

How Does American Domestic Politics Influence Its Foreign Policy? - Economic Policy, Aid and the Transatlantic Relations

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Abstract

U.S. foreign policy undoubtedly has a significant impact on the global political landscape. In recent years, with the increasingly polarized domestic political environment of America, the foreign policy of the U.S. government, especially within the areas of economic policy, aid, and transatlantic relation, has undergone major changes due to the influence of its domestic elections. This paper will use a case study approach to illustrate how U.S. domestic politics affects its foreign policy and global politics. Three major phenomena will be examined: the shift of Republican Party's economic policy from non-intervention to active intervention after the Donald Trump took office, how the relationship between Congressional members' vote preference and the will of their voters influence foreign aid, and the impact, brought by domestic voters' job demands, on the transatlantic relations.

Keywords

American Politics; Political Polarization; Diplomacy; Transatlantic Relations.

1. Introduction

As the world's only superpower, the United States' policies in various fields have enormous implications at home and abroad. Given the United States' unique democratic system and its constantly fluctuating domestic electoral dynamics, it is natural to consider the connection between its domestic politics and its policy directions. Does U.S. domestic politics significantly and persistently influence U.S. foreign policy? How do the mechanisms of such influence work? What are the consequences of corresponding changes? This paper will be divided into three sections to answer these questions through the Republican Party's shift in economic attitudes, the voting decision of U.S. members of Congress for foreign aid due to their concern for the preference of their constituents, and the impact of U.S. domestic nationalism on the transatlantic relations.

2. Transformation of the Republican Party's Economic Policy

Republicans once firmly believed that free markets and individual achievement were the founding stones of economic prosperity. To this end, they advocated liberal economics, fiscal conservatism, and the elimination of government welfare programs for private sector nonprofits, and encouraged personal responsibility.

Yet according to a survey data from the Pew Research Center, only 39% of Republican voters thought free trade was bad for America in January, 2016, one month before Trump kicked off his campaign [1]. However, in 2016, 62% of the Republican voters believed that free trade was bad for the United States. This finding could reflect the fact that Trump's political views have partially changed the economic attitudes of Republican voters.

Since Trump took office, he has implemented a series of economic policies that are starkly different from traditional Republican policies, including tariffs on China, due to the employment

demands of blue-collar and working-class voters behind him. Considering Trump's extreme popularity among Republican voters, including a large number of blue-collar workers, many Republicans who traditionally supported liberal economic policies began to change their original economic attitudes to accommodate Trump. Traditional Republicans such as Stephen Moore, Larry Kudlow and Mike Pence gained strong support in the party primaries and midterm elections because of their support for Trump's tariff policies. In contrast, a large number of traditional Republicans who opposed Trump were defeated in the election because of Trump's retaliating campaign [2].

Thus, while some congressional and local Republicans initially tried to preserve the traditional liberal economic policy, Trump and his supporters eventually changed that economic policy tradition in part by putting pressure on their opponents in the party primary election, making tariff policy part of the U.S. foreign policy and Republican's economic agenda.

3. Foreign Aid

Foreign aid policy is an essential part of U.S. foreign policy, and foreign aid needs to be approved by the United States Congress. This means that members of the Congress have a significant influence on this policy. One of the greatest desires of many U.S. members of Congress is for their actions to be approved by their constituents and thus get re-elected. A 2010 paper written by Helen V. Milner and Dustin H. Tingley found that in a competitive political environment, unorganized voter preferences can influence lawmakers' votes by causing them to worry that ignoring these preferences will let them perform unfavorably in re-election [3].

Hence, voter preferences can effectively influence U.S. foreign aid policy by affecting their members of Congress. The current chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Robert Menendez (D-NJ), has repeatedly expressed support for U.S. aid policy and proposed to optimize and reform the related system [4]. The state of New Jersey, which Menendez represents, is considered a Democratic stronghold because it has voted for Democrats in presidential elections since 1992. Thus, the support of New Jersey voters for the Democratic Party's traditionally interventionist aid policy has actually allowed Menendez to utilize his committee position to advance congressional foreign aid efforts.

In contrast, Idaho, represented by former Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman James Risch (R), is arguably one of the Republican bastions, with Republicans controlling all constitutional offices in the state and maintaining absolute majorities in the state House and state Senate. Accordingly, it is also understandable that Risch endorsed Trump administration's cancellation or postponement of aid programs for maternal and child health, poverty, food insecurity, and other ills in countries such as Laos, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Guatemala [5].

In a nutshell, since voters can influence members of Congress' attitudes toward U.S. foreign aid policy through their preferences, the critical or supportive attitudes toward foreign aid policy exhibited by the two chairmen of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, resulted from the preferences and political demographics of their constituents, are a good illustration of the influence of domestic politics on U.S. aid policy.

4. Transatlantic Relations

The relationship between the United States and its European allies is also known as the Transatlantic Relations. This relationship was one of the foundations of U.S. foreign policy during both World War II and the Cold War. After the Cold War, with the elimination of common threats, the U.S. and Europe retained NATO, however, the military partnership gradually

weakened. The focus of the relationship shifted to the economic side as globalization developed and remained consistently stable in the early 21st century.

However, after taking office, the Trump administration, guided by its "America First" policy, imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum from Europe in March 2018. This then led the EU to file a complaint against the United States at the WTO and impose tariffs on 180 U.S. products worth a total of more than \$3 billion. These tariffs were not removed until after Biden took office in 2021.

As such, the Trump administration's tariff actions have in fact damaged the transatlantic partnership, at least in the economic sphere. The proposed tariffs are directly linked to Trump's protectionist policies and his voter preferences as previously stated. By imposing tariffs, Trump seeks to protect and promote the recovery of the U.S. steel industry, thereby bringing back to the American jobs lost overseas due to outsourcing and meeting the employment needs of blue-collar Americans. The steel industry in the American central industrial land has actually partially been revitalized, which improved Trump's approval rating among the related groups [6]. For instance, in Granite City, Illinois, the second-largest U.S. steel manufacturer restarted its local workshop and recalled 500 employees who were laid off in 2015 [7], less than a week after the Trump administration's tariffs were imposed. Accordingly, Trump's approval ratings were improved in the region, which reinforced such politics-economics symbiosis [8].

To summarize, the working class Americans conveyed their dissatisfaction with job loss overseas and their desire to get their jobs back to the administration through the presidential election, and the latter influenced the transatlantic relations through tariffs in order to satisfying its supporters' demands, which illustrates the influence of U.S. domestic politics on the transatlantic relations.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes how the attitudes of domestic voters in the United States are transmitted through the U.S. political election mechanism to policymaking institutions, which in turn influence U.S. economic policy, aid policy, and the transatlantic relation by affecting policymakers. The purpose of this paper is based on the fact that previous studies have tended to make predictions about the U.S. government's foreign policy trends based on the decision-making tradition of certain politicians and political parties, while ignoring the important influence of the domestic political situation and voter attitudes in the United States on government decisions. This influence can even lead to a fundamental shift in the decision-making practices of the government and political parties in some instances. Therefore, this paper hopes that future research will focus on the important role of U.S. domestic politics and voter groups in policy analysis and international relation prediction. At the same time, this paper also suffered from the problem of brevity due to space limitations, and it is hoped that future articles will examine the various aspects covered in this paper in greater depth.

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