

CONSEQUENCES OF PARTY POLARISATION IN THE US CONGRESS ON US DIPLOMACY

Jeffrey S. Peake, *Dysfunctional Diplomacy: The Politics of International Agreements in an Era of Partisan Polarization*, Routledge, 2023, pp. 162.

The latest book by Professor Jeffrey Peak (Clemson University), published in 2023 by Routledge, is the continuation of his previous work, dedicated mostly to the Presidency and Congress. It explores the impact of partisan politics in the United States (US) on international agreements, drawing on historical context, case studies, and policy analysis. It is about interconnection and balance between the legislative and executive authorities. More precisely, it is about prevailing between two practices: the practice of executive unilateralism and shared power with Congress. Peake focuses on the consequences of party polarisation in the US Congress for US diplomacy. The central argument is that partisan politics can lead to dysfunctional diplomacy, hindering countries' ability to engage in effective international cooperation. The author discusses that partisan polarisation consequently results in a weakened role of Congress, increased presidential unilateralism in the making of international agreements, decreased influence the US has on International Law, etc. Using a mixed-methods approach, the author "provides an empirical analysis of the politics surrounding treaty ratification and the use of unilateral authority in diplomacy since World War Two, with a particular focus on the twenty-first century" (Peake 2023, 12).

Besides the introductory and concluding sections, the book's content is divided into five thematic chapters. At the end of each chapter is a conclusion summarising the research findings in the given chapter, followed by notes that explain in more detail some of the previously presented information and/or the author's positions or views. That is especially important for readers who are not as familiar with domestic politics in the US, allowing them to follow the content without major unknowns. Empirical and theoretical assertions in the chapters are complemented by numerous illustrations, such as figures and tables, making the content more tangible and receptive to the reader. Last but not least, the book is written in a very simplified vocabulary, without

complicated or unclear terms and expressions, which also makes it receptive to a wider readership.

At the outset, the author provides a concise historical overview of the development of dysfunction in the treaty approval process within the US Congress. This dysfunction ultimately led to the practice of “diplomacy without Congress” (Peake 2023, 1). The introduction also serves to elucidate and define several key concepts, including executive agreements, treaties, and political commitments. Each concept is followed by an illustrative example that complements it, making understanding easier. Since each form of agreement uses a different process to be completed, all the differences between these processes are thoroughly explained. Alongside the evolution of international agreements, the professor emphasises their importance in contemporary diplomacy as well as global governance.

The second chapter delves into the historical trends and approval rates of treaties submitted for ratification by different presidents, from Truman to Trump. The primary focus lies on recent trends and comparisons among the presidents of the twenty-first century. Peake paid most attention to the analysis of Obama’s experience with the New START in 2010 and Bush’s with the Moscow Treaty ratification in 2002. Although these two treaties shared many similarities, they faced very different ratification processes. To explain such an outcome, the author targets “partisan political context as the most important domestic political variable that affects the treaty ratification process” (Kelley and Pevehouse 2015; Krutz and Peake 2009). This analytical approach aims to reveal the evolution of polarisation over time and identify key moments that have contributed to the deepening differences between Republicans and Democrats.

In the following chapter, the author examines the effects of polarisation on the domestic politics surrounding treaties. The statistical analysis presented in this chapter utilises the following indicators: firstly, the number of treaties transmitted by presidents to each Senate; secondly, the modelled median time taken by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) to process treaties during each Senate session; and lastly, a detailed analysis at the treaty level to assess gridlock during the Senate approval process. Analysing treaty girdling is important because it indicates the president’s ability to achieve their diplomatic agenda; it can also affect the president’s reputation, and so on.

The results of this quantitative statistical analysis indicate that multilateral agreements are even less likely to secure Senate approval. The author further discusses that such practices negatively affect the position and role of the US in many international organisations. Therefore, the chapter also introduces the concept of partisan polarisation as a disruptive force in international relations, especially diplomacy.

The fourth chapter, entitled “The United States on the Outside: Multilateral Conventions”, explores several multilateral treaties that address significant issues such as the law of the sea, human rights, the environment, and arms control that remain unratified by the United States. Peake sees such agreements as the “epitome of dysfunctional diplomacy” (Peake 2023, 76). He provides case studies and examples to illustrate how political divisions can stall and prevent the United States from effectively participating in global diplomacy. He also discusses the role of interest groups in shaping legislators’ positions on international agreements. The analysis highlights the challenges and complexities introduced by partisan polarisation in the diplomatic process.

Chapter five begins by emphasising the characteristics of executive agreements and how they differ from Article II treaties. Furthermore, it examines how presidents can use executive authority to bypass congressional approval, discussing the legal and political implications of this approach. The author conducts an in-depth examination of a total of 3,045 publicly disclosed executive agreements signed during the second term of the George W. Bush administration through the Trump administration, with a particular focus on selected agreements related to trade and security. This analysis reveals a recent increase in instances where presidents opt for their own independent authority instead of treaties. Additionally, it presents some other challenges that occur as a result of this on-going practice, including the lack of transparency in the process of congressional oversight of the executive branch.

Chapter six discusses the limitations and disadvantages associated with the common practice of entering into international commitments without obtaining approval from Congress. These deficiencies are exemplified by two agreements, both signed by President Obama in 2015: the Iran Nuclear Agreement and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The lack of legitimacy is obviously one of the most obvious faults, but another is that an unratified treaty has no legal standing under international law. Therefore, it becomes relatively straightforward to reverse the commitment. President Trump withdrew the United States from both partially non-binding agreements. These agreements would have gained greater strength if they had received legitimacy from Congress. However, because both agreements were opposed by the Republican-led Congress, this was not a viable option.

The book concludes by summarising the key findings and arguments presented throughout the chapters. Peake reiterates the central thesis that partisan polarisation has had a detrimental impact on US diplomacy and international agreements. He also provides some closing thoughts on the implications of his research. Additionally, he offers reflections on the future of diplomacy in an era of partisan polarisation, considers the potential strategies for

addressing the challenges posed by polarisation, and emphasises the importance of finding common ground in the pursuit of more effective diplomacy.

This book addresses critical issues in contemporary politics and international relations, discussing the impact of partisan polarisation on a state's diplomacy and how it affects its international engagements. Therefore, this book effectively demonstrates the timeless and always relevant connection and interdependence between foreign and domestic politics. Peake's work provides valuable insights into the challenges governments face when trying to negotiate and implement international agreements in a politically polarised environment. That can shed light on why some agreements succeed while others fail. The academic contribution of this research lies, among other things, in understanding the dynamics of diplomacy in a changing political landscape and can serve as a reference for future research in the field.

References

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