

U.S. Political Polarization as a Driving Force Behind the Contemporary Transatlantic Divide

Academic supervisor – Новиков Дмитрий Павлович

Покатилов Иван Сергеевич

Student (bachelor)

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Факультет мировой экономики и мировой политики, Moscow, Россия
E-mail: IvanPokatilov1511@gmail.com

Many scholars emphasize a currently widening Transatlantic divide [18; 13; 1] and various factors are named for that. The most often cited one is, undoubtedly, the figure of Donald Trump and all the consequences of his “working style”, including unpredictability of actions, distrust towards multilateral institutions or vilification of political opponents. Some even said that “with Trump the “4 Ps” of American foreign policy have been replaced by the “4 Ds”: Disorder, Division, Domination, Disruption.” [4, p. 30]. Nevertheless, although less often, other causes are also listed, starting from the US “Pivot to Asia”, which, according to some views, “downgraded” Europe from the US top priorities [17, p.10], and ending with the role of NATO, bilateral trade future (ex-TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), abandoned by the first Trump administration) and environmental policies [2]. However, these explanations overlook the main cause of the diverging US-EU visions: US domestic political polarization. This paper briefly outlines historical dynamics of the US domestic political polarization, explains in what ways political polarization influences US foreign policy, perceptions of the United States around the globe, how it contributes to the US-EU divide and what the future of Transatlantic relations might be.

Generally, 5 periods of intense political polarization in the US history can be identified: (1) after independence, when it was decided whether a new state will be a confederation or federation [15]; (2) in the 1800s, when the French Quasi-War and the subsequent Alien and Sedition Acts, which granted the second US president John Adams an opportunity to intimidate political opponents, significantly polarized the public [10]; (3) years preceding to the Civil War, which still remains a peak of political polarization in the US history, when parties were unable to resolve their contradictions peacefully and had to resort to arms; (4) in the 1890s, when a transitional economy from agriculture to industry as well as a search for a new US place in world affairs exacerbated anxieties and begot one of the largest third parties in US history, namely, the Populist party, which at some point even captured the Democratic party mainstream; (5) the Great Depression, when the US government had acquired a new role in domestic affairs [8]. Thus, from a historical perspective political polarization is not a new phenomenon; though some of its features like the internet and the rise of partisan media are unprecedented.

Furthermore, one of the external conditions, which was not present during earlier waves of political polarization, is the so-called “transatlantic ‘community in values’” [16]. Although it was questioned many times [12], it still endures and politicians, both European and American alike, are calling for “transatlantic unity” [3] and “transatlantic bond” [7]. However, US domestic polarization has a crippling effect on this unity, which is harder and harder to maintain over time. It happens due to several major effects on foreign policy, which domestic political polarization in democracies has. This paper mainly considers effects of political polarization in democracies, as they are more salient and explicit there. Firstly, it erodes stable and consistent foreign policy over time, which means that when a new leader comes, the course of foreign policy can change dramatically [14]. Secondly, credibility of threats and offers which democratic

leaders make is undermined since it is possible that the new government will turn the tables completely [19]. Thirdly, reliability and durability of the committed initiatives is undercut as other countries bear in mind a possibility of a complete change of the foreign policy direction after an opposition leader takes power [6]. Fourthly, foreign policy is generally more aimed at short-run benefits to the detriment of long-run gains [5]. Considering the United States, all these ramifications worsen the image of the US around the globe and reinforce the US-EU divide, fueling all aforementioned causes (from this perspective, the figure of Donald Trump is not a reason, but a mere consequence of political polarization, which, according to a scholarly consensus, is on the rise at least since the 2000s [9; 11]).

During the remainder of Donald Trump presidency, the transatlantic relations will continue to be strained and probably worsen even more, exacerbated by the unpredictable nature of the American president. Most likely key disputes will revolve around security (including Ukrainian and Gaza crises and different approaches of the USA and EU to them) and economic issues. What happens after the end of the Trump term will depend on whether an electoral shift, which had resolved all previous domestic political polarization crises, would occur and whether both parties would be able to adjust themselves to the new preferences of the electorate.

Источники и литература

- 1) Aggestam, L. Double Trouble: Trump, Transatlantic Relations and European Strategic Autonomy / L. Aggestam, A. Hyde-Price – Text [U+202F]: direct // JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies. 2019. Vol. 57. Double Trouble. № S1. – P. 114-127.
- 2) Bilal, A. S. Emerging Contours of Transatlantic Relationship under Trump Administration / A.S. Bilal, N. Imran – Text [U+202F]: direct // Policy Perspectives. 2019. Vol. 16. № 1.
- 3) Kallas, K. Transatlantic unity, support to Ukraine and pressure on Russia is how we will end this war and prevent future Russian aggression in Europe. / K. Kallas. – 2025.
- 4) Langlois, L. Trump, Brexit and the Transatlantic Relationship: The New Paradigms of the Trump Era / L. Langlois – Text [U+202F]: direct // Revue LISA/LISA e-journal. Littératures, Histoire des Idées, Images, Sociétés du Monde Anglophone – Literature, History of Ideas, Images and Societies of the English-speaking World. 2018. Trump, Brexit and the Transatlantic Relationship. № vol. XVI-n°2.
- 5) Latham, A. How Political Polarization Is Killing Grand Strategy / A. Latham, L. Athas. – 2025.
- 6) Myrick, R. Polarization and International Politics: How Extreme Partisanship Threatens Global Stability : Princeton Studies in International History and Politics Series. Polarization and International Politics / R. Myrick ; 1st ed – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025. – 1 p.– ISBN 978-0-691-27462-1. – Text [U+202F]: direct.
- 7) Rubio, M. Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference / M. Rubio.
- 8) Brady, D. W. Polarization then and now: A historical perspective / D.W. Brady, H.C. Han // Red and blue nation? Characteristics and causes of America's polarized politics. Brookings Institution Press Washington, DC, 2006. Vol. 1. Polarization then and now. – P. 119-151.
- 9) Campbell, J. E. Polarization runs deep, even by yesterday's standards / J.E. Campbell, C.M. Cannon // Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics. Brookings Institution Press Washington, DC, 2006. Vol. 1. – P. 152-170.
- 10) Halperin, T. D. The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798: Testing the Constitution. The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 / T. D. Halperin JHU Press, 2016.

- 11) Jacobson, G. C. The triumph of polarized partisanship in 2016: Donald Trump's improbable victory / G.C. Jacobson – Text [U+202F]: direct // Political Science Quarterly. 2017. Vol. 132. The triumph of polarized partisanship in 2016. № 1. – P. 9-41.
- 12) Kagan, R. Power and weakness. Vol. 113 / R. Kagan Hoover Institution, 2002.
- 13) Kanat, K. B. Transatlantic relations in the age of Donald Trump / K.B. Kanat – Text [U+202F]: direct // Insight Turkey. 2018. Vol. 20. № 3. – P. 77-88.
- 14) Leeds, B. A. Domestic Interests, Democracy, and Foreign Policy Change / B. A. Leeds, M. Mattes ; 1 Cambridge University Press, 2022. p.– ISBN 978-1-009-03793-8. – Text [U+202F]: direct.
- 15) Morris, R. B. The Confederation Period and the American Historian / R.B. Morris – Text [U+202F]: direct // The William and Mary Quarterly: A Magazine of Early American History. 1956. – P. 140-156.
- 16) Peterson, J. Europe and America: The prospects for partnership. Europe and America / J. Peterson Routledge, 1996.
- 17) Shambaugh, D. Assessing the US “pivot” to Asia / D. Shambaugh – Text [U+202F]: direct // Strategic Studies Quarterly. 2013. Vol. 7. № 2. – P. 10-19.
- 18) Sinha, S. Tracing the Trajectory of Transatlantic Ties: Dealing with Trump 2.0 / S. Sinha – Text [U+202F]: direct // National Security. 2025. Vol. 8. Tracing the Trajectory of Transatlantic Ties. № 2. – P. 229-246.
- 19) Tomz, M. Domestic audience costs in international relations: An experimental approach / M. Tomz – Text [U+202F]: direct // International organization. 2007. Vol. 61. Domestic audience costs in international relations. № 4. – P. 821-840.