How U.S. Partisanship Polarization Affect Foreign Policy? An Examination Through the "Ebb and Flow" of US Foreign Climate Policy

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ABSTRACT

U.S. foreign climate policy has experienced extremely dramatic change from 2016 to 2021. The Democratic presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden uphold totally different policies from the Republican President Donald Trump. This article puts emphasis on the U.S. domestic partisanship polarization within two-party political system in order to effectively explain its climate policy change. Within the U.S. regime, the two-party system and the electoral system gradually bring about partisanship polarization. There is a growing tendency of competition based on different partisan beliefs and political stances affected by the demographic composition, interest groups, and public opinion in election. This article considers how the above three factors lead to partisanship polarization which destabilizes the U.S. foreign climate policy.

Keywords: *foreign climate policy, Republican President Donald Trump, demographic composition*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that the climate crisis is the greatest existential threat of our time [1]. Therefore, states are called for to put environmentally-friendly policy into effect. As the U.S. is the world's largest economy and second-largest greenhouse gas emitter [2], U.S. is expected to take great responsibilities and exert leadership. However, in the context of rising polarization within U.S. regime, Republican and Democratic Parties uphold different policies on climate change. Such phenomenon is regarded to be noticeable in the transition from Democratic President Barack Obama who signed the Paris Agreement to Republican President Donald Trump who announced withdrawal from it, and then from Trump back to Democratic President Joe Biden who rejoined the Paris Agreement. Political variables in U.S climate policy have made other actors in international relations suspicious about its determination on combating the climate crisis.

The domestic reasons for U.S. polarized climate policy have been discussed from several perspectives, the most impressive ones including: the implication of the economic power of coal shipping market [3] and the dispersion of the Congress internal power [4]. Overall, these studies have covered some vital motivators for climate policy change except for the systematic analysis

about partisanship polarization within political regime and the specific factors in the pathway from polarization to divided climate policy.

What are the factors that enable domestic partisanship polarization in the United States to result in its fickle foreign policy? This article will address this question by providing an analytic framework of three factors— demographic composition, interest groups and public opinion. Within the framework, the demographic composition of each party and the interest-oriented climate actions related to American electoral politics of both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party will be analyzed. Meanwhile, this article will also exam methodically the rising competing elements in the partisanship that is the direct reason for their sharp difference of attitudes towards climate policy.

The article is organized in the following way. First it provides a background of U.S. climate policy from Obama and Trump to Biden-Harris Administration and partisanship polarization that characterizes the U.S. politics and U.S. Then, it breaks down the factors for US domestic partisanship polarization that leads to the "ebb and flow" of US foreign climate policy into three aspects: first, the demographic composition of each party will be emphasized, including the main composition in ethnicity identity and generations as well as average educational

levels, to explain the essence of each party that affects their policy preference and political priority to some extent; secondly, how the division of stances that interest groups hold influences policy making at the international level and how interest groups serve as powerful promoters of different policies conforming to their own interests will be addressed; thirdly, the strategic choices of each party that have made to fulfill electoral promises will be stressed. These three factors have led to the diverse attitudes on climate change from President Obama, Trump to present Biden.

2. U.S. CLIMATE FOREIGN POLICIES: FROM BARACK OBAMA, DONALD TRUMP, TO JOE BIDEN

From Obama's ambitious climate strategies internationally, Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, to Biden's reviving climate ambition, the "ebb and flow" of the U.S. foreign climate policy is evidently a manifestation of divided partisanship.

Specifically, Obama Administration considered climate change as a core agenda and promoted global cooperation on climate issues. In 2016, together with other 174 countries, the U.S. signed the Paris Agreement, to improve global governance on climate crisis [5]. Adversely, under Trump's leadership, the U.S. withdrew from the Paris Agreement in spite of international criticism in 2017. The withdrawal violated former promise on climate aid for developing countries, made the climate cooperation more challenging, and undermined the authority of agreements [6]. As the presidency came back to a Democrat—Biden, the U.S. rejoined the Paris Agreement and restored its credibility on climate protection through Biden's aggressive climate plan [7], strongly in support of electric vehicles and zero greenhouse gas emissions [8].

Under the partisanship polarization, climate preference of each party is polarized, and policy decisions of presidents from different parties are divided.

3. PARTISANSHIP POLARIZATION LEADING TO THE "EBB AND FLOW" OF US FOREIGN CLIMATE POLICY

The term "partisanship polarization" in effect consists of a static phenomenon— "partisanship", and a dynamic process— "polarization". There has been a lively debate on the nature of partisanship, and through this debate, instrumental model and expressive model have gained popularity. Instrumental model construes a rational engagement, which is based on the observation and political perceptions of partisans. However, this represents an ideal image of citizens, and expressive model is acknowledged as more closed to reality, which is from the perspective of social identity theory [9]. As a result, here follows the expressive model and defines

partisanship as identification with a party and loyalty of partisans to the party beliefs within two-party or multiparty system. A sense of belongings to a group and attached emotions are embodied in partisanship so that members tend to disfavor contrapartisans in defense of their political community [10]. Accordingly, as there are different values between Democrats and Conservatists in U.S., conflicts and even animosity grow in the self-defense of identity, thus causing the polarization between parties. It becomes clear that American political polarization is the negative result of partisanship. Therefore, partisanship polarization is a process of division on partisan beliefs and party policies, and it is also a development from different identifications to competitions in political domain with disagreement towards contrapartisans. Partisanship polarization is rising in the U.S. In 2017, Pew Research Center unveiled that the partisan divide on fundamental value between Republicans and Democrats reached a record level with data analysis [11]. Few years later, the level is even higher while the polarization on the ideological positions is more evident according to empirical observation and mathematical counting. It was shown in Pew Research that the polarized stances of individuals in each party in 2017 was as roughly twice bigger as that in 2005 [12]. What are the factors that lead to such partisanship polarization? The following of the article will address the question from three aspects: demographic composition of each party, interests group behind each party and the public opinion in elections.

3.1 Differentiated demographic composition of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party

Different groups of citizens constitute each party. When seen from different perspectives, such as ethnicity, educational attainment and generations, these groupings demonstrate the uniqueness of their underlying demographic composition.

In terms of race and ethnicity, it has been confirmed that U.S. Republicans gain more popularity among whites, while the Democratic Party attracts more blacks, Asians and Hispanics [13]. Undoubtedly, the Democratic Party has an edge on ethnicity diversity, which motivates greater tolerance towards social issues, including environment protection and sustainability.

With respect to the educational levels, more highly-educated adults identify themselves as Democrats, with the number of post-graduates growing. In contrast, less well-educated adults choose the Republican Party as their partisan identification. Compared to the situation that the number of members in each party who were certificated as post-graduate was nearly the same in 1992, the gap of educational level has become wider as 56% of Democrats were post-graduates while only 36% of Republicans were post-graduates in 2014 [14]. People with higher educational background tend to be more knowledgeable

about climate crisis, concerned about the future of human beings, and cognizant of sustainability which should not be compromised by economic development.

In terms of generations, more than half of millennials tend to identify themselves as Democrats [15]. This younger generation are more open to climate issues and are willing to involve in ambitious climate protection actions as well as energy transitions from conventional sources to renewable ones.

These three aspects are the most noticeable demographic composition that characterize the Democratic and the Republican. Overall, compared to the Republicans who are more conservative about changes of climate and are more possible to feel skeptical about climate crisis, the Democrats are more open-minded and more enthusiastic to take immediate actions to address climate crisis. Their policy preference is predictable at the beginning due to their distinct demographic composition, their "essence" of partisan identification.

3.2 Divided demands of interest groups behind each party

The democratic composition discussed above is an innate motivator for the preference of climate policy between parties. In addition, there are external forces that promote such extremely polarized foreign climate policy.

To find out the external forces that have led to policy polarization on climate, an insight into the U.S. two-party system is indispensable. One thing that ought to be made clear is that interest groups play a key role in American policy making since parties need their resources to manage themselves as well as to win the next election. Interest groups like churches, corporations and media organizations, join the extended party networks, trying to affect at least one of the goals of each party [16]. Considering the essential financial support from the interest groups and their cultural power among the public, parties feel urged to cater for them if political principles or national laws permit. Hence, the demands from interest groups naturally are takin into serious account in any policy-making process. Because they don't belong to any part of political regime while acting as "influential actors" in political advancing [17], they are listed here as outside forces in the development of polarized climate policy.

One of the key reasons why interest groups are capable to act as "influential actors" is their lobbyists' eloquence in advocacy, through which they persuade the policy makers to support their agendas. Although Obama was ambitious in eliminating the power of "corporate lobbyists" [18], he could hardly deny that he had gained enormous resources from the Goldman Sachs [19] and the General Electricity (GE) in 2015 [20]. The Goldman Sachs has strong belief in the clean energy industry, and it aims to finance this future development [21], which needs to grow with less influential fossil fuel companies

competing. Similarly, GE is a corporation that harnesses renewable energy, such as sun, water and wind [22]. GE is a corporate leader in the energy transition, and there is no doubt that it has been benefiting from carbon neutrality for it sells those renewable resources. These two companies are examples of Obama Administration's vital donators, who are considered to be urgent in energy transition. Since the core of such transition is the refusal of conventional energy like coal and oil and the promotion of renewable energy, it is reasonable for the Obama Administration to put positive climate actions into effect and push forward global cooperation on climate protection.

Comparatively, President Trump has been closely connected to the fossil fuel industry and especially to the Dakota Access Pipeline. He has made investment between $1,500 and $50,000 in the pipeline through stocks of two of the fossil-fuel companies. This underground oil pipeline has been proved to be harmful towards water supply [23]. Meanwhile, coal miners are highly respected, and Trump expects that the revival of coal industry can bring him more profits [24]. In fact, under the contemporary climate crisis, fossil and oil are acknowledged as conventional energy that do harm to the climate, particularly for their negative influence on the climate warming. However, leading corporations of this conventional area are unwilling to abandon their fulfilling interests or to lose part of the energy markets along with the development of renewable energy companies. In other words, in the game of energy transition, innovation is not welcomed by them, and the cost of losing the game is desperately unpleasant for them. Thus, maintaining their present controlling positions in energy seems to be the only choice under the "survival crisis", in which the conventional energy companies either prosper or defeated by renewable energy companies. This choice conforms to the conservative attitudes of most of the Republicans, and traditionally, fossil fuel donors favored the Republican Party [25]. Hence, the giant companies that benefit from conventional energy together with the Republican conservatists advocate skeptical review on the climate warming theory. Out of skepticism and the desire to revive domestic conventional energy industry, President Trump criticized the Paris Agreement as "unfair" and "very, very expensive" [26].

As democratic, the Biden-Harris Administration follows the path of Obama's, weighing more on the liberal values that emphasize more on sustainability and globalization. Within the contributing list to the administration, the involvement of corporations or institutions that are tied to conventional energy is noticeably less. Top contributors for Biden in election include Asana, University of California and Alphabet Inc [27], which lay much importance on the innovation, including the renewable energy innovation. Compared to Trump-era, conventional energy companies are less

influential in policy-making because few of them are listed as top contributors of Biden. Without their refusal to climate protection, it is not surprising that under Biden's leadership, the U.S. rejoins the Paris Agreement with ambitious climate plan.

It can be concluded in this part that the policies of parties are partly motivated by their interest groups behind, among which the companies are in most cases the most influential. While the combat in business between conventional energy and renewable energy is becoming tense for the energy transition, the demands of each group are growing divided, thus enabling leaders' polarized decisions.

3.3 Changing public opinion

Public opinion is another factor that constitutes polarized climate policy. To be the president-elect and to win the poll, the candidates are supposed to consider opinions from partisan preferences and related interest groups in order to obtain trust and support as much as possible.

Presidential candidates are advised by their team to make electoral promises that will most possibly make them popular among the public. For the reason that environment or energy ranked within top three in election issues that the public concerned when Obama was campaigning for presidency (Gallup 2008), he precisely announced his targets for renewables and pledged to raise the standards of fuel economy [28], which are obviously ambitious, thus attracting a large number of voters. As for Trump, due to the upsetting "death spiral" of coal industry that does harm to U.S. economy and the employment of relevant workers at that time, he promised to rescind the strict coal policies under Obama Administration and support domestic coal sector both on the electricity demand and the coal mining [29]. As a result, the coal leaders as well as workers would like to choose him as the elected in the hope of suffering less from the fast energy transition. However, the situation slightly changed before 2020 election. Although the coal industry did revive a little, Trump's unconventional withdrawal from treaties of climate cooperation aroused more distrust than gratitude among the public. So, Biden came onto the stage and pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions and fight for climate protection [30], thus restoring the U.S. leadership, and meeting both the environmentalists' expectation and the renewable energy corporations' demands.

Furthermore, their electoral promises often articulated in definite terms are conducive to catching public attentions. To win in election, the presidential candidates seldom maintain neutral opinion regarding climate policy so that the public would not be confused in voting. Therefore, their strategy is being polarized to ensure the favoring attitudes of specific groups. For example, the friendly climate policy of Obama and Biden is to attract environmentalists and renewable energy corporations, and the unfriendly climate policy of Trump is to attract climate crisis skeptics, coal or oil industry workers and conventional energy corporations. Polarized promises and the actions of fulfilling them provide a pathway to steadier presidency.

Obama shows his determination in signing the Paris agreement, for which he bypasses the Congress [31], and his ambition in the Clean Power Plan [32]. Trump shows his attitudes in his withdrawal from the Paris agreement and his reducing fines and controls on coal or oil industries [33]. Biden shows his attitudes by rejoining the Paris Agreement on his first day of presidency [34]. These attitudes are outputs of polarized partisanship explained by the above three factors.

4. CONCLUSION

Partisan polarization embodies disparate power that is competing in the foreign climate policy. Overall, the chain of the impact includes three factors, which are listed as demographic composition of each party, interest groups behind each party and the public opinion in election. The analysis explains the inherent instability within the U.S. two-party system. Such instability comes from partisan polarization, and it reflects on the foreign climate policy, which accordingly becomes fickle.

This article demonstrates how the U.S. domestic regime influences its climate policy at international level. Furthermore, this article well explains three key factors that contributes to U.S. extreme climate policy. Practically, the explanation helps the global community understand the making process of U.S. climate policy and possibly predict what the next step of U.S. foreign climate action is.

It is noted that the analysis is limited by the perspective of partisan polarization, which is only one of the aspects of U.S. political regime. The research could be better if other factors, such as federalism, is also included. In the future, research could be done to further explore the climate federalism in the United States.

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