Comment

The Age of the Disaffected Voter: American Democracy and US Foreign Policy under the Second Trump Presidency

Introduction

The re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 was met with disbelief by many observers in Europe and around the world. Although polls had indicated that the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris would face an uphill battle after incumbent President Joe Biden dropped out of the race due to concerns within the Democratic Party about his electoral viability, few anticipated the scale of Trump's resurgence. Trump did not only manage to flip six of the seven critical swing states,[1] but he secured an outright majority of the popular vote – something he had failed to achieve in 2016 – even if his margin remained narrow at just 1.47 percent.

At first glance, the results demonstrate Trump's ability not only to mobilise his base but also to expand his appeal across a broader range of voter demographics.[2] Key shifts in voter preferences played a decisive role in Harris's defeat, with Trump making significant gains among Black and Latino voters, particularly men, while Harris struggled to maintain the support levels of her predecessors. The widening gender and educational divides further contributed to Harris's underperformance, as Trump improved his standing among younger and working-class voters, while Harris performed better among affluent, college-educated white voters.

While the 2024 election results suggest a broad political victory for Trump and further consolidation of his influence within the Republican Party, they

1 Nevada, Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Georgia.

2 <https://www.cfr.org/article/2024-election-numbers>, last access 17 February 2025.

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also highlight deeper fractures within American society. Although it is certainly true that Trump gained the support of a diverse group of voters, to an even unprecedented extent compared to previous Republican candidates, I argue that the American electorate has been increasingly divided between those who seek radical change and those who, exhausted by political turmoil, disengage from political participation entirely.

We are witnessing the rise of the *disaffected voter* – a growing segment of the electorate defined by estrangement from political institutions, distrust in democratic processes, and detachment from both major parties. Unlike traditional swing voters who shift between candidates based on policy preferences, disaffected voters are not motivated by ideological commitment but by a broader dissatisfaction with the political system itself. Their support is often driven by a desire to disrupt the status quo rather than engage in democratic processes to shape policy.

As this comment will show, the rise of the disaffected voter has profound implications for both American democracy and United States (U.S.) foreign policy. It erodes institutional trust, diminishes political participation, and weakens the foundations of democratic stability. These developments are rooted in deeper structural shifts – most notably the decline of social capital, the intensification of polarisation, and the fragmentation of voter alignments, all of which undermine political accountability. Increasingly, large segments of the electorate are either embracing radical disruption or withdrawing from political life altogether rather than working within the system to achieve change.

The following section examines how the disaffected voter has emerged from several interwoven trends that have reshaped American politics over the past few decades. Chief among these is the steady decline of social capital, which has left Americans more isolated, less engaged in civic life, and increasingly cynical about political participation. This decline has coincided with growing polarisation and a fundamental reconfiguration of the electorate, shifting from a two-class system of working- and upper-class voters to a tripartite structure that includes the professional managerial class. Often perceived – particularly by conservatives – as an elite wielding disproportionate cultural and political influence, the professional managerial class has fuelled resentment among working-class voters. Meanwhile, progressive messaging has struggled to bridge the gap between the working class and professional managerial class priorities, further deepening voter alienation.

More critically, as I will argue in a later section, this fragmentation has produced a dysfunctional system of governance in which political opponents are treated as existential threats rather than democratic competitors. This

adversarial climate has eroded democratic legitimacy, fostering disengagement and, in some cases, outright repudiation of democratic governance.

The consequences of this shift are far-reaching. As I will outline in the final section, the disaffected voter weakens traditional mechanisms of political accountability by making it easier for political elites to pursue extreme policies without electoral repercussions. This transformation in voter behaviour and elite incentives not only destabilises American democracy but also has profound consequences for U.S. foreign policy, where symbolic and erratic short-termist decision-making increasingly takes precedence over strategic, long-term planning.

I. The Decline in Social Capital and the Polarisation of American Democracy

The growing disconnect between the American electorate and its political institutions can be traced back to the steady decline of social capital in U.S. society. Social capital – the network of informal norms and relationships – fosters trust, cooperation, and civic engagement, which are critical components of a healthy democracy.[3] Unlike economic policies or institutional frameworks, social capital is not easily generated through public policy alone; rather, it emerges organically through deeply ingrained social norms and interactions.[4]

At its core, social capital consists of cooperative norms such as reciprocity, honesty, and commitment within communities. Trust and networks develop as natural byproducts of social interactions, enabling societies to function effectively. However, social capital can produce both positive and negative externalities. On the positive side, religious communities and volunteer organisations cultivate mutual support and civic engagement, while exclusionary groups or echo chambers can foster division and polarisation. The concept of the 'radius of trust', originally coined by the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, plays a crucial role in determining how far cooperative norms extend beyond immediate social groups to broader society.[5]

3 Francis Fukuyama, 'Social Capital, Civil Society and Development', TWQ 22 (2001), 7-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713701144>, last access 17 February 2025.

4 Michael Woolcock, 'Social Capital and Economic Development: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework', Theory and Society 27 (1998), 151-208.

5 Francis Fukuyama, 'Social Capital and Civil Society', Presented at the IMF Conference on Second Generation Reforms, International Monetary Fund, 1999, Washington, DC.

From an economic perspective, social capital plays a vital role in reducing transaction costs by facilitating informal coordination and complementing formal mechanisms such as contracts and bureaucracy. Politically, social capital is indispensable for liberal democracy. It fosters civic engagement, encourages participation in public affairs, and balances state power by promoting self-governance at the community level. Alexis de Tocqueville famously highlighted the role of voluntary associations in countering individualism and strengthening democratic culture.[6] However, declining social capital correlates with political inefficiencies, rising corruption, and an overreliance on state intervention to address societal problems.[7]

In his seminal work *Bowling Alone* (2000), the Harvard political science professor Robert Putnam documented the decline of social capital in contemporary America.[8] His analysis revealed a steady erosion of social trust and civic engagement since the 1970s. Putnam distinguished between two types of social capital: bonding social capital, which reinforces solidarity within homogenous groups (e. g., ethnic associations and clubs), and bridging social capital, which connects diverse groups across social divides (e. g., civil rights organisations). While bonding social capital helps communities endure challenging circumstances, bridging social capital is essential for economic and social mobility.

Putnam's research indicates that social capital in the U. S. rose steadily until the 1970s but has since been in decline. Political participation, civic engagement, religious involvement, workplace relationships, and interpersonal trust have all diminished significantly. He attributes this decline to four primary factors: generational differences, the rise of television and digital media, time and financial pressures, and urban sprawl. Of these, generational differences are the most significant, as older generations, shaped by collective experiences such as World War II, maintained stronger civic habits than younger cohorts. The growing prevalence of television and digital technologies has fundamentally altered social habits, reducing face-to-face interactions and fostering isolation. Meanwhile, increased work demands and suburbanisation have further fragmented social networks.

The consequences of this decline in social capital are profound and far-reaching. Reduced social cohesion weakens collective problem-solving, increases social fragmentation, and undermines trust in institutions. Economic efficiency suffers as transaction costs rise and cooperation diminishes, while

6 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 10 (Regnery Publishing 2003).

7 Bo Rothstein, 'Social Capital, Economic Growth and Quality of Government: The Causal Mechanism', New Political Economy 8 (2003), 49-71.

8 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster 2000).

political engagement declines, leading to weaker democratic participation. Additionally, the erosion of social capital has significant effects on individual well-being, as human connection is vital for mental and physical health.

The decline of social capital in the 1970s coincided with another development: rising polarisation in American politics.[9] The political realignment of the late 1960 s, when Southern conservative Democrats joined the Republican Party and liberal Republicans in the Northeast gravitated toward the Democrats, created increasingly homogenous parties and constituencies. This shift reduced electoral incentives for bipartisan compromise and instead fuelled ideological extremity within both parties. Over time, moderate voices were marginalised or replaced by more radical candidates, deepening divisions within the electorate.

As polarisation intensified, it contributed to what Putnam described as a shift from bridging to bonding social capital. Social networks became more insular, reinforcing political and ideological divides. This 'double sorting' phenomenon resulted in social and political identities becoming increasingly intertwined, further entrenching partisan divisions and eroding opportunities for cross-party interaction.

One of the most visible effects of this polarisation is its impact on American families. Political differences have become a leading cause of familial estrangement, with divisions intensifying since the 2016 and 2020 elections.[10] Surveys suggest that one in two adults is estranged from a close relative due to political disagreements. Younger generations, in particular, are more likely to sever ties over political differences, prioritising personal values over familial bonds.

Beyond families, political polarisation has transformed the broader social landscape. Political debates now permeate sports, entertainment, and lifestyle choices, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to escape the partisan divide. Political identity now shapes friendships, workplace relationships, and community interactions. This growing trend has led Americans to view political opponents with distrust and hostility, replacing traditional social divides based on race, religion, or socioeconomic status with ideological barriers.[11] As political discourse grows more contentious and adversarial,

9 Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press 2019).

10 <https://time.com/7201531/family-estrangement-us-politics-epidemic-essay/>, last access 19 February2025.

11 Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra and Sean J. Westwood, 'The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States', Annual Review of Political Science, 22 (2019), 129-146.

many Americans have withdrawn from civic life altogether, disillusioned by the toxic and divisive nature of modern politics.

II. The Disaffected Voter and the Decline of Political Accountability

The decline of social capital and the rise of polarisation have fundamentally altered the fabric of American democracy. The erosion of civic engagement, the growing dominance of political identities, and the fragmentation of social trust have all contributed to the rise of the disaffected voter. This disengaged and alienated electorate feels increasingly disconnected from traditional democratic processes and institutions, seeking radical change rather than incremental reform. As Americans retreat from civic life, they become more susceptible to negative partisanship and political cynicism, viewing politics through a lens of frustration and grievance rather than engagement and problem-solving. A 2023 PEW poll shows that 65 % of Americans say they always or often feel exhausted when thinking about politics, and 55 % percent even feel angry.[12] This marks a sharp increase from previous decades – only 12 % of Americans reported feeling angry about politics in 1997, a number that had risen to 24 % by 2020, highlighting a growing sense of frustration and alienation from the political system.[13]

In addition, the decline in social capital and the intensification of political polarisation have created a dysfunctional political process, eroding public trust in government institutions and their ability to address pressing societal challenges such as inequality and public health.[14] Congressional sessions have been marked by partisan infighting, unproductive impeachment inquiries, and a failure to pass essential legislation on matters such as immigration, climate change, and fiscal responsibility. This stagnation is attributed to a lack of bipartisan deliberation and compromise, leading to a government that struggles to perform its fundamental duties.[15] It is unsurprising then that only

12 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/>, last access 19 February 2025.

13 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/>, last access 19 February 2025.

14 Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, 'Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities', American Behavioral Scientist 62 (2018), 16-42.

15 <https://global.upenn.edu/penn-washington/news/other-threat-democracy>, last access 19 February 2025.

16 % of Americans have trust in the federal government to do what is right, down from over 50 % just 20 years ago.[16]

As faith in democratic institutions wanes, voters have become increasingly sceptical of the government's capacity to serve their needs, leading many to disengage from the political process entirely or to embrace populist leaders who promise radical change.[17] Authoritarian populism has exploited public frustration with the inefficiency and perceived corruption of the political system. The political scientists Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler argue that polarisation is no longer simply about policy disagreements but reflects deep-seated psychological differences between authoritarian and non-authoritarian worldviews.[18] Authoritarians prioritise order, security, and deference to authority, while non-authoritarians emphasise diversity, autonomy, and openness. According to a 2023 Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey, roughly 38 % of Americans support authoritarianism in response to the direction of the country, favouring a 'leader who is willing to break some rules if that's what it takes to set things right'.[19] This cultural divide has been exacerbated by political elites who exploit fears and insecurities, further pushing disaffected voters toward reactionary and disruptive political movements. In fact, roughly 23 % support political violence to solve problems according to another PRRI poll of 2023.[20]

The disaffected voter is a product of the evolving estrangement between citizens and the democratic process. Rather than engaging with politics through policy evaluation or ideological alignment, these voters oscillate between disengagement and populist fervour. On one hand, they are cynical and withdrawn from civic participation; on the other, they are highly susceptible to appeals that promise to upend the political order. This tension is reflected in the widening gap between hyper-partisanship and political apathy – where a vocal, highly engaged minority dominates political discourse, while a frustrated and indifferent majority retreats from engagement.[21] Social media and partisan media further distort public perception, amplifying the voices of

16 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>, last access 19 February 2025.

17 <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/drivers-authoritarian-populism-united-states/>, last access 19 February 2025.

18 Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*, (Cambridge University Press 2009).

19 <https://www.prri.org/research/threats-to-american-democracy-ahead-of-an-unprecedented-presidential-election/>, last access 19 February 2025.

20 <https://www.prri.org/research/threats-to-american-democracy-ahead-of-an-unprecedented-presidential-election/>, last access 19 February 2025.

21 Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan, *The Other Divide: Polarization and Disengagement in American Politics* (Cambridge University Press 2022).

the hyper-engaged and shaping policy debates in ways that do not necessarily reflect broader societal concerns. Meanwhile, many Americans avoid politics not out of ideological extremism but from exhaustion with a system they see as dysfunctional and unresponsive.[22]

However, the disaffected voter shares a sense of ideational detachment and de-identification with the principles, functionality, and purpose of American democracy. They increasingly support candidates who advocate radical disruption, regardless of feasibility or adherence to democratic norms.[23] This emboldens political leaders to pursue extreme policies without fear of significant backlash, prioritising symbolic appeals over substantive governance. Disaffected voters care less about upholding democratic principles and more about non-governing – ruling without regard for institutions, the rule of law, or those outside their immediate political tribe. As a shared sense of civic responsibility erodes, cynicism, rather than a vision for governance, guides political behaviour.

The rise of the disaffected voter weakens traditional mechanisms of democratic accountability. Politicians no longer need to appeal to a broad, diverse electorate; instead, they can secure power by catering to ideological extremes and relying on widespread disengagement to suppress opposition. The high rate of incumbency re-election despite pervasive public dissatisfaction reflects how voter apathy allows politicians to evade scrutiny and continue pushing divisive agendas. A striking example of this is the public's fading memory of the January 6, 2021, insurrection – an event with profound consequences for democratic governance and global perceptions of U. S. stability.[24] The rapid decline in its political salience highlights how disengagement enables leaders to escape accountability for actions that threaten democratic norms.

The consequences of this shift are far-reaching. Political discourse has become increasingly adversarial, with attacks on democratic institutions and the rule of law proving more politically effective than substantive policy discussions. Both major parties now face internal rifts between establishment figures and anti-establishment factions, further complicating governance. Moreover, as issue saliency becomes politicised through the lens of disaffection, pressing challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and healthcare reform are increasingly framed not as problems to be solved but as

22 <https://theconversation.com/after-super-tuesday-exhausted-americans-face-8-more-months-of-presidential-campaigning-225047>, last access 19 February 2025.

23 Heather C. Lench, Leslie Fernandez, Noah Reed, Emily Raibley, Linda J. Levine and Kiki Salsedo, 'Voter Emotional Responses and Voting Behaviour in the 2020 US Presidential Election', Cognition and Emotion 38 (8) (2024), 1196-1209, doi:10.1080/02699931.2024.2355572.

24 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/01/06/jan-6-american-attitudes-polling-trump/>, last access 19 February 2025.

battlegrounds in a zero-sum political war – making consensus and effective policymaking ever more elusive.[25]

III. Democratic Foreign Policy in the Age of the Disaffected Voter

As trust in democratic institutions and processes erodes, the traditional mechanisms of accountability that have historically constrained and guided U. S. foreign policy are increasingly undermined. With an electorate that is either disengaged or driven by frustration rather than strategic vision, political elites face fewer incentives to pursue consistent, long-term foreign policy goals, instead opting for approaches that prioritise short-term political gains and symbolic gestures over substantive international engagement.

International relations scholars have long argued that democracies possess distinct advantages over autocracies in global affairs, such as enhanced war-fighting capabilities, sovereign borrowing capacity, and the ability to cooperate constructively with like-minded regimes.[26] These advantages stem from institutional constraints – both vertical, through electoral accountability, and horizontal, through checks and balances imposed by legislatures, independent judiciaries, and media scrutiny.[27] Together, these constraints have historically ensured that democratic leaders prioritise the provision of public goods (i. e., national welfare) over private goods (special interests), adhere to established foreign policymaking norms, and make credible international commitments.[28] As a result, U. S. foreign policy has traditionally been marked by stability, reliability, and long-term strategic vision.[29]

However, in the age of the disaffected voter, these constraints have weakened. With large segments of the electorate disengaged or deeply cynical about politics, political elites face less pressure to justify foreign policy decisions in terms of long-term national interests or global stability. Instead, foreign policy is increasingly leveraged for domestic political manoeuvring.

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25 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/18/us/politics/midterm-election-voters-democracy-poll.html>, last access 19 February 2025.

26 John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen and Jonas Berge, 'Does Democracy Matter?', Annual Review of Political Science 25 (2022), 357-375.

27 Yannis Papadopoulos, Understanding Accountability in Democratic Governance, Elements in Public Policy (Cambridge University Press 2023).

28 Daniel W. Drezner, 'The Death of the Democratic Advantage?', International Studies Review 24 (2022), viac017.

29 Brett Ashley Leeds and Michaela Mattes, *Domestic Interests, Democracy, and Foreign Policy Change* (Cambridge University Press 2022).

International institutions, once seen as pillars of U.S. global leadership, are now frequently framed as threats to national sovereignty – positions that resonate with disaffected voters who view institutions with scepticism rather than as safeguards of governance stability. This shift allows political elites to justify withdrawing from international agreements, undermining multilateral cooperation, and prioritising unilateral actions that project decisiveness while often delivering little substantive progress. It is thus unsurprising that one of Trump's first actions upon returning to office was to sign executive orders withdrawing the U.S. from the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Accord.

Another consequence of this shift is the blurring of distinctions between allies and adversaries. The erosion of social capital has fostered a transactional view of foreign relations, where alliances are no longer valued for their stability and shared values but are instead assessed through an immediate cost-benefit lens. A 2024 Pew Research Center (PEW) poll reveals a notable decline among the American electorate's beneficial view of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), particularly among Republicans and independents.[30] This fosters uncertainty among allies and emboldens adversaries, who see opportunities to exploit inconsistent U.S. commitments and policies. A striking example is NATO's muted response to Trump's assertion that the U.S. should assume control over Greenland, following Denmark's request that its allies refrain from engaging with such provocations.[31]

In this environment, foreign policy is increasingly reduced to performance politics, where symbolic gestures and headline-grabbing pronouncements take precedence over substantive diplomatic engagement. The incentive for political leaders is to appear decisive and bold, even if their actions are largely superficial or ineffective. Announcements of tariffs, threats to withdraw from international organisations, and high-profile but inconsequential summits become tools to signal strength to disaffected voters while avoiding the complexities of genuine diplomatic engagement. This performative approach to foreign policy enables leaders to cultivate an image of action while, in reality, achieving very little.

Furthermore, the disaffected voter's preference for disruption over pragmatism encourages political elites to pursue more extreme foreign policy measures. The need to project toughness takes precedence over sustainable diplomatic solutions, leading to impulsive tariffs, abrupt renegotiations of

30 <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/08/americans-opinions-of-nato/>, last access 19 February 2025.

31 <https://www.ft.com/content/dbb70dc0-0038-4b40-9f5f-f56a867b5eaf>, last access 19 February 2025.

longstanding agreements, and an embrace of isolationist rhetoric. These moves may provide short-term political benefits, but they come at the cost of long-term strategic coherence, further destabilising America's role in the international order.

IV. The Trump Administration and America's Future Role in the World

The consequences of this political shift are difficult to predict with certainty. However, it is evident that President Trump's second administration will enjoy significant latitude in shaping foreign policy with minimal constraints from an increasingly disaffected public. The erosion of accountability mechanisms has created an environment in which foreign policy decisions are driven less by strategic imperatives and more by immediate political calculations. The Trump administration's proposals to purchase Greenland or to incorporate Canada as the 51st American state exemplify how political elites, freed from meaningful scrutiny, are emboldened to pursue unconventional, and at times impractical, ideas without significant domestic pushback. Similarly, Trump's repeated claims that he could swiftly end the war in Ukraine and his assurances that tariffs would not raise consumer prices – positions that his administration has already begun to walk back – highlight the dominance of short-term political messaging over the complexities of international diplomacy and economic realities.

Another critical factor shaping U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration will be the internal dynamics of his executive branch. The second Trump presidency is poised to be characterised by what can best be described as court politics – a form of governance in which policy formulation and execution are dictated not by rational deliberation or institutional norms but by the competition among factions vying for the favour of the president.[32] In an environment where accountability is weak and political expediency reigns, court politics replaces strategic coherence with personal loyalty, ideological opportunism, and performative policymaking.[33]

Court politics thrives when a leader, unconstrained by institutional guardrails, encourages rival factions to compete for influence, not by presenting well-reasoned policies grounded in expertise, but by appealing to the leader's

32 <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/10/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-erica-frantz.html>, last access 19 February 2025.

33 Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press 2018).

personal preferences and political instincts. Under Trump's leadership, this dynamic has intensified due to his preference for loyalty over competence and his inclination to reward those who mirror his rhetoric and reinforce his worldview. As a result, the composition of his cabinet and White House staff is expected to reflect the fault lines within the broader Republican Party, divided into competing factions that prioritise different, and often contradictory, foreign policy goals.

One faction, composed of staunch national protectionists and populist loyalists, is likely to advocate for an aggressive, isolationist foreign policy, promoting economic protectionism, a hardline stance against China, and a transactional approach to alliances. This group, which includes prominent figures who align with Trump's 'America First' rhetoric such as Pete Hegseth (Secretary of Defence), Tulsi Gabbard (nominee for Director of National Intelligence), Kristi Noem (Secretary of Homeland Security) or Elisa Stefanik (nominee for Ambassador to the United Nations), is expected to push for policies that further disengage the U.S. from international institutions, reinforcing the perception that multilateral organisations are obstacles rather than assets to national sovereignty.

In contrast, the libertarian-leaning faction within the administration is likely to resist interventionist policies and push back against protectionist economic measures that could harm global trade relationships. This faction, consisting of figures like Marco Rubio (Secretary of State), Doug Burgum (nominee for Secretary of the Interior), Lori Chavez-DeRemer (nominee for Secretary of Labour) or Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (nominee for Secretary of Health) sees international engagement primarily through an economic lens, emphasising deregulation and free-market competition over geopolitical concerns. However, their influence within the administration will be contingent on Trump's willingness to temper his populist impulses with pragmatic economic considerations – a balance that proved tenuous in his first term.

A third faction, composed of representatives from the business elite, including Scott Bessent (Secretary of Finance), Cantor Fitzgerald (nominee for Secretary of Commerce), Chris Wright (nominee for Secretary of Energy) or Elon Musk (nominee for potentially new Department of Government Efficiency) is expected to promote policies that prioritise economic interests over ideological battles. They may advocate for maintaining trade relationships with Europe and balancing economic decoupling from China with strategic engagement, recognising the costs of complete disengagement. However, their influence may be limited by the nationalist rhetoric dominating Trump's political base and the broader sentiment among disaffected voters who see globalisation as a threat rather than an opportunity.

The competition among these factions will shape foreign policy in unpredictable ways, with Trump acting as the ultimate arbitrator, often swayed by the faction that best aligns with his immediate political goals rather than long-term strategic interests. The influence of court politics in Trump's second term is further reinforced by the role of his closest advisors and White House staff, who are expected to act as gatekeepers, insulating the president from dissenting views and limiting congressional oversight. Consequently, congressional Republicans, particularly those in leadership positions or on key foreign policy committees, may find themselves sidelined, with their influence diminished in favour of Trump's inner circle of loyalists.

This dynamic is likely to exacerbate the trend of executive overreach, with key decisions increasingly made within the confines of the White House rather than through deliberative interagency processes. This, in turn, makes policy volatility and arbitrariness more likely. His return to office suggests a shift to lawfare, as executive orders flood the system, many already facing legal challenges that sideline legislative oversight and voter input. The administration's growing reliance on executive power over institutional deliberation reflects a broader trend toward authoritarian-style governance, where policy decisions are increasingly shielded from democratic accountability. This shift will extend to foreign policy, where decisions will be shaped by personalist leadership and political loyalty rather than by expert-driven assessments or bipartisan deliberation.

This internal chaos will have significant consequences for America's global role. Allies once reliant on U.S. stability must now navigate an increasingly erratic diplomatic landscape, as conflicting factions within the Trump administration send mixed signals on NATO, trade, and security alliances. The perception of the U.S. as an unreliable partner will only deepen as foreign policy becomes reactive and fragmented. Meanwhile, Trump's narrow 52-seat Senate majority falls short of the 60 votes needed to bypass the filibuster, ensuring that major legislative efforts will still require bipartisan support, adding further unpredictability to U.S. global engagement.

The broader consequence is the U.S.'s accelerated, yet selective retreat from the global order. Once a key architect of international institutions, the U.S. is increasingly acting as a transactional power, engaging only when immediate gains are clear. However, this retreat will not take the form of a wholesale exit from multilateral organisations but rather a strategic hollowing out of U.S. influence within them – scaling back participation, withholding funding, and undermining institutional commitments. This approach will allow the administration to reap the benefits of selective engagement while avoiding long-term obligations.

V. Concluding Reflections

The rise of the disaffected voter and the internal factionalism within the Trump administration have the potential to fundamentally reshape U.S. foreign policy. As democratic accountability mechanisms weaken and decision-making becomes increasingly driven by court politics, American foreign policy is likely to become more erratic, short-sighted, and unpredictable. As I have argued here, this erosion of institutional constraints foregrounds a more unilateralist and volatile foreign policy approach. This shift will likely manifest in diminished commitments to multilateralism, an intensified focus on great power competition, and a greater reliance on performative diplomacy rather than substantive engagement.

Similar patterns can be observed in comparative cases of democratic backsliding, where governments abandon long-standing diplomatic norms, renegotiate international agreements with minimal public legitimacy, and engage in abrupt foreign policy shifts that destabilise strategic partnerships.[34] Addressing these challenges will require renewed efforts to re-engage the electorate, rebuild trust in democratic institutions, and restore strategic coherence in policymaking. Without such efforts, the U.S. risks further erosion of its global leadership role, with lasting consequences for international order and stability.

The global response to Trump's re-election has been divided. While some states view his return as an opportunity to advance their own strategic interests, traditional U.S. allies – particularly in Europe and South Korea – have expressed notable pessimism, raising concerns about the weakening of the geopolitical 'West'. This divergence in perspectives suggests that Europe may struggle to maintain unity or exert global influence in leading an outright resistance to the new administration. Nevertheless, recent surveys indicate that many around the world view the European Union as a power on par with the U.S. and China – an asset European leaders should leverage as they navigate the uncertainties of the coming years.[35]

In light of these developments, it is imperative for European policymakers to acknowledge and adapt to the realities of a more transactional world. Rather than attempting to lead a global liberal opposition to Trump's administration, Europe should focus on strengthening its strategic autonomy and cultivating partnerships that align with its long-term interests. This requires

34 Benjamin J. Appel and Sarah E. Croco, 'Democratic Backsliding and Foreign Policy' (May 2024). IGCC Working Paper No. 2, available at: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8s31h6c9>, last access 20 February 2025.

35 <https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-in-a-trumpian-world-the-eu-and-global-public-opinion-after-the-us-elections/>, last access 19 February 2025.

pragmatic engagement with a diverse range of global actors, reinforcing the European Union's role as a stabilising force amid shifting geopolitical dynamics. By doing so, Europe can maintain its influence, uphold its values, and safeguard its strategic interests in an increasingly unpredictable international order.

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