

# Congress Is Already Post-Partisan: Agreement Across the Aisle on U.S. Foreign Policy

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*Foreign Affairs* Snapshot

January 28, 2013

Published at:

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-01-28/congress-already-post-partisan>

U.S. President Barack Obama began his second term last week, and already the prospects for bipartisan cooperation in the realm of foreign policy look bleak. In light of partisan acrimony over Obama's cabinet nominees; the continuing investigations into the attack on U.S. facilities in Benghazi; the departure of several senators with records of working across the aisle, including Joseph Lieberman, Richard Lugar, Ben Nelson, and Olympia Snowe; and the seemingly never-ending struggle over the federal budget and deficit reduction, many expect that partisan divisiveness will stymie progress on important foreign policy challenges facing the United States in Obama's second term.

Nevertheless, although issues such as the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran's nuclear program, and the U.S. defense budget may spur sharp partisan disputes, a new survey suggests that in other areas, bipartisanship on foreign policy may still be possible.

Last May, we reported in *Foreign Affairs* the results of a survey on the foreign policy attitudes of nearly 50 senior Democrats and Republicans, almost all of whom had served in national security positions in the executive branch. The goal of the survey was to capture whether their views on world affairs were becoming more polarized by party, particularly in areas related to international cooperation. Somewhat to our surprise, we found a reservoir of bipartisan support for a number of international organizations, alliances, and treaties -- such as NATO, the World Bank, the WTO, and the IMF -- as well as for the importance of multilateral action on issues such as nonproliferation and international trade. To be sure, the reasoning and priorities attached to these outlooks were often different: Democrats emphasized the legitimacy that multilateral engagement confers to U.S. foreign policy, while Republicans were more concerned about defending U.S. sovereignty and preserving freedom of action. But these differences were relatively small compared with the commonalities.

We wondered, however, whether there might exist greater division in foreign policy outlooks in Congress, where partisan attachments often burn hotter. In the lead-up to the 2012 elections, we conducted a similar survey of congressional staff who work primarily on foreign policy and national security issues, including relevant committee staff from both chambers, House and Senate legislative assistants, and Senate legislative directors. Close to 90 House and Senate staff members responded, evenly split by party and with about twice as many respondents from the lower chamber.

This new survey is notable not just because it allows comparison with executive branch attitudes but because it provides deeper insight into Congress, whose role in U.S. foreign policy is underappreciated, and sometimes forgotten entirely. On essential issues such as funding for the Pentagon, the State Department, and USAID; authorizing the use of force; ratifying treaties and trade agreements; confirming executive branch nominations; and writing the laws that govern U.S. foreign policy, Congress is both influential and indispensable. Yet we know surprisingly little about what Congress actually thinks about America's role in the world.

Today's severe political polarization might lead one to expect little overlap in the views of Republican and Democratic congressional staff, but our survey found some important areas of agreement (for tables comparing our two survey results, see [here](#)). More than 80 percent of aides in both parties think that it is important to protect U.S. sovereignty and that U.S. law takes precedence over the United Nations. Yet over 60 percent of staff in both parties think that most international problems cannot be solved by the United States alone, and that it is less efficient to act alone than to cooperate with others. These data suggest that both Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill share skepticism toward international law but recognize the importance of multilateral cooperation.

Congressional attitudes also converge on some specific security and economic issues. More than 70 percent of Republican and Democratic staff in both chambers have very favorable attitudes toward NATO and think that multilateral cooperation on the threats of nuclear proliferation and terrorism is very important. Responses to questions about global security treaties, including the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention, revealed that although Democratic aides are far more supportive of them, roughly half of Republican aides also view them positively. The United States' long-standing allies are another area of agreement: more than 90 percent of staff in both parties reported having a positive outlook on U.S. alliances with the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

Opinion toward the U.S.-Israeli partnership is more split. Whereas 88 percent of Republican aides have a favorable view of this relationship, only 59 percent of Democratic aides do. Opinion diverges even more sharply on the International Atomic Energy Agency: over 75 percent of Democrats have a favorable view of the institution, compared with fewer than 21 percent of Republicans -- a gap that mirrors a stark party divide in congressional attitudes toward the UN. Collectively, these findings on security institutions and alliances suggest that there is common ground in Congress on key principles of international security cooperation, but that Republicans on the Hill have much less confidence in global institutions charged with enforcing security treaties and keeping the peace.

Regarding international trade and financial institutions, about half of Republican aides and two-thirds of Democratic staff have favorable views of the IMF and WTO. This suggests that traditional Republican support for free trade and economic liberalization might extend somewhat to GOP congressional attitudes on multilateral economic institutions.

On climate change and the importance of preserving U.S. primacy, opinions among congressional staff split markedly along party lines. Democratic aides are three times as likely as

their Republican counterparts to think it is important to address climate change multilaterally, while Republican staff are two and a half times more likely than Democratic aides to think it is very important to preserve U.S. primacy in the international system. These findings suggest that Senate approval of a climate change treaty remains a distant prospect, and that the parties will continue to be at loggerheads in upcoming debates over defense budget cuts.

Still, taken together, the results of our two surveys suggest that there are areas of agreement between the parties, and that these convergences are at least as significant as the disagreements. Certainly there are sharp partisan divides on issues ranging from the nuclear nonproliferation regime to climate change to international trade, but on the whole, the gaps separating the parties are not as large as one might expect.

The intense partisanship of today's political environment often leads policymakers to oppose each other for political reasons, even when their views do not differ greatly in substance. But our findings indicate that it should still be possible for U.S. foreign-policy makers to work together -- both across the aisle and down the length of Pennsylvania Avenue -- on some important issues. Given the global challenges confronting the United States, the possibility of bipartisan cooperation could be a needful source of national strength.