



The reputational consequences of polarization for American foreign policy: evidence from the US-UK bilateral relationship

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Abstract

How does partisan polarization in the United States affect foreign perceptions of its security commitments and global leadership? In a survey experiment fielded to 2000 adults in the United Kingdom, I demonstrate that priming respondents to think about US polarization negatively impacts their evaluations of the US-UK bilateral relationship. These impacts are stronger for the long-term, reputational consequences of polarization than for immediate security concerns. While foreign allies do not expect the United States to renege on existing security commitments, perceptions of extreme polarization make them less willing to engage in future partnerships with the United States and more skeptical of its global leadership. I find that these negative reputational consequences of polarization are driven by perceptions of preference-based, ideological polarization rather than identity-based, affective polarization. The results suggest that American allies anticipate that increasing divergence between the Republican and Democratic Party will create future uncertainty around US foreign policy.

Keywords Polarization · Reputation · Survey experiment · Public opinion · US foreign policy

There is little doubt that America's closest allies are acutely aware of the hyper-partisan nature of contemporary US politics. Extensive international coverage of

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the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, for example, increased the salience of American politics abroad (Liu 2016; Schwartz 2020). Highly politicized events in the United States, such as the congressional hearings in September 2018 around allegations of sexual misconduct from US Supreme Court Justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh were broadcast live worldwide, including on major British news programs like the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) and Sky News (BBC World Service 2018). In the summer of 2020, protests originating in Minneapolis rippled across the globe in support of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement condemning police brutality and racial injustice (Reuters 2020). And in January 2021, when pro-Trump rioters stormed the US Capitol in a failed bid to disrupt certification of the 2020 presidential election results, American allies looked on with ‘resounding reactions of horror’ (Schemm et al. 2021).

As international awareness of polarization in the United States increases, aspects of contemporary American foreign policy have also drawn criticism from US allies. This criticism is fueled in part by American withdrawal from major international agreements, such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Paris Climate Accord, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Nationalist sentiments expressed by the Trump administration also threatened the integrity of longstanding organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

During the Trump era, it was tempting to dismiss both extreme partisanship domestically and America’s changing role internationally as a function of President Trump’s actions and words. However, scholars consider President Trump a byproduct of extreme polarization rather than a cause (Westwood et al. 2019). The 2016 election of Donald Trump was less of a political anomaly and more of a testament to the strength of partisan identity.¹ And many foreign policy ideas articulated by the Trump administration are not novel, *per se*. Distrust of international organizations and skepticism of multilateralism has deep roots in the Republican Party (Flynn and Fordham 2019) and is a persistent feature of aspects of American foreign policy, such as human rights (Ignatieff 2005).

How do these developments impact foreign perceptions of the United States? I argue that polarization has the potential to affect perceptions of the US and its role in international politics in three ways. A first potential impact, and one that receives much attention in current scholarship and policy writing, is that polarization may cause states to doubt existing commitments that America has made to its allies. I refer to these doubts as short-term or ‘first-order’ concerns about existing commitments. This concern is tied to a perception that increasing divergence between the Republican and Democratic Party erodes a ‘bipartisan consensus’ in American foreign policy—a commitment to liberal norms, multilateralism, and an open world economy—established following World War II. As parties move towards the extremes, moderates on the center-left and center-right that upheld this consensus have lost political influence, jeopardizing American engagement in international

¹ Public opinion polls showed that 92 percent of self-identified Republicans voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election (Pew Research Center 2018).



institutions and security guarantees to foreign allies (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007, 2010).

However, partisan polarization also has two other long-term, or ‘second-order’ impacts on the relationship between the United States and its allies that are less widely recognized. First, polarization can affect the willingness of allies to engage in future partnerships or agreements with the United States. Doubts over existing commitments may amplify concerns about possible future agreements given the fact that it is far more difficult to create new international agreements rather than maintain existing ones. Second, polarization can have downstream reputational consequences for the United States by negatively impacting perceptions of American global leadership. These second-order impacts arise from a generalized sense of uncertainty over the future of American foreign policy. Increasing divergence between the parties makes foreign policy more likely to change with executive turnover and therefore less predictable over time.

This paper uses experimental public opinion research to examine how polarization in the United States during the Trump era was perceived by one of its closest allies: the United Kingdom. To explore the impact of partisan polarization on perceptions of US foreign policy, I design and field a survey experiment to 2000 adults residing in the United Kingdom in October 2018. The experiment assesses how priming allies to think about domestic polarization in the United States impacts evaluations of America’s commitments and global reputation. As one of America’s closest allies, this setting provides a tough test of the reputational impacts of polarization. Attitudes towards the United States are relatively entrenched in the United Kingdom, and the two countries have a robust history of security cooperation. If priming polarization negatively affects perceptions of the US-UK bilateral relationship, we should anticipate stronger effects in countries whose alliances with the United States are more tenuous.

Using experimental public opinion research in this context has two advantages. For one, while researchers can observe short-term impacts of polarization (failures to uphold an existing commitment) behaviorally, long-term impacts (reputational consequences and failures to initiate future partnerships or international agreements) are often not directly observable. Therefore, public opinion research is a helpful tool to understand how foreign publics in American-allied countries anticipate their relationship with the United States will change in the future. Another advantage of using an experimental design is that it can disentangle perceptions of polarization from other features of the United States. For example, international public opinion polls that show increased skepticism of American global leadership can reflect many different concerns, including growing polarization, racial divisions, economic inequality, or attitudes towards the current presidential administration. By priming respondents to consider different types of polarization in the United States, a survey experiment helps to distinguish the negative reputational consequences of polarization from other aspects of American democracy and governance.

The survey experiment has three main findings. First, I show that the baseline assessments of the United States and its role in the world are quite negative during this period. Second, I find that polarization primes have the largest effects on attitudes towards future partnerships and assessments of US global leadership. This



result suggests that the long-term reputational consequences of polarization in the United States are under-appreciated. Third, I explore *why* polarization results in more negative assessments of US foreign policy. I consider the reputational effects of two forms of partisan polarization: polarization motivated by diverging policy preferences (*preference polarization*) and polarization motivated by partisan animus and social identity (*affective polarization*). The results show that in the United Kingdom, preference polarization exerts a stronger negative impact on assessments of US foreign policy relative to affective polarization. I argue that this effect is driven by the perception that diverging preferences between the Republican and Democratic Party create uncertainty over the future of US foreign policy. This uncertainty makes foreign publics perceive the United States as less of a trustworthy decision-maker or reliable partner in the long run.

Defining partisan polarization

Partisan polarization is best understood as an increasing divergence between political parties. The literature in American political behavior distinguishes between two forms of polarization. One form of divergence is ideological or preference-based (*preference polarization*).² In the United States, this occurs as the Republican Party moves rightward and becomes more conservative, while the Democratic Party moves leftward and becomes more liberal. Measures of legislators' ideology (Poole and Rosenthal 1997), party unity (Bond and Fleisher 2000), support for the president's agenda (Edwards and Barrett 2000), and partisan speech in the *Congressional Record* (Lauderdale and Herzog 2016) illustrate increasing preference divergence between the Republican and Democratic parties, particularly since the early 1990s.

A second type of polarization is *social* or *affective polarization*, defined as 'the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively' (Iyengar and Westwood 2015, p. 691). Measures of affective polarization include the presence of positive feelings towards one's in-party and negative feelings towards one's out-party, metrics of increasing social distance, and the use of stereotypes to characterize parties and their members (Iyengar et al. 2012, 2019). Scholars point to internet penetration and partisan media (Lelkes et al. 2015), ideological polarization among elites (Webster and Abramowitz 2017), and the decline of 'cross-cutting' social identities (Mason 2015, 2018) as explanations for the rise in affective polarization in the United States.

Some scholars argue that preference and affective polarization are distinct phenomenon (Mason 2015; Iyengar et al. 2019), while others emphasize their interrelation, particularly in the American context (Diermeir and Li 2019; Rogowski and

² For the purposes of this study, I refer to this form of polarization as *preference polarization* because it is framed to UK respondents in the survey as increasing divergence in policy preferences rather than increasing ideological coherence. I use the term 'preference' to avoid introducing ideological labels in the survey like 'liberal' and 'conservative,' which have different connotations in British politics relative to American politics.



Sutherland 2016; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). In research on public opinion and foreign policy, distinguishing between these forms of polarization enables scholars to explore different mechanisms that shape public attitudes. For example, Maxey (2021) shows that heightening affective polarization limits a democratic leader's ability to rally support for military action. Myrick (2021) finds that security threats from foreign adversaries impact polarization over policy responses but have minimal impact on overall levels of affective polarization. In this paper's application, disentangling the effects of preference and affective polarization helps us to understand *why* polarization might have negative reputational consequences abroad. If heightened affective polarization negatively impacts foreign perceptions of US foreign policy, this may reflect how social divisions and domestic dysfunction erode US global leadership. If heightening preference polarization negatively impacts perceptions of the United States, this could reflect concerns about how partisan disagreement creates uncertainty over the future of American foreign policy.

How polarization affects perceptions of US foreign policy

While a substantial body of research examines how the American public perceives growing polarization in the United States, foreign assessments of America's partisan politics are less well understood. This section identifies three overarching consequences that polarization may have for perceptions of American foreign policy abroad. I argue that overall, growing polarization should have a negative impact on attitudes towards US foreign policy and America's relationships with its allies. However, the long-term and reputational consequences of extreme partisanship for US foreign policy should be of greatest concern to the United States.

Short-term challenges: existing commitments

A short-term, 'first-order' consequence of partisan polarization is that it may make the United States less likely to maintain its *existing commitments*. America's growing inability to maintain its international commitments receives much attention in current political discourse (Rapp-Hooper 2020; Wallcott 2020; Walt 2019). Scholars argue that American commitments to foreign allies in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia are foundational elements of a liberal international order built upon 'economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation, and democratic solidarity' (Ikenberry 2018, p. 7). Brands (2016) characterizes this order as 'single most consistent theme of US grand strategy since World War II' (p. 1). Two sets of international commitments reflect bipartisan support for overarching principles of the liberal international order.

The first set of commitments are security guarantees made to allies that the United States will come to their aid in that their security is threatened. These commitments are reinforced by a network of military alliances and the presence of over 200,000 active-duty US military personnel overseas (Pialik 2017). In Europe, US membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) fosters security cooperation and economic ties between the United States and its European allies. Commitment



to mutual defense among NATO members contributes to a unified Europe and deters Russian aggression. In Asia, the presence of American military personnel reinforces US security commitments to South Korea and Japan and balances against Chinese influence. In the Middle East, US military bases in the Persian Gulf facilitate access to oil and natural gas, counter-terrorism cooperation, and deterrence against Iranian aggression. Collectively, this network of military alliances and participation in other multilateral institutions is part of a US grand strategy characterized by ‘deep engagement’ (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016).

The second set of commitments are to international institutions that promote cooperation among states. These include major institutions like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, which facilitate cooperation around security and human rights, trade, monetary policy, and economic development, respectively. They also encompass the broader network of multilateral agreements that span different domains of foreign policy, promoting adherence to a rules-based international order.

Since the end of the Cold War, policymakers and scholars have periodically issued warnings about the willingness of the United States to maintain existing commitments. Mearsheimer (1990) famously predicted that US departure from Europe following the dissolution of the Soviet Union would lead to the collapse of NATO, warning this scenario could increase the likelihood of a major international crisis. After the American-led invasion of Iraq, scholars argued that a unilateralist approach pursued by the George W. Bush administration would facilitate the ‘collapse of the Atlantic alliance’ (Asmus 2003). During the Obama era, fatigue from protracted wars in the Middle East increased advocacy for US retrenchment (Gholz and Press 2010; Layne 2009; Peña 2006; Posen 2007; Preble 2009), which some experts warned would create power vacuums abroad (Dueck 2015).

Under former President Donald Trump, the president’s ‘America First’ rhetoric and repeated attacks on longstanding alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led to renewed concerns about existing security commitments. The Trump administration’s withdrawal from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement, the World Health Organization, and other multilateral institutions clearly signaled a rejection of the underlying principles of liberal internationalism. However, the extent to which the Trump presidency permanently eroded America’s liberal internationalist orientation in foreign affairs remains a subject of much debate (Busby et al. 2018; Chaudoin et al. 2018; Rathbun 2018).

Accompanying the actions of individual leaders is a larger, overarching concern that a structural feature of American politics—growing partisan polarization—is further degrading liberal internationalism. As Kupchan and Trubowitz (2007) summarize, ‘The polarization of the United States has dealt a severe blow to the bipartisan compact between power and cooperation. Instead of adhering to the vital center, the country’s elected officials, along with the public, are backing away from the liberal internationalist compact, supporting either US power or international cooperation, but rarely both’ (p. 9). The argument is based on the idea that politicians in the center of the political spectrum were responsible for sustaining commitments to



foreign allies and engagement in international institutions. In a highly polarized era, however, accountability to an electorate pushes legislators further to the extremes. As such, support for the principles of liberal internationalism and the international commitments that accompany them has waned (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007, 2010; Kupchan 2020). A natural question this argument raises is whether foreign allies share the perception that increasing polarization will erode the willingness or ability of the United States to maintain its existing commitments.

Long-term challenges: future partnerships and reputational impacts

Beyond concerns about existing commitments, there two long-term consequences that follow from partisan polarization in the United States. First, polarization may affect US allies' willingness to initiate *future partnerships* and agreements with the United States. Second and closely related, polarization may generate long-term *reputational costs* in international politics. These 'second-order' consequences of partisan polarization may be concerning to policymakers because they are difficult to pin down. While we can identify instances in which a state withdraws from an international organization or abrogates a military alliance, we cannot observe instances of cooperation that never materialize in the first place. Likewise, more abstract concepts like reputation, status, and legitimacy are challenging to measure. In these instances, public opinion research becomes a valuable tool.

Future partnerships

One possibility is that allies of the United States may not necessarily believe that polarization will cause the US to renege on its existing international commitments, but they may fear long-run uncertainty in a hyper-partisan environment. This uncertainty could discourage prospective allies from pursuing new forms of cooperation with the United States. Existing research in international relations shows that democracies tend to be reliable partners in international politics (Gaubatz 1996; Martin 2000; Mansfield et al. 2002; Cowhey 1993; Broz 2002). Specific features of democratic governments—such as regularized elections and checks on executive power—make abrupt changes in foreign policy unlikely compared to autocratic governments (Leeds et al. 2009; McGillivray and Smith 2008; Mattes et al. 2015). However, in highly polarized environments where political parties have divergent foreign policy platforms, future leadership turnover has the potential to result in significant changes in foreign policy (Myrick 2018). In theory, perceptions of long-run uncertainty could diminish the willingness of allies to engage in future partnerships with the United States.

This uncertainty stems from multiple sources. One possibility is that allies may be skeptical that new international treaties will be ratified by the US Congress in the first place, since ratification requires significant bipartisan support. Declines and delays in treaty ratification have become more common as Congressional polarization increases (Peake 2017; Schultz 2018). In addition, allies may not believe that the start-up costs of a new agreement are worthwhile given that polarization increases the likelihood that executive turnover could result



in the United States renegeing on an agreement after its passage. As Yarhi-Milo (2018) summarizes, ‘If other countries believe that American political commitments cannot survive a transition of power, they will be less likely to make significant or painful concessions’ (p. 73). Similarly, in an assessment of US treaty behavior, Chayes (2008) points out that renegeing on international agreements will likely deter other prospective US allies from cooperation in the future, but we cannot know the full extent of these effects. She writes:

Negative reactions to US treaty behavior may well have undercut essential international cooperation. We cannot know for sure that the ‘unsigning’ of the ICC, walking away from Kyoto, rejecting the Land Mine Treaty, or any other form of American treaty behavior will lead to lack of future cooperation on issues that Americans value. But resentment runs deep (p. 74).

High levels of domestic polarization fuel a ‘general uncertainty, ambivalence, and volatility’ (Brands 2017) in American foreign policy. In polarized environments, political officials are more likely to be rewarded electorally by actively speaking against or even undoing policies of the political opposition. While it is typical for a presidential challenger to define their platform in opposition to an incumbent, these distinctions are amplified in recent years. In the 2020 US presidential election, Democratic candidate Joe Biden campaigned against incumbent Republican president Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ foreign policy (Atwood and Gaouette 2020). Likewise, during the 2016 presidential campaign, efforts to undo Obama-era policies were the central, unifying theme of then-candidate Donald Trump’s foreign policy platform (Sokolsky and Miller 2019). And of course, central to Barack Obama’s 2008 candidacy was his opposition to the Bush administration’s ‘dumb war’ in Iraq (Obama 2002).

Uncertainty over US foreign policy complicates future cooperation with the United States. A critical distinction between existing and future forms of cooperation is that it is significantly harder to create new agreements and institutions than to maintain existing ones (Koremenos et al. 2001). If maintenance of existing agreements with a given state becomes challenging, potential partners will be even more skeptical about the ability of that state to enter into new, durable agreements. For instance, one of the architects of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Ambassador Wendy Sherman, expressed concern that the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran would have downstream consequences by giving other countries ‘less reason to trust Washington on future deals or take US interests into account’ (Sherman 2018).

Even actions short of withdrawal from existing agreements could have lasting ripple effects. The 2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, an intelligence report submitted annually to Congress, highlights this strategic concern. The report notes that, ‘US allies’ and partners’ uncertainty about the willingness and capability of the United States to maintain its international commitments may drive them to consider reorienting their policies...’ (Coats 2018, p. 4). This suggests that simply inducing stress and uncertainty into current partnerships may make allies reticent to enter into new ones.



Reputational consequences

Finally, polarization may have negative consequences for American foreign policy that are more intangible. The growing partisan divide in American politics could have reputational effects, negatively impacting assessments of American global leadership. Classic theories of soft power in international relations posit that states exert influence in international politics in part based on their ability to attract other states (Nye 2004). One measurable 'soft-power resource' is foreign public opinion (Goldsmith et al. 2021). Extreme partisanship could erode American influence abroad by making foreign allies more skeptical of or unfavorable towards the US.

Disentangling the impacts of perceived preference polarization and affective polarization can help us understand why polarization may have negative reputational effects. If heightening foreign perceptions of affective polarization has strong negative repercussions on attitudes towards American foreign policy, allies may be concerned that political dysfunction will be destabilizing for the US internationally. When the United States is unable to manage domestic dysfunction, its allies may believe that it will be unable to maintain its global standing. Recent episodes in which partisan infighting directly or indirectly affected US foreign policy highlight this dynamic. For instance, Khong (2014) discusses how partisan polarization indirectly complicated the bilateral relationship between the United States and China. The hyper-partisanship that led to a government shutdown in October 2013 in response to healthcare legislation had lasting negative repercussions for President Obama's strategic 'pivot to Asia.' As a result of the shutdown, Obama canceled his trip to the East Asia Summit, which subsequently 'made it hard for the United States to twist some arms on the TPP or reassure its Asian partners about the TPP's clauses' (Khong 2014, p. 174).

Concerns that affective polarization may damage America's international standing parallel ideas about imperial overstretch (Snyder 1991) and hegemonic decline precipitated by domestic actors (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Musgrave 2019). Scholars and analysts raise concerns that identity-based political tribalism in the United States will erode America's capacity to project power internationally and, as a consequence, embolden foreign adversaries. As Nye (2012) summarizes, 'Rome rotted from within, and some observers, noting the sourness of current US politics, project that the United States will lose its ability to influence world events because of domestic battles over culture, the collapse of its political institutions, and economic stagnation' (p. 37). Indeed, Russian interference in the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections reveals how American adversaries believe sowing affective polarization by amplifying identity-based cleavages can be destabilizing (Friedersdorf 2018). However, whether US allies also perceive that affective polarization could precipitate a decline in American global leadership is unknown.

In contrast, if heightened perceptions of preference polarization rather than affective polarization drive negative reputational consequences, a major concern for US officials should be partisan divergence over foreign policy, which creates long-run uncertainty. As the Republican and Democratic Party grow further apart in terms of their policy preferences, executive turnover will be increasingly likely to lead to changes in US foreign policy. This inconsistency could lead US allies to perceive the



United States as less reliable. As a consequence, they may be less willing to initiate future partnerships with the United States and more skeptical of American global leadership overall. Since both preference polarization and affective polarization are occurring simultaneously in the United States, survey experiments are a useful tool to distinguish between these two related yet distinctive processes.

Research design

To investigate the effects of partisan polarization on perceptions of US foreign policy, I embed an experiment in an omnibus public opinion survey fielded to 2000 adults living in the United Kingdom. The survey, conducted online by a professional European survey firm called Respondi, was nationally representative based on target demographic quotas for sex, age, and geographic region (England, Scotland, North Ireland, and Wales). In addition to looking at the overall impacts of polarization on America's international reputation, the survey distinguished between the effects of *preference polarization* (divergence in policy preferences of the Republican and Democratic party) and *affective polarization* (hatred or strong dislike of members of the opposite political party) on these assessments.

Why focus on the US-UK bilateral relationship? Shared military alliances, economic ties, common memberships in international organizations, and agreements for intelligence sharing have reinforced a 'Special Relationship' between the United States and the United Kingdom for more than a century (Reynolds 1985). While trying historic events have tested the enduring nature of the 'Special Relationship,' the perception that the US and the UK remain the closest of allies is ingrained in both countries. Public opinion polls show that American adults consistently rank the United Kingdom among its closest 'friends' in international politics; similarly, British adults continue to rank the United States as Britain's most important ally (Dinic 2015; YouGov 2017). As such, the United Kingdom poses a tough test of my argument. If priming respondents in the UK to think about polarization negatively impacts their assessment of US foreign policy, we would anticipate larger negative effects in states where attitudes towards the United States are more malleable or existing alliances are more fragile.

Public opinion research is useful in this application because it can identify potential second-order impacts of polarization that are not easily measurable. While we can observe whether the United States reneges on an international commitment, it is more challenging to observe negotiations that were never initiated in the first place. Similarly, concepts like reputation and perceptions of global leadership are difficult to measure without drawing on public opinion polling. An additional benefit of fielding an original public opinion survey is the ability to embed experiments in the survey questionnaire. A survey experiment will allow me to distinguish the effects of heightened polarization from other aspects of governance. For instance, Fig. 1 shows that residents of the United Kingdom have become less favorable towards the United States in recent years (Wike et al. 2020). However, the extent to which these negative assessments are driven by perceptions of polarization rather than other characteristics of the US cannot be inferred from observational data.



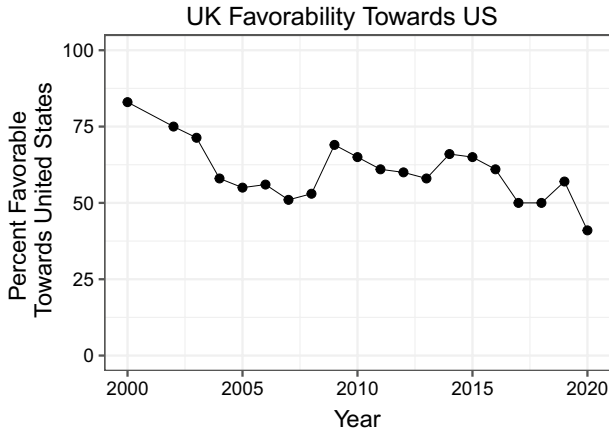


Fig. 1 Favorability towards the United States among residents of the United Kingdom (2000–2020)

One critique of public opinion research in international relations is that foreign policy decisions are made by elites rather than the public. Yet scholars of foreign policy increasingly focus on public opinion for a few reasons.³ First, given that elite surveys are costly and difficult to implement, public opinion surveys are a more practical option. Second, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the public can meaningfully influence foreign policy. Tomz et al. (2020) outline two pathways through which this occurs in democratic politics. In one pathway, political officials are responsive to the public, anticipating how they will react before making major foreign policy decisions. In a second pathway, the public shapes foreign policy by selecting political officials that align with their policy preferences through democratic elections.

A third reason to focus on public opinion is the growing consensus that democratic publics hold coherent foreign policy preferences that are worthy of study (Holsti 2004; Kertzer et al. 2014; Wittkopf 1990). Recent research further suggests that gap between foreign policy preferences of elites and the public is often overstated. Kertzer (2020) shows that much of the difference in opinion between elite and public samples comes from demographic differences between the samples rather than differences in expertise. Taken collectively, these findings suggest that public opinion research can provide useful insights on global perceptions of US foreign policy.

Experimental design

In the survey experiment, participants are randomly assigned to one of three groups. Those in the **Control Group** do not read a prime or receive any information about polarization in the United States. Respondents in either of the treatment groups

³ See Kertzer (2021) for a discussion of this trend and an overview of recent research.



receive information about polarization both among American adults and political officials (i.e., polarization at both the ‘mass’ and ‘elite’ level). Those in the **Preference Group (T1)** are primed to think about preference polarization, while respondents in the **Affective Group (T2)** are primed to think about affective polarization. In the survey, respondents in the treatment groups first read basic information about American politics and polarization. The text, which emphasizes either preference polarization (T1) or affective polarization (T2), reads:

We are now interested in understanding your attitudes towards the United States. We will first provide you with some information about American politics and then ask you for your opinions.

The United States has two major political parties: the Republican Party and the Democratic Party.

Studies show that the American public and its elected officials have become increasingly polarized along party lines.

In other words, [T1: Republicans and Democrats increasingly disagree with one another on policy issues. OR T2: Americans increasingly dislike members of the other political party.]

On the next page, respondents in both treatment groups read information about polarization within the American public.

Surveys from the United States show that, more than ever, Americans:

- *T1: Have different attitudes about social issues, such as abortion rights and gun laws. OR T2: Oppose the idea of their child marrying someone from the other political party.*
- *T1: Have different preferences over economic policies, such as tax rates and welfare spending. OR T2: Have ‘just a few’ or ‘no’ close friends from the other political party.*
- *T1: Think their political parties cannot agree on basic facts. OR T2: ‘Strongly dislike’ or even ‘hate’ members of the other political party.*

Next, respondents in both treatment groups read information about polarization among American political officials.

These differences are reflected in the US government. More than ever, Republican and Democratic politicians:

- *T1: Disagree on a wide range of basic policy issues. OR T2: Use extreme, negative language to taunt politicians of the other party.*
- *T1: Vote the same way as members of their own political party. OR T2: Post angry or hateful posts on social media about members of the other party.*

In order to ensure the delivery of the treatment, two attention checks within each treatment group ask respondents to identify information they previously read.⁴

⁴ An online appendix provides the full survey questionnaire.



Respondents then evaluate a series of six statements on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree.’ The statements are labeled from 1 to 6 to correspond to the regression tables in the next section, but they appear in random order to respondents. Two statements—one worded positively and one worded negatively—correspond to each of the three potential effects of polarization on foreign perceptions of the United States.

As detailed previously, a first potential short-term impact of polarization is that it can affect perceptions of *existing commitments*. The two sets of commitments emphasized in the theoretical discussion were security commitments as well as other non-militarized commitments to foreign allies. The corresponding statements read:

- *Statement 1: The United States would come to the aid of my country in the event our security is threatened.*
- *Statement 2: The United States no longer maintains its commitments to foreign countries.*

A second impact of polarization is that it can affect the willingness of US allies to engage in *future partnerships* or international agreements because of concerns about its reliability. These statements read:

- *Statement 3: My country should partner with the United States in future international agreements.*
- *Statement 4: The United States will not be a reliable future partner for my country.*

A third potential impact of US polarization is that it can affect America’s *reputation for leadership* in international politics. These statements read:

- *Statement 5: I trust the United States to do what is right in international politics.*
- *Statement 6: We should not look to the United States for global leadership.*

In developing these outcome variables, I make two design choices. The first choice is to measure each outcome in multiple ways, varying the language used to describe the underlying concept of interest. Small changes in question wording can induce measurement error, which is of particular concern for abstract concepts like “reputation for leadership.” Therefore, my intention in developing the statements is to describe each concept in multiple ways. The second design choice is to frame one statement positively and one negatively for each of the three outcomes. This is because a positive or negative frame influences a respondent’s likelihood of agreeing or disagreeing with a statement. The practical guidance is to mix positive and negatively framed questions in survey questionnaires (Bradburn 2004).

Finally, after measuring the outcome variables, I ask respondents about the extent to which they think the two major parties in the United States—the Republican Party and the Democratic Party—agree. This question is asked to respondents in both treatment and control groups. If the prime is delivered correctly, respondents in



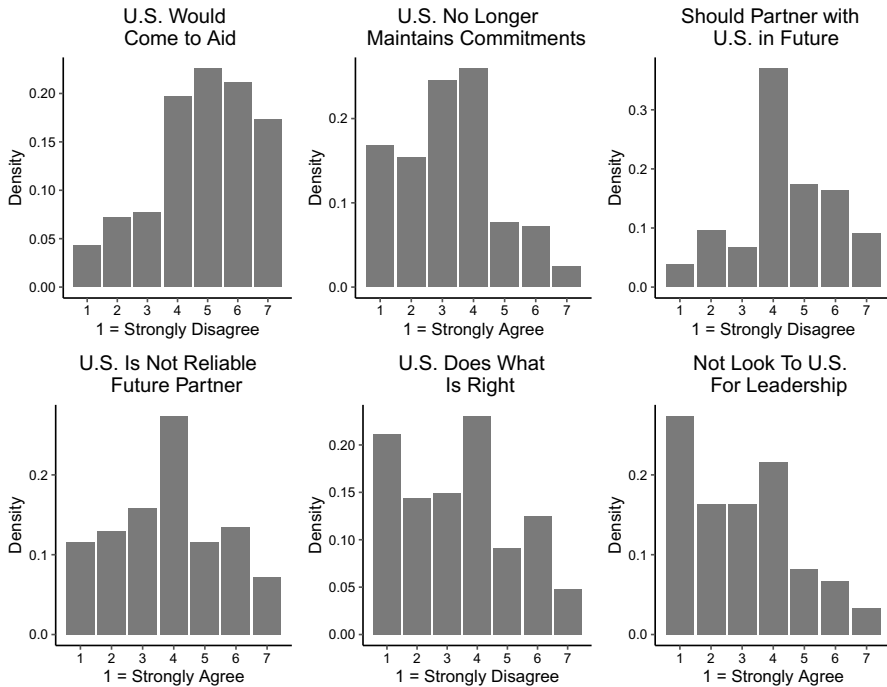


Fig. 2 Attitudes towards American foreign policy in Control Group

the treatment group should be less likely to perceive agreement between the parties relative to respondents in the control group.

Descriptive results

Before analyzing the impact of the polarization primes on respondent attitudes, I look at the data descriptively. For each of the six statements above, respondents express views using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree.’ I inverse-code the three statements that are negatively worded (i.e. ‘The United States will *not* be a reliable future partner for my country’) such that a ‘1’ equals ‘Strongly Agree.’ Therefore, higher values indicate more positive assessments of the United States. To get a sense of baseline attitudes in the sample, Fig. 2 shows the distribution of the six dependent variables in the **Control Group** only ($n = 843$). Respondents in this condition did not read the polarization primes.

The most striking finding in Fig. 2 is that the baseline assessments of American foreign policy are fairly negative. Most respondents believe that the United States no longer maintains its commitments to foreign countries and is not a reliable future partner. In addition, most respondents think that the UK should not look to the US for global leadership and do not trust the US to do what is right in international politics. However, respondents expect that the United States would come to the aid of the UK were its security threatened. As I show in the following section, priming



Table 1 Effects of affective and preference treatments on perceptions of United States

	Existing commitments		Future partnerships		Reputation for leadership	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Affective Treatment	-0.146 (0.090)	-0.030 (0.082)	-0.032 (0.089)	-0.077 (0.093)	-0.081 (0.093)	0.011 (0.094)
Preference Treatment	-0.131 (0.089)	-0.026 (0.082)	-0.178** (0.088)	-0.221** (0.093)	-0.203** (0.093)	-0.168* (0.094)
Constant	4.749*** (0.057)	3.241*** (0.052)	4.329*** (0.057)	3.846*** (0.059)	3.288*** (0.059)	3.100*** (0.060)
Observations	2008	2008	2008	2008	2008	2008

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

respondents to think about partisan polarization in the United States does not alter this confidence in US security commitments (Fig. 2).

Experimental results

Next, I consider how priming polarization shapes attitudes towards the United States. The dependent variables are responses to the six statements presented previously. Negatively worded statements remain inverse-coded such that higher values indicate more favorable attitudes. Therefore, the expected direction of all treatment effects is negative. I regress the six dependent variables on treatment indicators, using the control group as the omitted reference category. For simplicity, the main effects, displayed in Table 1, are modeled using ordinary least-squares regression models and show the sample average treatment effects for both treatment conditions. The results are substantively similar with and without demographic controls and when using alternative model specifications, such as logistic regression models (see appendix).

These results show that priming respondents in the United Kingdom to think about partisan polarization in the United States negatively impacted their evaluations of US foreign policy and the US-UK relationship. However, in many cases, the strength of these effects was small and varied across both the outcomes and treatments. In general, priming preference polarization exerted a stronger negative effect on respondents' attitudes. While priming affective polarization typically had a negative effect, these effects were not statistically significant at conventional levels.

We see the strongest negative effects, in terms of both magnitude and statistical significance, for the long-run impacts of polarization. Priming preference polarization—that is, emphasizing increasing disagreement between the parties—decreases the likelihood that the respondent believes their country should partner with the United States in future international agreements and increases the likelihood that they will not perceive the US as a reliable future partner. In addition, priming preference polarization has important reputational effects. It causes respondents to be less



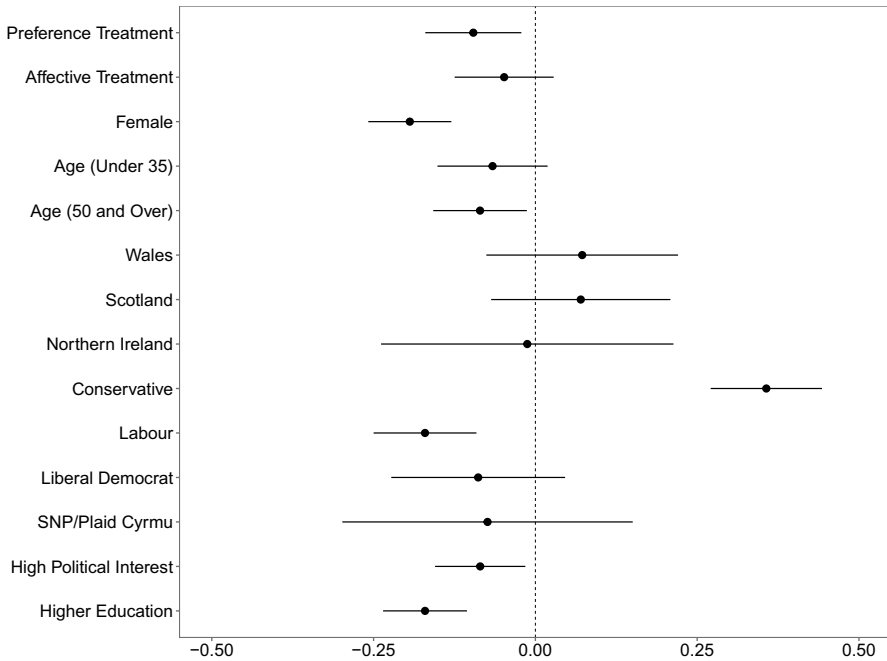


Fig. 3 Relationship between demographic characteristics and evaluations of US foreign policy

likely to trust the United States to do what is right in international politics or view the US as a global leader.

Despite the fact that many of these treatment effects attain statistical significance, their magnitude remains relatively small (≈ 0.1 to 0.2 standard deviations). A substantive interpretation of the effects from logistic regression models (see appendix) would suggest, for example, that priming preference polarization makes respondents 5 percentage points less likely to agree that the United States tends to do what is right in international politics. Similarly, it makes respondents 7 percentage points more likely to disagree with the assertion that the United States would be a reliable future partner for the United Kingdom.

However, these results are still somewhat surprising for a simple priming experiment for three reasons. First, one would expect that respondents in the United Kingdom have relatively fixed attitudes towards the United States given the long history between the two countries. Second, this is not a strong prime; respondents are merely exposed to thinking about partisan polarization in the United States. Third, the baseline attitude towards the United States are already fairly negative in the control condition, making it difficult to find the hypothesized negative treatment effects.

In order to get an overall sense of the magnitude of these treatment effects with respect to other demographic characteristics of the sample, I combine all six dependent variables into one z-score index. Higher values of the index indicate more positive assessments of US existing commitments, future partnerships, and America's global leadership. The Cronbach's alpha of the z-score index is 0.85, suggesting a



Table 2 How often would you say the two major political parties agree?

	Republican/Democratic (1)	Conservative/Labour (2)
Affective Treatment	-0.120*** (0.041)	0.010 (0.042)
Preference Treatment	-0.130*** (0.041)	0.054 (0.042)
Constant	1.913*** (0.026)	1.989*** (0.027)
Observations	1792	1909

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

high internal consistency among the different items.⁵ I regress this index on indicators for the two treatments and include demographic characteristics of the respondents. The coefficient plot in Fig. 3 illustrates how the magnitude of the treatment effects compares to other covariates. The figure shows, for instance, that members of the Conservative Party in the UK have much more positive assessments of America's reliability and reputation. Female respondents, respondents with high political interest, and respondents with higher levels of education have more negative assessments of the US-UK bilateral relationship.

Discussion

There are a few potential concerns with this analysis that can be addressed by additional robustness checks. A common concern in survey experiments is that respondents did not closely read the treatment—in this case, the polarization prime. I used two strategies to mitigate this concern. First, for the main results, to achieve the target sample size of 2000 respondents, I oversample ($n \approx 2400$) respondents and drop 'speeders,' defined as the fastest 20% of respondents, from the analysis.⁶ Second, in a robustness check, I analyze results within the sub-sample of respondents who passed two attention checks which asked them to identify information from the polarization treatment that they previously read (see appendix). While we should exercise caution in directly interpreting these results, given that these respondents are dropped from the analysis post-treatment (Aronow et al. 2019), the effect sizes are larger in magnitude among this subset of respondents.

There are additional concerns, however, that arise in interpreting survey results. A critique of small or null effects in survey experiments is that the treatments may not sufficiently convey the core concepts. For example, perhaps respondents receiving polarization primes did not update their assessment of whether or not members

⁵ A Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 or higher is generally considered internally consistent in the social sciences.

⁶ 'Speeding' here is measured before the treatment so that dropping respondents from the analysis does not bias the results.



of the Republican and Democratic Party in the United States increasingly disagree. Null results could also reflect pre-treatment bias: respondents may already be acutely aware of polarization in the United States, such that the treatment has no effect on attitudes. To preempt these concerns, I added a series of questions about respondents' perceptions of polarization in the United States and in the United Kingdom at the end of the survey in order to test how effectively the polarization primes were working. One question asked: *'The United States has two major political parties: the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. How often would you say these parties agree?'* Respondents had the following answer options: *Almost Always / Sometimes / Rarely / Almost Never / I don't know*. My expectation was that respondents receiving the treatment would be less likely to say that the two parties tend to agree. Model 1 in Table 2 supports this intuition. The model is an ordinary least-squares regression model, in which the dependent variable ranges from 1 ('Almost Never') to 4 ('Almost Always'), with 'Don't Know' removed. Respondents in *both* treatment groups were much more likely to perceive disagreement between the two parties (i.e. to say they 'Almost Never' agree) than respondents in the Control Group.

Another concern is that priming respondents to think about polarization leads to more general pessimism about politics rather than about the United States, per se. To ensure this is not the case, I consider whether the polarization primes affected respondents' perceptions of their politics at home in addition to their perceptions of American politics. Specifically, I asked: *'The United Kingdom has two major political parties: the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. How often would you say these parties agree?'* If priming polarization about the US had no impact on attitudes towards UK politics, we should expect null effects. Model 2 of Table 2 supports this finding; both treatments have no statistically significant impact on respondents' assessments of how often the Conservative Party and Labour Party in the United Kingdom tend to agree. Therefore, it is likely that the polarization primes affect perceptions of the United States but do not result in a more general negative attitudes towards politics overall.

Extensions

While these robustness checks improve the internal validity of the study, the central limitation of this research is that the results can only speak to one bilateral relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. Extensions of this work could consider how these findings may differ in other contexts. One possibility is that polarization primes would induce greater uncertainty about partnering with the United States among allies that face more direct security threats, such as South Korea. The survey in this paper showed that respondents living in the United Kingdom consistently believed that the United States would come to its aid in the event its security was threatened. However, this certainty may not hold among allied partners who have a more tenuous relationship with the United States or who face more pressing national security concerns than the United Kingdom. We should not assume that the null effects of heightened polarization on perceptions of existing US commitments are generalizable to foreign publics in other American-allied countries.



Another possibility is that priming polarization—and affective polarization, in particular—has stronger negative effects in contexts that are not experiencing similar partisan divides at home. The United Kingdom, for example, exhibits fairly high levels of affective polarization following the Brexit referendum (Hobolt et al. 2021), so information about increased social distance and partisan tribalism in the United States may not have a large impact on attitudes. By contrast, in contexts where affective polarization is less ubiquitous, allies may be more concerned by its potential implications for American foreign policy. New cross-national measures of affective polarization (Boxell et al. 2020; Gidron et al. 2020) could be used to classify American allies as having comparatively high or low levels of polarization.

Although this paper focused on public attitudes in a US-allied country, it would be interesting to further explore how perceptions of polarization in America differ among adversaries of the US. It is possible that polarization in the United States is even more salient for its adversaries than its allies. Some policymakers and analysts have stressed that America's extreme domestic partisanship may embolden rival foreign powers (Hubbard 2021). High levels of polarization could provide also opportunities for foreign interference as states seek to exploit political and social dysfunction in the United States (Tomz and Weeks 2020).

Extensions of this work may also replicate this experiment at different political moments to probe whether or not the reputational consequences of polarization for the United States are confined to the Trump era. Under President Joe Biden, who has reiterated America's commitment to multilateralism in foreign affairs, US withdrawal from international commitments is likely less concerning globally. It is not immediately clear, however, whether and how these changes would impact the experimental results. On the one hand, foreign publics may view partisan politics in the US as having different—or perhaps dampened—effects on American foreign policy in the Biden era. This means that a survey fielded to the UK public in 2022 would have smaller treatment effects than a survey fielded in 2018. On the other hand, survey respondents in 2022 may be less subject to pre-treatment bias, as partisan politics in the United States may be less salient than in 2018. This means that priming polarization in 2022 could actually have a larger negative impact on public attitudes. Similarly, it is possible that the British public could display lower levels of baseline pessimism about American foreign policy in the Biden era relative to the Trump era. In this case, polarization primes could have a stronger negative effect on attitudes towards the US-UK relationship were the survey replicated under the Biden administration. These conflicting possibilities highlight the importance of replicating and extending this study before reaching broader conclusions.

An additional extension to this experiment would be to see if the results presented in this paper hold among samples of political officials. Without direct survey evidence, it remains unclear whether policymakers would be more or less likely than the public to be alarmed by growing polarization in the United States. One possibility is that elites are more attuned to long-term repercussions of affective polarization relative to the public. While the affective treatment in this survey experiment produced null results within a sample of UK adults, political officials may be more apt to recognize the second-order consequences of affective polarization and negative partisanship.



Finally, future research could explore the extent to which any growing alarm among the public or policymakers in allied states translates not only to attitudes, but also to policy responses. After observing American domestic polarization, some alliance partners may be more likely to use hedging strategies to limit their reliance on the United States. Investigating whether such policies are already being pursued would be an interesting behavioral extension of this analysis of public opinion.

Conclusion

This paper investigates how partisan polarization affects foreign perceptions of the United States using a survey experiment fielded to respondents living in the United Kingdom. A great deal of contemporary commentary about polarization and American foreign policy highlights concerns that the United States may renege on existing agreements or be unable to maintain its security commitments. This concern is driven by the perception that support for liberal internationalist principles has declined as political parties in the United States move further to the extremes.

However, the results from this survey experiment show that perceptions of polarization did not seem to substantially affect respondents' assessment of US ability to maintain existing security commitments. Instead, priming polarization has larger effects on respondents' long term evaluations of the US-UK bilateral relationship. Heightened awareness of disagreements between the Republican and Democratic Party in the United States led to more negative evaluations of America's reliability in the future, trustworthiness as an ally, and role as a global leader.

The experiment also evaluated the reputational effects of two different forms of partisan polarization: polarization based on divergent policy preferences (preference polarization) and polarization based on social identity and tribalism (affective polarization). While affective polarization and preference polarization are both occurring in American politics, they potentially have different domestic and international implications. The experimental findings show that respondents in the United Kingdom view increasing preference divergence between the two major parties in the United States as more concerning for international politics than partisan tribalism.

There are many natural extensions to this survey experiment that investigate the reputational consequences of polarization for the United States. Future work may explore whether the findings hold among political officials or in other contexts beyond close allies like the United Kingdom. For example, are the reputational effects of partisan polarization in the United States more or less severe within allied states that have a less stable bilateral relationship with the US? And how, if at all, do American adversaries shift their foreign policy objectives in response to growing partisan polarization in the United States? These and similar questions emphasize how exploring both the short-term and long-term consequences of partisan polarization sheds light on broader patterns of international cooperation and conflict.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00382-z>.



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