# Loyola Marymount University
## Global Policy Institute

**Domestic and Geopolitical Realignments: Implications for the Republic of Korea-US alliance**
*Evidence from a survey experiment of U.S. voters*

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I.    **Research Summary:**

This policy brief provides analysis on U.S. voter support for aiding strategic allies. The brief utilizes a series of survey experiments that explores the effects of partisan polarization on levels of public support for the ROK-US alliance and discusses the larger implications for the management of alliance relations.

## II.    Research Question

The Biden administration has a clear position on U.S. commitment in Ukraine: provide military and other aid and impose harsh economic sanctions but avoid direct military engagement with Russia to prevent an outbreak of war. The war has raised larger questions about the nature of the U.S. commitment to formal allies that it has vowed to defend. How does voter partisanship influence foreign policy commitments, specifically commitment to aid and defend other countries?

### III.     Relevance

According to Pew Research Center, among Republicans or those that lean Republican, support for an active US role in the world has declined since 2014 with only 37% agreeing with that sentiment in 2019.  By contrast, 51% of Democrats or those leaning Democrat support that view (Doherty et al 2019). Republicans and Democrats also have clear differences toward allies with 83% of Democrats or those leaning Democrat responding that the interests of allies should be taken into account but only 51% of Republican or those leaning Republican share that view.  Conversely much larger shares of Republicans / lean Republicans believe that the US should focus on following its national interests – 48% versus 15% for Democrats / lean Democrats (Doherty et al 2019).  Partisans also have different views toward diplomacy and the role of military power.

#### A.  Why Focus on Voters

In this study, we focus on the role of voters.  Voters are the ultimate deciders in elections, and new pathbreaking literature shows that public opinion influence leaders as they consider foreign policy issues (Tomz, Weeks & Yarhi Milo 2019, Chu 2022).

#### B.  The Hazard of Polarization

Polarization makes it more difficult to build broad support for significant actions such as the use of military forces. It also weakens the consensus on what can be learned from previous foreign policy mistakes. In addition, polarization complicates decision making, making long-term commitments difficult. Besides, it makes the U.S. and other powers more susceptible to foreign influence (Schultz 2017). Additionally, polarization undermines democratic advantages in foreign policy consisting of stability, credibility, and reliability (Myrick 2021).

#### C.  Partisanship and foreign policy

The research on partisanship and foreign policy provides mixed evidence.  Some scholars have found little evidence for systematic partisan evidence (Levendusky and Horowitz 2012). By contrast Kertzer (2016) finds that there are clear partisan differences in the resolve that voters show in various conflict scenarios.  By and large, existing studies though do not take a systematic approach to examining partisan polarization, nor do they draw on the what the existing research on partisan polarization should be likely to induce partisan effects, such as emotions, language, leadership cues, and the media.
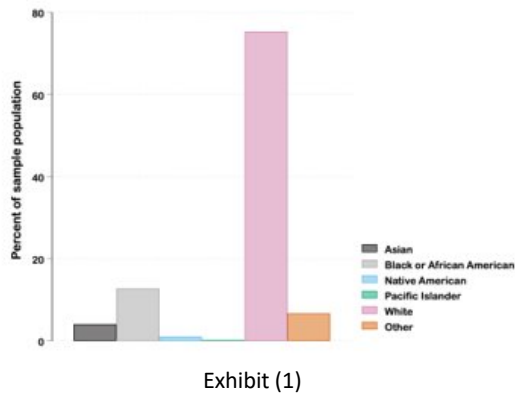
## IV.    Research

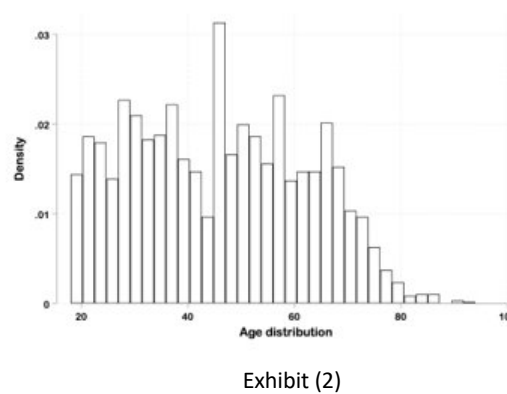The **first question** our study seeks to answer is:

What characteristics shape U.S. public commitment to its allies? AND
What type of allies are we more or less willing to support?

We then break this down further by exploring the relationship between political identity and commitment to allies.

Sample Race Distribution                              Sample Age Distribution



Exhibit (1)



Exhibit (2)

To answer these questions, we use a randomized survey design administered online using the crowdsourcing platform Lucid. For this first experiment, we had 2645 respondents, split about 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans (1369 Republicans and 1276 Democrats). Lucid also ensures that our sample is representative of the U.S., with a race, age and gender distribution that approximately matches that of the entire U.S.
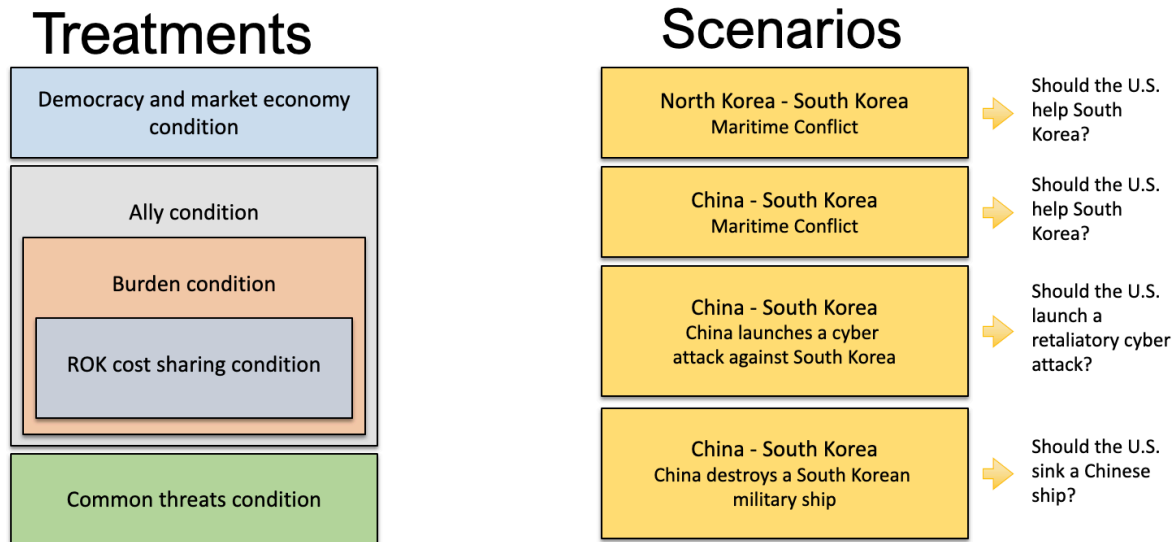
## Treatments

- Democracy and market economy condition
- Ally condition
  - Burden condition
    - ROK cost sharing condition
- Common threats condition

## Scenarios

| Scenario | Question |
|---|---|
| **North Korea - South Korea** Maritime Conflict | Should the U.S. help South Korea? |
| **China - South Korea** Maritime Conflict | Should the U.S. help South Korea? |
| **China - South Korea** China launches a cyber attack against South Korea | Should the U.S. launch a retaliatory cyber attack? |
| **China - South Korea** China destroys a South Korean military ship | Should the U.S. sink a Chinese ship? |

Exhibit (3)

To measure what ally characteristic matter most to Americans, we used a randomized vignette approach. At the start of the survey, all survey respondents were prompted with a paragraph that provided information about South Korea, but we randomly varied what information they received in the form of treatments.

Respondents that received the first treatment were told that South Korea is a democracy with a strong market economy. This treatment aims to measure whether regime type matters to the U.S. voters. U.S. policy such as the Free and Open Indo Pacific strategy makes use of rhetoric's that suggests regime type does matter, but there could be partisan differences. For example, Trump praised autocrats whereas Biden has instead elevated democracies and market economies.

The second treatment informed respondents that South Korea is a US ally. But of those who received this treatment, a smaller subset were also told of the burdens that come with alliances, including the amount that the U.S. currently spends in South Korea. This treatment addresses the concern that Trump and his supporters have raised that U.S. allies rely excessively on US support, and we would therefore expect it to elicit partisan differences. Of those who received this treatment, an even smaller subset received an additional treatment which explains that South Korea shares the cost of US military expenditures, in order to measure whether this undoes the expected negative reactions to the burden treatment.

Finally, a final treatment was added to inform subjects that South Korea and the US have many threats, namely China and North Korea, in common. Our expectation was that this would make Americans feel personally connected to challenges in South Korea, and therefore perhaps impact US commitment to South Korea.

Next, respondent's commitment to South Korea was measured by presenting them with four different hypothetical scenarios and asking their willingness to support South Korea in each of the scenarios.

The first scenario included a maritime conflict between North Korea and South Korea.

The second scenario included a comparable maritime conflict between China and South Korea.

In the third scenario, China carried out a cyber-attack against South Korea and participants were asked whether the US should launch a retaliatory cyber-attack.

Finally in the fourth scenario, China destroyed a South Korea military ship and participants were now asked whether the US should respond by destroying a Chinese ship.
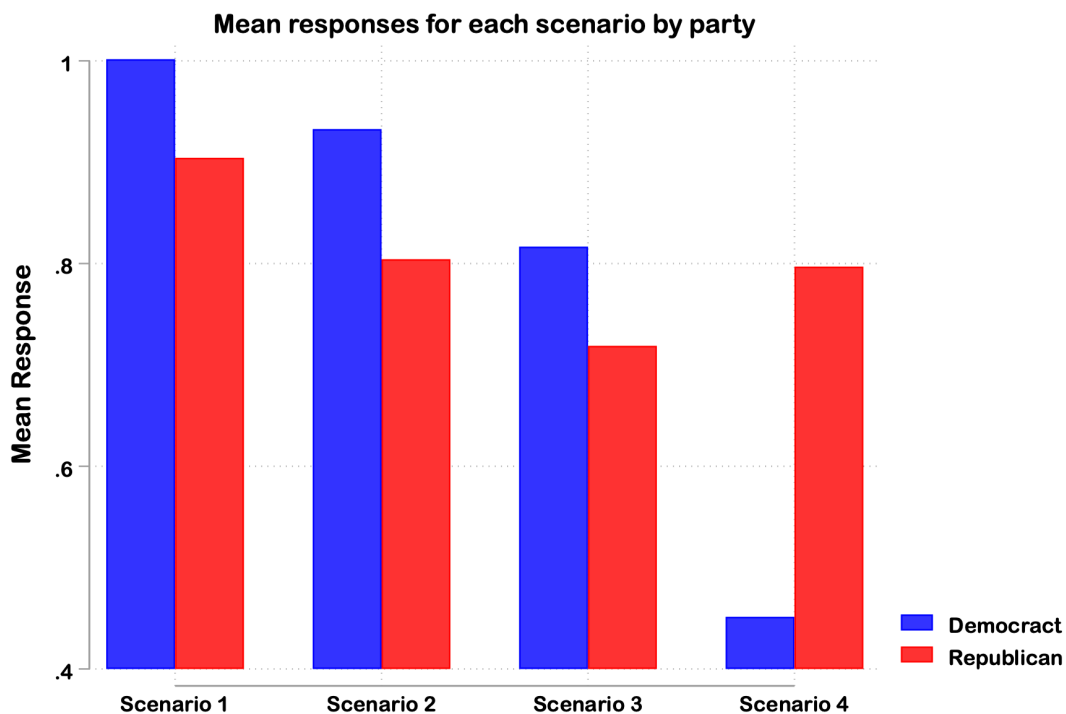


Exhibit (4)

This figure presents the average responses to each of the scenarios by political party. The y-axis represents the average response on a scale of -5 to 5 where -5 means the respondent is strongly opposed to supporting South Korea and 5 means they strongly support South Korea.

In the first three scenarios, Democrats on average appear to be more likely to support South Korea than Republicans. However, the difference is not statistically significant, and you can see that it is numerically quite small. Thus Republicans and Democrats do not respond differently to these scenarios. The fourth scenario, however, does produce clearly different partisan effects. Republicans were much more likely to support sinking a Chinese ship than Democrats. If we look at this scenario, the biggest difference between it and the previous scenarios is the use of force against a major power, namely China. Our results align with existing work, since there is evidence that Democrats, on average, are less likely to approve the use of military force.

Next, let's look more closely at the relationship between political polarization and U.S. commitment to its allies. Existing research has shown that partisan polarization is growing. Democrats and Republicans are growing farther apart, and one of the places it is most evident is news media (Pew Reseach Center 2014). Current research has also shown that language is deeply tied to political polarization, which encourages more emotionally charged and aggressive language.

In our **second survey experiment**, we focus on <u>the effect of news media polarization, leadership cue polarization, and language polarization on the US-South Korea alliance</u>.

### *Background*

Partisan polarization is at a high. Recent research has focus heavily on the role of news media, social media and charged language on partisan polarization.

### *Motivating Question*

Does partisan polarization impact American's commitment to their allies?

### *Methodology*

We conducted randomized survey experiments to gather primary data. The sample is fairly representative of the U.S. population in terms of political affiliation, gender, age and race. The survey had a total of 1896 respondents, which comprised 991 individuals who identify themselves as a Republican and 905 individuals who identify themselves as Democrats.

We focused on a real, on-going situation, which is the proliferation of hypersonic missiles in North Korea and China. Hypersonic missiles travel at the speed of sound, which make it difficult for countries to defend from them. In this survey, we told respondents what hypersonic missiles are and informed them that China and North Korea both recently conducted hypersonic missile tests.

Then, we presented them with a fabricated news article talking about the danger that this situation poses to South Korea. We also included a made-up quote urging Americans to defend South Korea. The text of the fabricated article reads as follows:

After back-to-back hypersonic ballistic missile tests from China and North Korea, experts are concerned about the danger this poses to South Korea. We add the following quote: "I will do everything in my power to defend our South Korean allies....we can not tolerate any Chinese or North Korean threat against the core American values of liberty and democracy."

To make test if partisans are sensitive to leadership cues and media source, we randomized who said the quote — Trump, Biden or a neutral expert — and whether it was published by CNN, FOX or AP news.
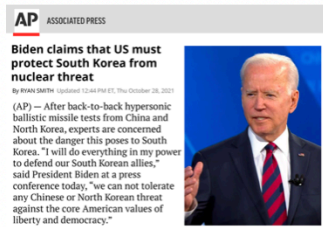


Exhibit (5)

Then, respondents were asked whether the US should defend South Korea in the case of a hypersonic missile attack.

**Question 1:** *Suppose that China or North Korea launches a hypersonic missile attack on South Korea. The U.S. government must now decide whether to defend South Korea by responding to the attack, an action that would likely result in several thousand casualties. To what extent to do you disagree or agree that the U.S. should defend South Korea?*

The Biden-Trump Effect

The identity of the person for who the quote was attributed had a large effect on whether Democrats and Republicans were in favor of defending South Korea. In general, Democrats were more in favor of defending South Korea. However, when Trump was the speaker, Republican support of South Korea increased sharply and Democrat support of South Korea declined to the point that Republicans were much more likely to want to defend South Korea.

Biden also had a small positive effect on Democrat's support of South Korea.
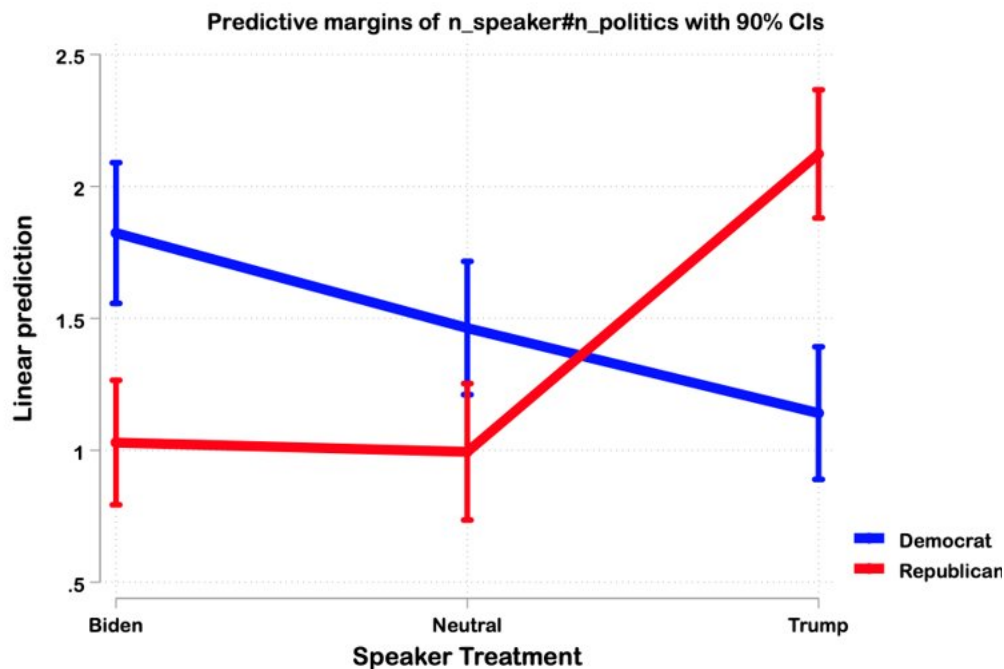


Exhibit (6)

## News Source Effect
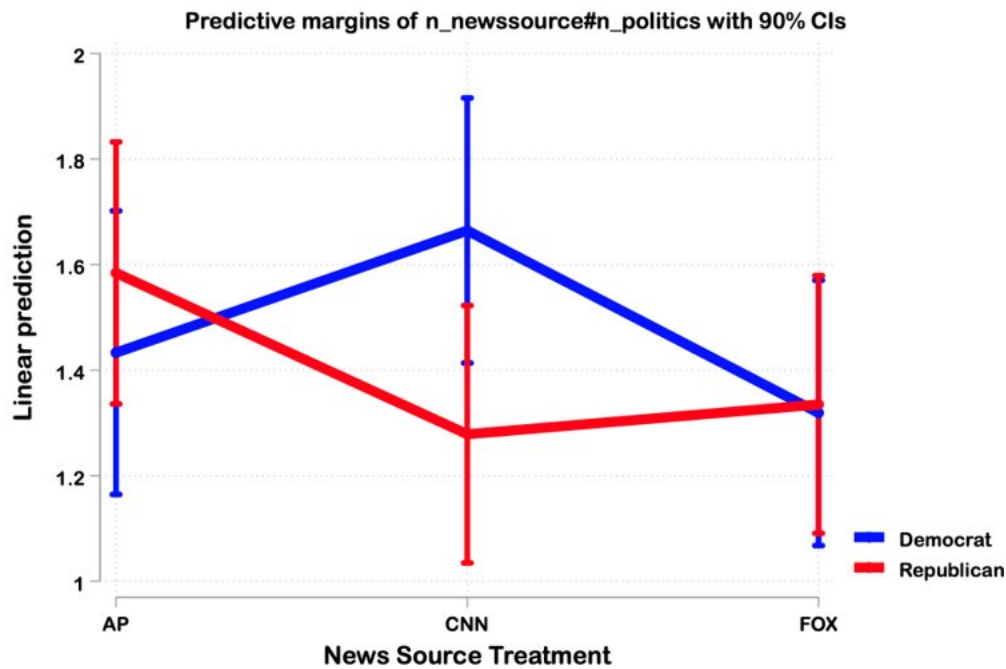


Exhibit (7)

The news source had less effect. CNN made Democrats more likely to support South Korea and Republicans less likely, but the results were not statistically significant at conventional levels.

The second part of this experiment studied the effect of language cues on partisan commitment to South Korea. To measure this, we generated two sets of fabricated tweets, one in opposition to deploying troops to South Korea to assist with the hypersonic missile crisis, and another in favor of deploying troops. In each set of tweets, we then varied the language between more and less polarizing terms, as depicted by Exhibit 11 and Exhibit 12.

Exhibit (8)



Exhibit (9)

Afterwards, participants were asked whether the U.S. should deploy troops to South Korea.

*Question 2:* *Do you disagree or agree with the following statement: The U.S. Should deploy more troops to South Korea.*
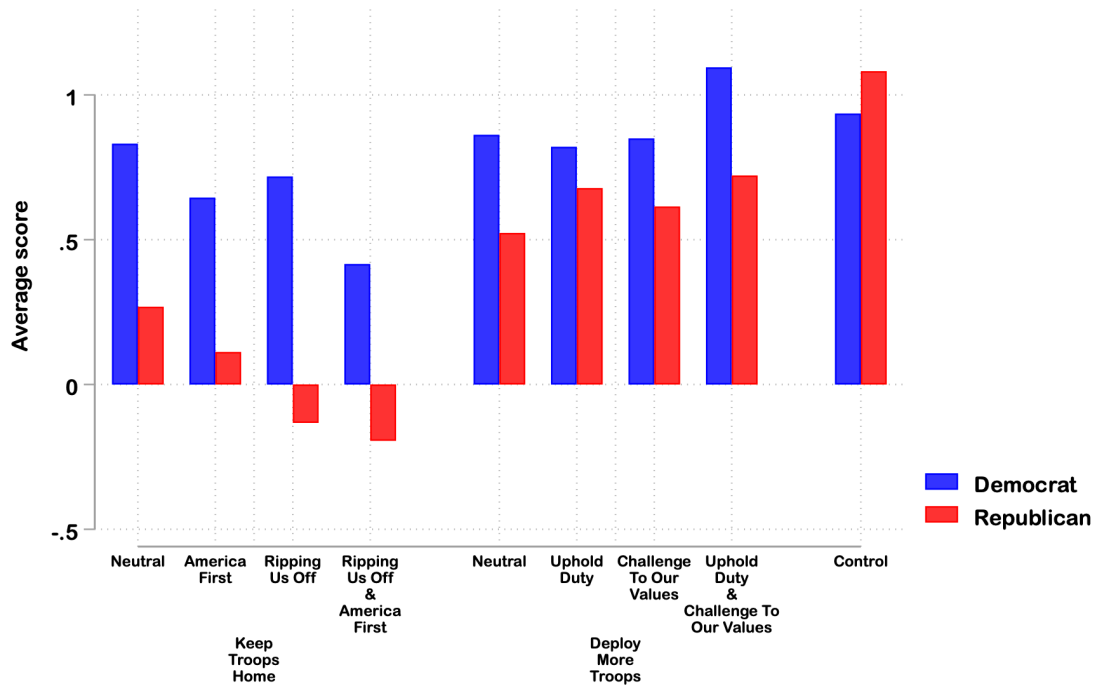


Exhibit (10)

The polarizing terms with the strongest effect were those in the set of tweets opposed to deploying troops to South Korea. Using the term "put America first" instead of "consider national interests" as well as the term "South Korea is ripping us off" instead of "South Korea is relying excessively on U.S. support" had significant negative effects on Republican's willingness to deploy troops to South Korea.

From this exercise it was found that leadership cues, and especially Trump, have a strong partisan effect. Language also has a powerful effect, especially on Republicans. In general, Democrats (and especially moderate Democrats) are least likely to be affected by the partisan cues.

### V.     Implications and Conclusion:

The results show that there is still U.S. voter support for South Korea even when voters are presented with realistic scenarios, with some of the them involving high costs such as U.S. troop casualties. But we also find that voters are susceptible to partisan cues.  Interestingly, in general, Republicans exhibit greater responsiveness to partisan cues.  In terms of possible challenges to the US-ROK alliance, emotional appeals to allies "ripping us off" and America first ideology produced quite large negative impacts on support of South Korea, in some cases *generating opposition* to supporting South Korea. Such strong appeals could undermine the reliability of the United States as an ally. Our finding suggest that policymakers must be attuned to these effects – the tone of our public dialogue matters significant. One additional implication is that the political messaging supporting the alliance management should especially target the Republican voters, as they are more prone to respond to partisan cues.

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