, until the end of the Cold War when the United States vaulted over them. Democratic presidential candidates fared about 2 percent worse than Republican presidential candidates among regular churchgoers before 1992, but afterward fared an average of nearly 12 percent worse.⁵

Kupchan and Trubowitz present their explanations as an unfortunate confluence of independent events, which will not dissipate in the near future. The authors should have addressed the striking coincidence of timing in their independent variables, and explain why they are not causing each other. Why not believe a more parsimonious explanation instead? For instance, one could argue that external threat is the decisive force disciplining U.S. politics, and as the Soviet Union collapsed, external discipline fell along with it, allowing long-suppressed domestic cleavages to grow.⁶

Third, the authors reach pessimistic conclusions unwarranted by their argument. In the final analysis, they are deeply skeptical about bipartisanship rebounding for almost exclusively domestic political reasons (pp. 31, 40–42). Yet even though Kupchan and Trubowitz privilege domestic over international causes, international forces absorb a great deal of their attention and should influence their policy recommendations. If the absence of a peer competitor decreases incentives for bipartisanship (p. 27), then the approach of a peer competitor, or competitors, should portend some resurgence of biparti-

4. On Southern realignment and ideological sorting, see Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*, pp. 26–28; Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 72; and Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along? The Reality of a Polarized America,” *Forum*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June 2005), <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol3/iss2/art1>.

5. On income inequality in the United States, see Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, “The Evolution of Top Incomes: A Historical and International Perspective,” *American Economic Review*, Vol. 96, No. 2 (May 2006), p. 203; and McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, *Polarized America*, chap. 3. On values politics and polarization, see McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, *Polarized America*, p. 99; and William A. Galston and Pietro S. Nivola, “Delineating the Problem,” in Nivola and Brady, *Red and Blue Nation?* p. 22.

6. For similar claims, see Pietro S. Nivola, “Can the Government Be Serious?” in Henry J. Aaron, James M. Lindsay, and Nivola, eds., *Agenda for the Nation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. 495–496, 512–517; Peter A. Gourevitch, “Reinventing the American State: Political Dynamics in the Post-Cold War Era,” in Ira Katznelson and Martin Shefter, eds., *Shaped by War and Trade: International Influences on American Political Development* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 313; and Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 295.

sanship. China and a unified Europe are prime candidates to match U.S. might in the foreseeable future, and we were disappointed that the author of *The End of the American Era* did not discuss these prospects. In short, if the world's unipolarity drives U.S. polarization, Kupchan and Trubowitz's pessimism is overdrawn.

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Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz Reply:

Joseph Parent and Joseph Bafumi make a worthy contribution to the ongoing debate over the sources of U.S. grand strategy. Although their critique of our article misfires, it does provide us a welcome opportunity to reinforce our central claim that the erosion of bipartisanship and liberal internationalism in the United States stems from both international and domestic developments.¹

Parent and Bafumi contend that a monocausal account suffices. They argue that geopolitical conditions—the end of the Cold War and the onset of unipolarity—adequately explain the collapse of political discipline and the awakening of the “long-suppressed domestic cleavages” that undermined the bipartisan consensus on U.S. grand strategy. We fully accept that the international setting had a significant impact on the domestic sources of American statecraft. Indeed, we describe in detail how changes in polarity and the threat environment affected U.S. politics and policy from World War II through the current Iraq War (see pp. 15–16, 20–31).

Although we welcome parsimony, geopolitics alone cannot explain the trajectory of U.S. statecraft. Domestic conditions are at least as important as the international setting in shaping U.S. foreign policy. America soundly rejected liberal internationalism after World War I but embraced it enthusiastically after World War II—despite the similar geopolitical opportunities afforded by military victory. The main difference was the domestic landscape; Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations were attacked from the left and the right, whereas Franklin Roosevelt and the United Nations enjoyed the support of the bipartisan center Roosevelt had assembled in wartime. The onset of the Cold War then helped consolidate the nation's political center, but of vital importance were domestic developments—a new North-South alignment and the ideological moderation of elites and the public alike.

If external threat alone were adequate to consolidate domestic support for liberal internationalism, then the United States should have jettisoned isolationism well before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. It did not do so because domestic conditions were not yet ripe for a new brand of international engagement. A similar line of argument applies to liberal internationalism's demise. Contrary to the claims of Parent and Bafumi, biparti-

1. Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, “Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 7–44. Additional references to this article appear in parentheses in the text.

sanship and liberal internationalism began to erode in the 1970s—well before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992—making clear that domestic sources of polarization had been at work long before the arrival of unipolarity expedited the collapse of the center (see pp. 20–27).

In their attempt to dismiss the independent effects of domestic politics on foreign policy, Parent and Bafumi suggest that our claims lack empirical support. But it is their analysis that parts company with the historical record. They correctly note the increase after 1992 in southern conservatives who identified as Republicans. But the domestic cleavage over race and civil rights was at least as important as international events in turning the once-solid Democratic South into a Republican stronghold—a realignment that began in the 1970s, not the 1990s.

Parent and Bafumi take us to task for identifying redistricting as a source of polarization. We accept that gerrymandering is not the most potent cause of partisanship; we devote several pages to sectional realignment and only one paragraph to redistricting. As one careful study reveals, however, redistricting is hardly irrelevant; it accounts for between 10 and 20 percent of the increase in party polarization in Congress over the last thirty years.²

Parent and Bafumi also question our claim that economic prosperity and the closing of income equality encourage ideological moderation and political pragmatism. But as we detail, the polarization of the New Deal era was substantially eased by the economic boom that followed World War II (pp. 19–20). Moreover, increasing party polarization closely tracks growing income inequality during the 1980s and 1990s.³ During the 2008 presidential campaign, the Democratic candidates distanced themselves from free trade—another clear sign of the polarizing effects of growing income gaps in the United States.

Finally, Parent and Bafumi chide us for our “pessimistic conclusions” about how difficult it will be to rebuild bipartisan support for liberal internationalism. The rise of China or a unified Europe, they contend, will provide the United States the challenger it needs to rediscover its political center and reclaim a grand strategy of power and partnership. Although we are none too confident about the longevity of unipolarity, neither China nor the European Union—nor any other party, for that matter—shows signs of becoming a peer competitor any time soon. The United States is headed toward the uncertainties of a multipolar world—an international landscape that, for better or worse, raises the urgency as well as the difficulty of crafting a grand strategy that not only meets the country’s geopolitical needs but also restores political solvency at home.

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2. Sean M. Theriault, *Party Polarization in Congress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

3. See Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), especially pp. 6–8.