**Introduction**

We completed this article in September 2021, just as the Taliban defeated the American-supported government of Afghanistan, and the United States worked to transport all of its citizens out of the country along with the people of Afghanistan who worked for and with its troops, contractors, and officials. On the liberal internationalism front, this is a set-back for the United States. Not only was an ostensibly aspiring democratic U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan defeated, but the withdrawal from the country was arguably undertaken without full consultation with the United States’ allies who had sent troops and aid in this American-led effort. What, then, can we now say about the future of liberal internationalism (LI)?

Here we follow up where one of us left off in a previous article examining this topic when Donald Trump was elected president. It asked whether the “partisan conflict at the level of political leadership and the mass public [had] undermined the pursuit of liberal internationalism in American foreign policy—a pursuit that has emphasized multilateral economic and security relations and the judicious use of military force?” Shapiro found that even with the increase in partisan conflict that had occurred as of the end of 2016:

“...some of the data still show continued majority support for international institutions and the use of diplomacy—somewhat increasingly in some cases. In this debate public opinion has become increasingly important. While the partisan divergences that have occurred in public opinion may have initially been driven largely by elite leadership—in particular by the Republican leadership affecting its partisan supporters—this opinion may now significantly constrain what leaders can do in foreign policymaking.”
These data included new issues that became highly relevant. What emerged was a mixed picture since forces were at work with the election of Trump that pushed against LI. While there remained underlying public support regarding liberal internationalism, there were tensions tied to partisan conflict and Trump’s form of saber-rattling that resonated with Republicans and especially Trump’s supporters. This could constrain the effects of those who wanted to pursue LI, and made possible the Trump administration’s moves in a direction opposed to the liberal internationalism of President Barack Obama.

Specifically, Trump, during the 2020 presidential campaign or later in office, opposed the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris climate agreement, the United States’ participation in the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Iran nuclear agreement; and thus as President withdrew the United States from these. He also used more militant anti-immigration policy rhetoric and actions – especially his proposal to ‘build the wall’ on the U.S./Mexican border. Trump and members of his administration diminished the State Department and its expertise. Through it all, however, it remained an open question as to how LI would fare in the mind of the public at large and how this might vary based upon partisanship. The answer to this awaited new public opinion survey data. We examine these new data and other developments here, as they bear on the status of liberal internationalism among the American public at the end of Trump’s presidency.

How We Got Here and What Happened during the Trump Years

The political history of these developments is a striking one and we can only summarize it very briefly. Partisan political polarization of public opinion in the United States has been on the rise for more than twenty years, after first becoming apparent in the 1990s, and then increasing. The political forces leading to this involved earlier divisive elite-level conflict that crystallized by the 1970s, followed by the penetration of this conflict to the level of public opinion. In particular, it involved an internal realigning of divisions within the Democratic and Republican parties along liberal/conservative ideological lines that went beyond the existing party differences on New Deal-type social welfare, “big government,” and regulatory issues.

This realigning emerged for racial civil rights and civil liberties in the 1960s, and it proceeded to expand to a wide range of issues, from abortion and law and order, to environmental protection, gay rights, and almost all other major domestic policy matters. National security and certain foreign policy issues, surprisingly, came to be added to the mix; partisan politics no longer stopped at the water’s edge. Further, Americans’ increasingly visibly aligned their social identities with their partisan identities, as political divisions on issues became sharper and partisan animosity deepened. What has added to the emotional heat is that during this time both major parties became increasingly competitive for control of both the House and the Senate, thereby making either unified Republican or Democratic government more likely than before. With unified party government, elections mattered more than before – they became more likely to have significant policy and partisan political consequences, as changes in party-controlled government could lead more directly than in the past to changes in government actions.

As to the voters’ identities, the current mass base of the Democratic Party is now largely made up of non-Whites, non-Christians (including the non-religious), and self-identified liberal urbanites, while the Republican Party is generally characterized as White, Christian, self-identified conservatives who...
live in small towns and rural areas. These demographic differences are associated with the “partisan sorting” described above involving the increased association of partisanship and policy issue opinions among the public, which was preceded earlier by the same transformation among their partisan political leaders whom they elected into office. Individuals who are less well sorted and might be considered moderate are, of course, important as both leaders and voters, but it is the more ideological partisans who most visibly dominate elite and mass-level politics. The disappearance of cross-cutting identities is related to the ideological conflict among party elites and the partisan divergence in policy preferences among the general public.

Today, more than ever, partisan conflict and highly emotional identity politics can lead to stalemate, or “gridlock,” in government and also, as we have strikingly seen, to political violence. Partisan brinkmanship has undermined the ability of the government to respond to social needs and national emergencies, as the management of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed. The emergence of diametrically opposed worldviews, leading to perceptual biases in understanding real world conditions and realities has sown confusion over what is fact and what is fiction. The rhetoric and behavior of Trump exacerbated these developments beyond the effects of partisanship, and has shown that individual leaders can matter more than party leaders in moving public opinion.

Trump was impeached for a second time for his alleged connection to violent protests and the rise of right-wing domestic terrorism, culminating in the assault on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, in an attempt to overturn the presidential electoral vote results. It is therefore not surprising (Figures 1 and 2; all Figures are included in the Appendix) that partisan differences in presidential approval that were at an all-time high during the Obama presidency, an average on the order of 70 percentage points or greater, rose to more than 80 percentage points for Trump. Trump took this aspect of partisan conflict to a new level that has remained stable during President Joe Biden’s his first year in office.

The data showing increases in partisan differences in all manner of policy opinions and related attitudes and perceptions among the public and leaders are stunning. Domestic policies are the primary battleground of partisan conflict, which is captured well in Figures 3-5. Americans have increasingly grown apart on most salient issues, including government regulation of business, government efficiency and spending, the welfare system, the legitimacy of free markets, racial attitudes, and environmental protection. Partisan conflict is driven by polarization at the elite rather than general public level (Figures 6-8), and political divisions now go beyond the water’s edge and include stances toward national security and foreign affairs (Figure 9).

Although this transformation dates to before the twenty-first century, the defining moment for the politicization of foreign policy was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Combined with its neoconservative approach to foreign policy, the George W. Bush administration’s Republican conservatism on domestic policies increased the salience of foreign affairs and divided the American public. As partisan conflict has been expanding from domestic politics to foreign affairs, the study of polarization has attempted to identify its origins, document its dynamics and contemporary changes, and anticipate its consequences.

So where did public opinion stand toward LI by the end of the Trump administration and the beginning of the post-Trump period? Partisan conflict in public opinion over foreign policies and
issues pertaining to liberal internationalism continued to increase during Trump’s administration. However, there are policy areas for which the divides between Democrats and Republicans have remained the same or have been closing. The further partisan divisions occurred due to specific aspects of Trump’s presidential and Republican Party leadership. Older divides over the Middle East and North Korea remained or perhaps became less pronounced, but new threats, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict with China, and climate change, tore the American public further apart. Overall, liberal internationalism survived with the defeat of Trump by Biden, but its future is uncertain as partisan conflict concerning the role of the United States in the international arena has deepened, especially as the partisan divide in presidential support has reached an all-time high and the stability of the U.S. foreign policy strategy has been challenged. The August 2021 fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban raised questions about the United States in its pursuit of liberal internationalism.

Partisan Conflict over Liberal Internationalism since 2016

The Trump administration represented perhaps the hardest test yet for the liberal international order in the twenty-first century – a conjecture that Shapiro shared with Joshua Busby and Jonathan Monten in their contribution to the 2018 volume. The election of Trump as the 45th U.S. president was met with disbelief and despondency among publics around the world. This was especially pronounced among key American allies and partners, who increased their confidence in the U.S. only after Biden’s victory in 2020. After Obama, who was a vocal advocate for liberal internationalism, Trump was unable or unwilling to take up the role of the leader of the free world that was soon claimed by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Despite the increasing gridlock in Congress, Trump was able to push through a plethora of policies that aimed at unraveling (albeit not always successfully) many of the Obama-era foreign policy landmarks. Trump’s “America First” vision of foreign policy resonated well with a small yet not negligible group that represented approximately 9% of the American public. Having its ideological roots in GOP’s isolationist posture of the 1930s, this group of populist neo-isolationists desired a foreign policy that was mostly non-interventionist but demanded a stronger U.S. defense. President Trump wanted the U.S. to focus on its own priorities rather than the problems of other countries and to withdraw from foreign entanglements while increasing the defense budget and reinforcing military superiority to protect U.S. interests.

Trump’s “America First” vision manifested itself into foreign policies that aimed to disengage the U.S. from global politics and shook long-standing alliances. On the one hand, the Trump administration withdrew from or reversed many important agreements that regulated international cooperation. In just four years, Trump withdrew from numerous international agreements he deemed as “job-killing deals,” such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017, the United States – Korea Free Trade Agreement in the same year, the North American Free Trade Agreement (which was subsequently replaced by the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement in 2018), and the Paris Agreement to combat climate change in 2017. Moreover, he threatened to leave the U.N. Human Rights Council and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) insisting on the need for all NATO members to “finally contribute their fair share” to the alliance. Trump also took a firm stance against China by entering into a long and costly trade war and later blaming Chinese authorities for the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, Trump suspended funding to the WHO over its coronavirus response and its
alleged failure to attribute responsibility to China for not containing the coronavirus outbreak and letting it spread to other countries to become a pandemic.

On the other hand, Trump had a mixed and somewhat unpredictable approach to solving international conflicts. In 2017, he aggressively confronted the administration of North Korea and Vice President Mike Pence even paid a visit to the Korean demilitarized zone. During the first years of his presidency, he adopted a similar hard line in the Middle East. In retaliation for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s atrocities against civilians, Trump authorized a cruise missile strike on Syrian soil and accelerated the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State, which led to the territorial collapse of it in Syria. In a controversial move, he officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and announced the relocation the U.S. embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem. Trump also had a confrontational approach to Iran which manifested itself into the suspension of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, and the unilateral assassination of Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian major general, in January 2020.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration took many steps in foreign policy that were aligned with its neo-isolationist agenda. In the Middle East, he withdrew a significant number of U.S. forces in Syria and Afghanistan and pushed through the Abraham Accords that established direct diplomatic and economic relations between Israel and Arab/African countries (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco) for the first time in 25 years. Further, he tried to deescalate tensions with North Korea by repeatedly meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and even becoming the first U.S. president to set foot in North Korea. Throughout his presidency Trump had a conciliatory approach to Russian President Vladimir Putin, which smoothed out the differences between the two countries but also raised questions of U.S. national security and vulnerability to international pressure.

Just as Trump’s foreign policy represented the negation of Obama’s international vision, Biden’s victory signaled the return of the U.S. to the frontline of liberal internationalism. Biden has been trying to build back a liberal democratic alliance that could effectively address the threat of the rising global autocracy. Indeed, the emerging Biden Doctrine argues that the defining challenge of this century is whether democracies will prevail over autocratic regimes. This doctrine offers the political framework to link together Biden’s foreign-policy agenda that emphasizes the needs of the U.S. middle class, cooperation among democracies, the defense of human rights, trade protectionism, and the improvement of U.S. competitiveness through investment in public infrastructure and research and development. However, these initiatives require broader partisan consensus than what currently exists. The challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of autocratic regimes, climate change, and globalization represent are substantial but their effects will become even more devastating unless partisan conflict subsides significantly. How do Democrats and Republicans position themselves on foreign policy today, in the post-Trump and early Biden era?

The State of Partisan Conflict and Liberal Internationalism

In our analysis, we find mixed results about the state of liberal internationalism and the partisan conflict over it. In principle, Americans express support for the basic tenets of liberal internationalism but there is substantial partisan disagreement over the role of the U.S. in world affairs and defense spending. A large majority of Americans understand the need to coordinate
domestic and foreign policy to secure the major role that the United States play in international arena (Figure 10 shows that there is still substantial support for the U.S. playing a leading or major role in solving international problems) but they do not want the U.S. to meddle with other countries or foreign powers to meddle with domestic affairs (Figure 11).

Since 2016 there has been a continuing, though not substantial, increase in partisan divergence in public opinion around foreign policy issues, but in certain policy areas these differences have remained the same or even decreased. Partisan divisions on North Korea, the Middle East, immigration, and climate change have in many cases remained similar during the Trump presidency. In contrast, Democrats and Republicans have grown increasingly apart on the COVID-19 pandemic, China, Russia, international organizations, and free trade. This political polarization is largely symmetric with Republicans and Democrats similarly moving in opposite directions; the few asymmetries that have occurred are driven mostly by Democrats changing opinions and Republicans remaining essentially unchanged. To look further at these dynamics, we organize our discussion by policy areas and examine changes over time where we can.

**Foreign Policy and International Organizations.**

Overall, the big partisan split on whether the U.S. should play a major role in the international arena and coordinate and collaborate with international organizations to solve global issues continues. In fact, 83% of Democrats and only a third of Republicans thought that diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace (Figure 9). Although large majorities of Democrats and Republicans (85% and 60% respectively) wanted to either maintain the U.S. commitment to NATO or increase it, the 25-point partisan gap is the widest it has been since 1974 (Figure 12). Similarly, Democrats were consistently more favorable toward the United Nations, the WHO, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) than Republicans with partisan differences ranging between 23 and 39 percentage points in 2020 (Figure 13).

These large gaps may be attributed to the different priorities and views that Democrats and Republicans express concerning the role of the U.S. in global affairs. A majority of Republicans (80%) but only 35% of Democrats believed that the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, a difference which has been more than doubled since 2012 (Figure 14). Likewise, almost two-thirds of Republicans agreed that the U.S. was the world’s leading economic power in July 2020 – 20 percentage points above Democratic support (Figure 15). These evaluations are reflected in the divergence of opinions about whether the U.S. is more respected by other countries these days compared with the past (Figure 16). Partisanship has strongly affected Americans’ perceptions here – as occurred in different aspects of American domestic and foreign politics in the past, but more so in recent years.

Significant partisan divides exist on the priorities the U.S. should have in its foreign policy as well as its effectiveness in successfully coping with global threats. Figure 17 shows that Democrats placed a higher premium on combating global climate change (48%), stopping Russian interference in U.S. government (41%) and politics, and improving relationships with U.S. allies (40%), while Republicans were more concerned about reducing illegal immigration (64%), dealing with terrorist threats (53%), and protecting jobs for American workers (40%). During the last months of Trump’s presidency, Republicans expressed much higher levels of confidence in the capacity of the American government
to effectively deal with all of these threats much higher than did Democrats (Figure 18). Importantly, Democrats seemed to favor more conciliatory foreign policy tools than Republicans, who tended to agree that aggressive and punitive measures against adversaries are more effective than signing international agreements or maintaining existing alliances (Figure 19).

Globalization and Free Trade.

During the past 15 years, Americans have grown increasingly apart in their attitudes toward globalization and free trade. In 2020, three-quarters of Democrats stated that globalization, especially the increasing connections of the American economy with others around the world, was mostly good for the U.S. In contrast, only 55% of Republicans agreed with that statement, the lowest percentage in a decade (Figure 20). This divergence is particularly striking as two-thirds of both partisan publics admitted that the foreign policy decisions made by the American government affected their lives and those of their families (Figure 21). Similarly, a slim majority of the public across both parties understood that America was stronger when it took a leading role in the world to protect its national interests and advance common goals with other countries (Figures 22-23).

Despite the fact that Trump was elected as a staunch critic of free trade agreements, which he often described as the cause of massive job losses in the U.S., his presidency surprisingly transformed how the American public perceived free trade in a positive way. Between 2016 and 2020, Democrats and Republicans increased their support for the general idea of free trade by 20 and 28 percentage points respectively, reaching a 30-year high of almost 80%. This increase was particularly pronounced among Republicans, which suggests they have come to see prospects for free trade differently in the hands of the more protectionist Trump administration. In a 2021 Gallup poll, Republicans' skepticism about free trade being an opportunity for the American economy bounced back to a 12-year low at 44% (Figure 24).

Republicans have been supportive of certain protectionist measures even when they took up a positive stance toward free trade. In 2018 and 2019, they were five times more likely than Democrats to think that increasing the tariffs between the U.S. and its trading partners was a good thing for the U.S. (Figure 25). Accordingly, Republicans expressed strong support (60%) for producing critical goods in the U.S. and not buying or selling critical goods overseas, ensuring the national supply of goods, even if this meant higher prices (Figure 26). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 47% of Republicans but only a quarter of Democrats agreed that individual countries should themselves make all the goods they need in order to ensure that a crisis or disaster in one place would not hurt the supply of goods around the world (Figure 27).

Russia.

The Trump presidency reshaped how the American public viewed Russia and its relation to the United States. In a 2019 Pew Research survey, nearly 70% of the general public thought of Russia as an adversary or a serious problem, a rise of four percentage points since 2016. This large majority masked important partisan divergence, with 83% of Democrats versus 61% of Republicans thinking Russia in negative terms (Figure 28). Until Trump’s election both Democrats and Republicans were similarly concerned about Russia representing a threat to the U.S. but during Trump’s presidency the partisan gap grew wider and reached a 15-year high, with 65% of Democrats and only 35% of
Republicans perceiving Russia as a threat (Figure 29). Gallup reported a comparable 30-point gap in 2019 (Figure 30). Large partisan gaps of 10 to 30 percentage points also exist in regard to favoring trade and strengthening ties with Russia (Figures 31-32). Although Russia’s favorability rating steadily decreased among Democrats and Republicans (Figure 33), a third of the latter (vs. 10% of the former) had confidence in Putin (Figure 34) as Trump downplayed Russia’s efforts to interfere with American elections. These differences in evaluations may be related to the fact that Democrats were roughly twice as likely as Republicans to be concerned about Russia or other foreign countries interfering with the 2020 presidential election (Figures 35-36).

**China.**

An increasing share of Americans described China in negative terms. In January 2020, roughly 40% of Democrats and Republicans saw China as a critical threat to the vital interest of the U.S. However, in July 2020, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this share increased by 9 and 26 percentage points respectively, hitting a 20-year high (Figure 37). A solid majority of supporters of both parties perceived China as a rival of the U.S. (Figure 38), thought that China should be less involved in addressing the world’s problems (Figure 39), and believed that limiting its power and influence should be given top priority as a long-range foreign policy goal (Figure 40). Republicans remained more unfavorable toward China (83%), but Democrats were also increasingly negative (Figure 41).

Overall, all partisans became reluctant to undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China in dealing with its rising power (Figure 42). Republican elites were more likely than their Democratic counterparts to identify China as a critical threat (Figure 43) and twice as likely to have agreed that the U.S. should actively work to limit China’s power (Figure 44). Republicans were much more likely to support hardline policies on economic issues while majorities of all partisans favored negotiating arms control agreements, placing sanctions on the Chinese officials who were responsible for human rights abuses, working with China to limit climate change, and prohibiting U.S. companies from selling sensitive high-tech products to China and Chinese technology companies from building communication networks in the U.S. (Figure 45). Further, large majorities of Republicans, but not Democrats, favored increasing tariffs on products imported from China, reducing trade between the United States and China, even if that led to greater costs for American consumers, restricting the exchange of scientific research between the U.S. and China, and limiting the number of Chinese students studying in the United States (Figure 46).

**Use of Military Force and U.S. Bases Abroad.**

Republicans and Democrats shared similar perceptions concerning the potential for war. Almost half of all partisans expected the U.S. to fight in another world war within the next ten years (Figure 47). Nevertheless, Democrats and Republicans disagreed on how much to spend for national defense. Indeed, there was a 24-percentage point gap in opinions about national spending on national defense with 45% of Republicans but only 21% of Democrats saying that the U.S. spends too little on the military, armaments, and defense (Figure 48). Interestingly, the establishment of the U.S. Space Force in 2018 coincided with a record low of roughly 23% of all partisans stating that the U.S. spent too little on space exploration (Figure 49).
Overall, Americans' support for intervention abroad depended on which country was involved. Solid majorities of Democrats and Republicans supported the use of troops if a U.S. ally were invaded, if another country seized territory of a U.S. ally, or if North Korea invaded South Korea or Japan (Figures 50-51). However, partisans were more skeptical about a possible intervention if China invaded Taiwan or if China initiated a military conflict with Japan over disputed islands (Figures 50-51). In contrast to Democratic elites who partially shared the skepticism of the general public, 85-89% of Republican elites\(^{[23]}\) reported that the U.S. should send troops to support Japan or Taiwan in case China threatened them (Figure 52-53).

Democrats and Republicans were most notably divided regarding military intervention and bases in the Middle East. Seven out of ten Republicans favored the use of U.S. troops if Israel were invaded by a neighbor, while only 46% of Democrats agreed with such a course of action (Figure 50). Large differences could also be observed in opinions about military bases in Iraq and Kuwait. Roughly 70% of Republicans but only half of Democrats supported the U.S. having long-term bases in both countries (Figure 54). Finally, Republicans were 20-percentage points more likely than Democrats (a 10-year high of 61%) to favor long-term military bases in Afghanistan (Figure 55).

**Allies and Foreign Aid.**

Relations with U.S. allies and foreign assistance continued to be divisive issues. Since 2016, there has been a decline of 12 percentage points among Democrats (37%) who believed that the U.S. spent too much money on foreign aid and assistance to other countries; the 28-percentage point partisan gap is the widest of the last 50 years (Figure 56). In 2019, 48% of Republicans (vs. 28% of Democrats) said that allies in Europe should increase their spending on national defense. Notwithstanding, Republicans’ support has waned by about 15 percentage points since 2017 (Figure 57). Majorities on both sides favored greater cooperation with Germany, though Democrats by 12 points more than Republicans: three-quarters of Democrats and 63% of Republicans expressed positive attitudes toward Germany (Figure 58). Partisans on both sides ranked Germany as the fifth most important foreign policy partner (Figure 59). Favoring greater economic cooperation with Germany did not necessarily mean that Americans also agreed to keep the U.S. military presence in Germany at current levels. In response to Trump’s initiative to reduce the U.S. military presence in Germany from 34,500 to 25,000 U.S. troops in 2020, 51% of Republicans, versus 29% of Democrats, approved this move (Figure 60).

South Korea and Japan have long been the principal allies of the U.S. in Asia. In 2020, almost 80% of partisans on both sides (up from 66% in 2018) agreed that it was important for the U.S. to build strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan, even if this might challenge U.S. relations with China (Figure 61). In addition, large majorities of partisans (80-90%) indicated that good relations with Japan were important for the economy and national security of the U.S. (Figure 62) and expressed positive views about Japan (Figure 63). Finally, 65% of Democrats and 72% of Republicans favored the U.S. having long-term military bases in Japan (Figure 64).

**Iran.**

The Trump presidency was a major test for the relations of the U.S. with Iran. Overwhelming majorities of Democrats (70%) and Republicans (82%) were consistently critical of Iran (Figure 65).
In 2019, almost 57% of partisans on both sides (up from 51% in 2017 (Figure 66)) believed that Iran’s nuclear program was a major threat to the U.S. (Figure 67). Although 74% of Democrats supported the return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or the Iran nuclear agreement) in 2021, only 39% of Republicans (down from 53% in 2018) expressed positive views (Figure 68).

The most critical moment for the U.S.-Iran relations in recent years was the January 2020 assassination of Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian major general. Trump’s decision to proceed with the strike without any previous deliberation divided Republicans and Democrats. More specifically, Republicans and Republican-leaning independents were more confident (83%) than Democrats and Democratic leaners (14%) in what the Trump administration said on Iran (Figure 69). Moreover, 80% of Republicans approved the decision to conduct the drone strike that killed the top Iranian general and the way Trump was handling foreign policy, while only 15% and 8% of Democrats answered positively to these two items, respectively (Figure 70). Finally, 63% of Republicans thought that the strike contributed to make the country safer but three-quarters of Democrats said that this decision made the U.S. less safe (Figure 71) and increased the likelihood of a major military conflict between the U.S. and Iran (Figure 72).

Israel and Palestine.

Israel remains popular in the U.S. but Americans are warming to Palestinians. In particular, 58% of Americans expressed their sympathy with the Israelis in a 2021 Gallup poll, while a quarter of the general public (up from 19% in 2017) was favorable to the Palestinians (Figure 73) and 52% supported the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Figure 74).

However, attitudes toward Israelis and Palestinians depend heavily on partisanship, with Democrats being more supportive of the Palestinian cause and Republicans rooting for Israel (Figure 75). In 2018, the partisan divide in Middle East sympathies was wider than at any point in the last forty years (Figure 76). In 2020, more than 60% of Democrats but only a third of Republicans favored the establishment of an independent Palestinian state (Figure 77). A year later, 53% of Democrats (up from 43% in 2018 and no more than 38% in the decade before that) stated that the U.S. should put more pressure to the Israelis in order to resolve the Mideast conflict. Meanwhile, only 17% of Republicans agreed with the U.S. applying more pressure on the Israelis (Figure 78).

Afghanistan and Iraq.

Americans remained divided about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2018, two-thirds of Republicans thought that the U.S. made the right decision in 2001 to use military force in Afghanistan while less than a third of Democrats shared this opinion. This gap was the widest it has been since 2006 (Figure 79). A comparable divide could be observed in 2021, too (Figure 80). Similar disagreement exists about how successful the war in Afghanistan was. Roughly half of Republicans (up from 29% in 2015) evaluated the outcome of the war in a positive manner whereas 28% (down from 42% in 2015) of Democrats thought that the U.S. had mostly succeeded in achieving its goals in Afghanistan (Figure 81). Further, almost 50% of Republicans (vs. 27% of Democrats) agreed that sending troops to Afghanistan was the correct choice and that the war was worth fighting (Figures 82-83). In contrast, about three-quarters of Democrats regretted the invasion in Afghanistan.
The recent military evacuation of Afghanistan brought America’s longest war to an end and affected public opinion on the war. In a Pew Research Center survey conducted between August 23 and 29, 2021, Democrats (33%) were less likely than Republicans (61%) to view Taliban control of Afghanistan as a major threat to the security of the United States (Figures 84). In fact, Democrats evaluated domestic terrorism as a more critical threat than international terrorism – an opinion that is in stark contrast with how Republicans perceive the relative risk (Figure 85) Republicans and Democrats also disagreed on whether the U.S. decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan was the right one: almost two-thirds of Republicans disagreed with this initiative while 70% of Democrats favored the end of the war (Figures 86). Further, the Democratic public was split on whether the United States’ initial decision to use military force in 2001 was right or wrong whereas 70% of Republicans supported this decision (Figures 86). Nevertheless, most partisans are united in thinking the U.S. mostly failed in achieving its goals in Afghanistan and that the Biden administration did not handle the situation in Afghanistan in a positive way (Figures 86-87).

Public opinion on Iraq exhibited similar dynamics. In 2018, 61% of Republicans (up from 52% in 2014) but only 27% of Democrats reported that the U.S. made the right decision in engaging in invading Iraq (Figure 88). Moreover, 48% of Republicans (up from 38% in 2014) and just 30% of Democrats (down from 36% in 2014) answered that the war in Iraq was mostly successful (Figure 89). Overall, considering the costs and benefits of the Iraq war, 46% of Republicans and almost 80% of Democrats suggested that it had not been worth fighting it (Figure 83). Finally, veterans were more negative than the general public about whether the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were worth fighting. Less than half of Republican veterans thought that the wars were worth it while only 26% and 15% of Democratic veterans agreed that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had been beneficial, respectively (Figure 90).

North Korea.

Contrary to previous areas, North Korea remained a relatively uncontroversial foreign policy issue. Indeed, partisans on both sides expressed similar attitudes toward North Korea. A 2018 Gallup poll revealed that almost half of Democrats have perceived North Korea as an enemy since 2006. In contrast, the Trump presidency reshaped how Republican viewed North Korea: 42% perceived North Korea as an enemy in 2018, down from 64% in 2013 (Figure 91). About half of both Republicans and Democrats found North Korea’s nuclear program to be a major threat to the well-being of the United States (Figure 92). A similar share of Republicans said that North Korea’s leadership was not serious about addressing concerns about its nuclear program, while Democrats were even more skeptical (Figure 93).

Significant partisan differences are found in what kind of pressure the U.S. should apply on North Korea to convince it to stop building its nuclear weapons program (Figure 94). Democrats preferred less violent actions such as imposing tighter economic sanctions and conducting cyberattacks against North Korea’s nuclear production facilities, while Republicans favored more drastic measures like conducting airstrikes or sending troops to destroy nuclear production facilities. Nevertheless, 80% of Republicans (vs. 17% of Democrats) declared that the U.S. should simply accept the fact that that North Korea would produce additional nuclear weapons.

Immigration and Refugees.
Immigration remains one of the most divisive issues in contemporary American politics. Although the coronavirus outbreak in 2020 reduced public concerns about immigration, the share of Americans who thought that illegal immigration was a very big problem in the country increased from 28% to 48%, which marked a 5-year high. More specifically, 72% of Republicans (up from 43%) and 29% of Democrats (up from 15%) declared illegal immigration to be a very big national problem (Figure 95). A more macroscopic view reveals that polarization on immigration is asymmetric: since 1998 Republicans’ opinion on the issue has remained almost unchanged, while Democrats have become less concerned about the large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the U.S. after 2002 and increasingly so after 2010 (Figure 96).

A similar trend concerns the importance of controlling and reducing illegal immigration (Figure 97). Despite the fact that Democrats and Republicans differed in their attitudes toward immigration, there is evidence that common ground existed in certain policy areas. Solid majorities of partisans on both sides favored increasing staffing and resources available to patrol and police the U.S.-Mexico border and to process unaccompanied minors more quickly, reducing the number of people coming to the U.S. to seek asylum, and providing safe and sanitary conditions for asylum seekers once they arrive in the U.S (Figure 98). In contrast, wide partisan gaps existed about making it easier for asylum seekers to be granted legal status, providing more assistance to countries in places like Central America, where many asylum seekers originate, not allowing people to seek asylum in the U.S. (Figure 94), and building a wall in the U.S.-Mexico border (Figure 99).


During the first months of Joe Biden’s presidency, public opinion seems to have been more confident about the position of the U.S. in global affairs. A majority of Americans (60%) expressed confidence in Biden’s ability to handle international affairs (Figure 100). This majority is not as large as the one that Barack Obama enjoyed at the beginning of his term (74%) but it is significantly larger than that of Donald Trump (46%). Nevertheless, following a trend that dates back at least to the administration of George W. Bush, there are vast partisan differences in public trust in the president to handle foreign policy. Throughout his presidency, Democrats were skeptical of Trump’s capacity to do the right thing regarding world affairs while Republicans were clearly more confident. In the beginning of 2021, this dynamic reversed: 88% of Democrats but only 27% of Republicans expressed confidence in Biden’s handling of international affairs (Figure 101). Gaps of similar magnitude characterized Democrats’ (93%) and Republicans’ (41%) views about whether Biden’s election victory would improve how other countries perceive the U.S. (Figure 102).

Moreover, there are stark partisan divides over foreign policy priorities and in terms of public confidence in Biden’s decision-making and ability to deal effectively in different policy areas (Figure 103-104). Democrats and Republicans disagreed on the issues of improving relationships with U.S. allies, maintaining the U.S. military advantage over all other countries, limiting the power and influence of China, Iran, and Russia, reducing illegal immigration into the U.S., dealing with global climate change, and getting other countries to assume more of the costs of maintaining world order. In contrast, solid majorities favored giving top priority to protecting the jobs of American workers, taking measures to protect the U.S. from terrorist attacks, reducing the spread of infectious diseases, and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Smaller percentages of partisans on both
sides gave top priority to reducing the trade deficit with other countries, limiting the power and influence of North Korea, reducing U.S. military commitments overseas, aiding refugees who are fleeing violence around the world, reducing legal immigration into the U.S., promoting democracy in other nations, strengthening the United Nations, and promoting and defending human rights in other countries.

These dynamics of public opinion hint that the perseverance of liberal internationalism is still at stake. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose a major challenge to the current world order. Since 2018, an increasing number of Americans from both parties have agreed that reducing the spread of infectious diseases should be given top priority as a long-range foreign policy goal (Figure 105). At the same time, both Democrats and Republicans seem to have become disenchanted with the United Nations.

Perhaps the most polarizing issue relating to the COVID-19 pandemic is the role of China. Republicans thought that the U.S. should limit the power and influence of China at a much higher rate than Democrats (Figure 105). Accordingly, they expressed more negative views about China and its handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, with partisan gaps ranging between 15 and 35 percentage points (Figures 106-107). Although Democrats blamed the U.S. government for the coronavirus situation during the first months of the health crisis, Republicans were more likely to criticize the governments of other countries and the World Health Organization (Figure 108).

In response to the pandemic, 80% of Democrats wanted the U.S. to coordinate and collaborate with other countries to solve global issues while roughly 60% of Republicans preferred the U.S. to be self-sufficient as a nation so that Americans did not need to depend on others (Figure 109). Partisans on both sides overwhelmingly agreed that the U.S. should have a major role in developing the coronavirus vaccine, but only Democrats favored allowing other entities (such as the WHO, the European Union, China) contributing to this effort (Figure 110). Similar disagreement existed on who should be benefited from the vaccines: 70% of Republicans said that the U.S. should keep any vaccines it produces for Americans first, while Democrats were divided over the U.S. making any vaccine it developed immediately available to other countries (Figure 111).

Despite the challenges that the pandemic currently represents for the international community, climate change is the most important threat that humans will have to face in the near future. Since the early 2000s, Republicans have grown more skeptical about climate change. Nowadays, Democrats almost unanimously believe that the world’s temperature has probably been increasing over the past 100 years while only half of the Republicans share this belief. However, among those who believe that the global warming exists, solid majorities of Americans from both parties attribute the rise of temperature to human activity (Figure 112).

In 2020, the divide between Democrats and Republicans who thought that global warming would be at least a somewhat serious problem for the U.S. and the world and that the world’s temperature would probably go up over the next 100 years hit a 15-year record high of almost 50 points (Figures 113-115). Most worryingly, a similar gap is observed regarding preferences about the actions that the U.S. government and other countries in the world should take to fight climate change: Republicans are consistently reluctant to support a green policy agenda while Democrats are enthusiastic about it (Figures 116-117).
In addition, it is crucial to redress the widening inequalities between the losers and winners of globalization. To deal with this urging issue, Republicans seem to prefer a more protectionist approach whereas Democrats think that problems can be better solved with greater integration at the international level (Figures 118). Perhaps Republicans’ skepticism about the forces of globalization better manifests itself in the low ratings they give to international organizations (Figure 119), such as the WHO (38% vs. 88% of Democrats), the United Nations (46% vs. 86% of Democrats), and NATO (55% vs. 85% of Democrats). Finally, two-thirds of Republicans say the U.S. should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on domestic policy issues at the same time that the same share of Democrats wants the U.S. to be active in world affairs (Figure 120).

Conclusion

After the end of World War II, the U.S. largely dominated the Western hemisphere and the world in political, economic, and cultural terms. During the American Century, international liberalism was the predominant foreign policy doctrine that encouraged interventions around the globe in order to pursue liberal objectives, such as the defense of human rights and the establishment of liberal democratic regimes and free market institutions. Nevertheless, systemic deficiencies have caused the unraveling of the current world order, a process that has been further accelerated by global shocks.

Recent developments highlight the importance of shocks in determining the international politics of the United States and bear on the current state of liberal internationalism. One is the COVID-19 pandemic with its domestic and global public health and economic consequences. The other is the defeat of the United States and its allies in Afghanistan. The liberal internationalism that was able to endure the Trump administration and that could rebound through the efforts of the Biden administration has been weakened by these two developments. The COVID-19 crisis was engulfed in the continuing partisan conflict in the United States that Trump inflamed and will endure for as long as Trump remains on the political scene and beyond. The partisan repercussions of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan are readily apparent and have ramifications for the next congressional and presidential elections.

In this international context, new types of authoritarian regimes offer an alternative Hobbesian vision of the world, one that often embraces economic freedom but consistently undermines fundamental political and social rights. The rise of illiberal democracies and autocracies around the globe foreshadows the defining clash of the twenty-first century. The longer-term consequences of these shocks for the American public and liberal internationalism are open questions to be answered by future opinion survey data and other evidence.

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APPENDIX

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Notes

[1] Acknowledgments: We want to thank Diane Labrosse and Robert Jervis and for their comments and encouragement. For generous permissions to reprint public opinion data figures and tables, we are most grateful to The Pew Research Center, Gallup, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA), the NORC-General Social Survey (GSS), the NPR/PBS News Hour/Marist Poll, AP-NORC, the Center for American Progress and GBAO, and Stanford/Resources for the Future/ReconMR. At these organizations we thank Dina Smeltz, Frank Newport, Vallerie Nottage, Claudia Deane, Rene Bautiste, Tom Smith, Trevor Tompson, John Halpin, Lee Miringoff, Jon Krosnick, and Bo MacInnis. All analyses and interpretations are our own.


[18] Richard Wike et al., “Trump Approval Worldwide Remains Low Especially Among Key Allies,”


