



Yaro Patrice:¹ The effect of voter realignment on US foreign policy

Executive Summary

- In his second term, Donald Trump places greater emphasis on the implementation of the "America First" foreign policy doctrine.
- The voter coalition underpinning the Republican Party has undergone significant transformation in recent years, a shift that influences President Trump's foreign policy.
- The Republican Party is no longer primarily the party of the upper classes; its most important voter base now consists of individuals with lower levels of formal education, who are more receptive to the "America First" message and the foreign policy that follows from it.
- Political realignment is a continuous phenomenon in American politics, and the Democratic Party is expected to attempt to regain the support of the working class.
- The latter development could, in the long term, alter U.S. foreign policy priorities due to domestic factors.

Many scholars contend that U.S. foreign policy reached a critical juncture with Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2024. His second term demonstrates significant departures from his first, with foreign policy being no exception.² During this administration, Trump has more assertively articulated and implemented the "America First" doctrine, both rhetorically and in practice.³ This analysis seeks to explore how the electoral realignment observed in recent years has shaped Trump's foreign policy orientation and to assess its potential implications for global politics in the near future.

Introduction

The analysis seeks to interpret recent shifts in American foreign-policy rhetoric and practice through the lens of voter realignment occurring within U.S. politics. It aims to address the following questions: Why has the Trump administration turned away from the multilateral world order? What explains the transformation of the Republican Party — long a proponent of free trade and international institutions — into a party that, during Trump's presidency, increasingly embraced elevated tariffs? What developments among core Republican voters account for the fact that the party which, from Ronald Reagan through George W. Bush, actively cultivated transatlantic relations is now perceived by many as producing an administration viewed by

some as anti-European and by others as retreating from global engagement?

Over the past decade, the geopolitical landscape has undergone profound transformations, accompanied by significant shifts in U.S. foreign policy. While these changes have been influenced by a combination of external and internal factors, this analysis focuses exclusively on domestic dynamics — specifically, the realignment of the American electorate. The central hypothesis of this study is that lower-educated, working-class voters have demonstrated a markedly higher receptiveness to the "America First" message compared to the traditional coalition that historically supported the Republican Party. This shift in voter behavior and participation has driven notable changes in Republican foreign policy, initiating a departure from previous norms in several key areas: the erosion of soft power as a strategic priority, a redefined stance toward free trade, and the neglect — often coupled with direct challenges — of core institutions underpinning the liberal international order. These developments raise critical questions about the interplay between domestic political realignment and the trajectory of U.S. engagement in global affairs.

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² MACDONALD, Paul K.: America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump's Foreign Policy. *Political Science Quarterly*, 133 (3): 401–434.

³ GODDARD, Stacie E – KREBS, Ronald R - KREUDER-SONNEN, Christian – RITTBERGER, Berthold: Liberalism Doomed the Liberal International Order. *Foreign Affairs*, July 28, 2025.



2. Voter realignments in American politics

This analysis proceeds from the assumption that the Republican Party's increasingly divergent foreign-policy positions — departing from long-standing U.S. practice — are rooted in significant transformations within the party's electoral base. Before turning to these dynamics, it is useful to highlight several structural features of the American political system. Since the adoption of the Constitution, the United States has effectively operated under a two-party system. The primary reason is that at nearly every level of government — local, state, and federal — elections are conducted using majoritarian, winner-take-all rules following a first-past-the-post logic.⁴ As numerous international examples demonstrate, such electoral systems tend to produce de facto two-party competition.⁵

This does not mean, of course, that the same two parties have dominated American politics since the constitutional founding in 1789. Political science distinguishes several successive "party systems" and identifies a series of so-called critical or realigning elections that either brought an existing party system to an end or fundamentally reshaped the voter coalitions underpinning the major parties. In the First Party System, which spanned roughly the first three decades of the republic, political competition occurred between the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans (also known as the Democratic-Republicans, who bear no relation to the modern Republican Party). The Second Party System, lasting from the 1820s until the Civil War, featured competition between the Democratic Party (in its modern institutional lineage) and the Whigs. The Third Party System emerged after the Civil War and was defined by the Democratic Party and the modern Republican Party.⁶

Although historians sometimes identify additional party systems beyond the third,⁷ this analysis does not catalogue them in detail. Since the emergence of the Third Party System, the Democratic and Republican parties have remained the central pillars of the American two-party structure. For this reason, the discussion that follows focuses not on enumerating later party systems or minor parties, but on examining the critical elections that reshaped the major parties' voter coalitions.

In 1955, the American political scientist V. O. Key Jr. introduced the concept of "critical" or "realigning" elections — electoral moments in which sharp and enduring shifts occur in the political behavior of particular voter groups. In such elections, a segment of the electorate transfers its partisan support from one party to another, and this new partisan alignment persists across multiple subsequent elections. Crucially, this realignment is understood to be largely independent of short-term or idiosyncratic factors that might otherwise influence voting behavior.⁸

Although historians and political scientists — including scholars such as James E. Campbell — debate the precise criteria that define a critical election,⁹ there is broad consensus that the elections of 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932 constitute major realigning moments in U.S. political development.¹⁰ There is far less agreement, however, regarding which elections since the collapse of the New Deal coalition in the 1960s should be considered critical. Some analysts argue that Richard M. Nixon's victory in 1968 and Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 produced substantial partisan realignments.¹¹ Others contend that the so-called Republican Revolution in the 1994 midterm elections represents the most recent major realignment.¹² Considerable debate also surrounds whether Donald Trump's victories in 2016 or 2024

⁴ ANTHONY, George – CARL, Arthur: Two-Party system: A case study of United States of America. *The IDOSR Journal of Communication and English*, 4(1) 18–26.

⁵ ALDRICH, John H. – J. LEE, Daniel: Why Two Parties? Ambition, Policy, and the Presidency. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 4 (2) p.275

⁶ [The History of Political Parties in the United States](#). Bill of Rights Institute, 2025. (online, 2025.10.22)

⁷ SUNDQUIST, James L.: Dynamics of the Party System. Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States. The Brookings Institution. 1983. Washington D.C

⁸ KEY, V. O.: A Theory of Critical Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, 17 (1): 3–18.

⁹ CAMPBELL, James E.: Party Systems and Realignments in the United States, 1868–2004. *Social Science History*, 30 (3): 359–386.

¹⁰ NARDULLI, Peter F.: The Concept of a Critical Realignment, Electoral Behavior, and Political Change. *American Political Science Review*, 89 (1): 10–22.

¹¹ KNUCKEY, Jonathan: Classification of Presidential Elections: An Update. *Polity*, 31 (4): 639–53.

¹² SCHOFIELD, N – MILLER, Gary – MARTIN, Andrew: Critical Elections and Political Realignments in the USA: 1860–2000. *Political Studies*, 51 (2): 217–240.



should be classified as critical elections. A growing body of scholarship suggests that contemporary realignment may be better understood as a gradual, multi-election process rather than a single transformative moment,¹³ and that voter behavior may diverge significantly between congressional and presidential elections.

This analysis does not attempt to determine which specific election of the past decade qualifies as “critical.” Instead, consistent with its central hypothesis, it emphasizes that the period following Donald Trump’s entry into national politics has witnessed notable shifts in the partisan preferences of several key demographic groups. In 2016, Trump substantially expanded the Republican Party’s support among working-class voters, and in 2020 and 2024 he achieved significant gains among Latino — or Spanish-speaking — voters as well.¹⁴

For the purposes of this analysis, the political behavior of working-class voters is the most important.

3. Republican voters

The origins of the Republican Party (GOP, or “Grand Old Party”) can be traced back to the abolitionist movement. Activists opposed to slavery formed an alliance with settlers seeking to move westward across the North American continent with minimal federal intervention. It was in the spirit of the slogan “Free soil, free labor, free speech, free men!” that the Republican Party emerged in the 1850s. In the 1856 presidential election, the party nominated John C. Frémont, who ultimately lost to the Democrat James Buchanan. Four years later, Abraham Lincoln won the presidency, becoming the first Republican to enter the White House. In its early decades, the party’s commitment to liberty was unmistakable: Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and after the Union’s victory in the Civil War, Congress adopted three constitutional amendments addressing fundamental civil rights. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Republicans also supported women’s suffrage.¹⁵

The party’s core electorate traditionally consisted of Northern Anglo-Saxon Protestants — often referred to, somewhat humorously in sociological terms, as WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). This group not only secured victory in the Civil War but also spearheaded America’s industrialization in the decades that followed. Although the Republican Party gained substantial support among various immigrant communities by the early twentieth century, its leadership and voter base continued to be dominated by WASPs. After 1932, during the New Deal era, many immigrants and African Americans left the Republican Party, but this shift largely reinforced the position of the old elites. Until the 1960s, intra-party conflict centered on how different WASP factions envisioned constructing a political counterweight to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s program.

By the time Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980, the modern conservative movement had effectively absorbed the party, and Reagan succeeded in attracting a segment of the working class — the so-called “Reagan Democrats.” Yet even then, the GOP’s electoral strength continued to rest primarily on upper-income and highly educated voters. The 1988 presidential election illustrates this pattern: the victor, George H. W. Bush, was himself a WASP from a prominent New England family, educated at Phillips Academy and Yale University. That year, Bush won 62 percent of voters with a college degree and 67 percent of Protestant voters.¹⁶

Since 1988, the Republican presidential nominee has won the national popular vote only twice — in 2004 and 2024¹⁷ — and only in George W. Bush’s 2004 reelection did the party secure an absolute national majority.¹⁸ Although George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016 won the presidency through the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote to their Democratic opponents, many analysts argued that demographic changes in the United States threatened to render the party nationally uncompetitive in the medium term. The most alarming signal came with the GOP’s defeat in the 2012 presidential election.

¹³ NARDULLI, Peter F.: The Concept of a Critical Realignment, Electoral Behavior, and Political Change. *American Political Science Review*, 89 (1): 10–22.

¹⁴ DILULIO, John J.: [The 4 Working-Class Votes](#). Brookings, December 2, 2024. (online, 2025.10.28)

¹⁵ [History of the Republican Party](#). Alabama Republican Party, (online, 2025.10.29)

¹⁶ OLSEN, Henry: [The New Republican - American Compass](#). American Compass, 2024.11.18 (online, 2025.10.22)

¹⁷ [Presidential Election Results, 1789–2024](#). Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, (online, 2025.10.26)

¹⁸ Ibid.



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The Republican nominee, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, was not a classic WASP — he was a Mormon — but he was nonetheless a wealthy member of an influential East Coast family. In an election many considered winnable, Romney lost decisively to incumbent Barack Obama, not only in the Electoral College and the popular vote but also among several key demographic groups.

As the proportion of secular voters increased and the share of non-white voters continued to grow, many concluded that the Republican Party would struggle to win another presidential election in the foreseeable future.¹⁹ Then came 2016 and Donald Trump's campaign. Although, like Romney, Trump was a second-generation wealthy figure, his political identity was rooted in anti-elitism and populism. His platform placed far less emphasis on supporting large corporations, free trade, or more permissive immigration policies. In contrast to the Republican mainstream of the preceding decades, he elevated the priorities of fundamentalist Christianity while simultaneously advancing a secular and nationalist message centered on the interests of American workers.

The Republican vote share increased markedly in regions populated by descendants of Italian, Polish, and Swedish immigrants who arrived around the turn of the twentieth century. Beginning in 2016, Trump also made growing inroads among non-white voter groups that had traditionally supported the Democratic Party.

For the purposes of this analysis, however, the most significant indicator is Trump's gains among voters without a college degree in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential elections. In 2024, the Republican Party lost the college-educated vote — once a core constituency — by 13 percentage points, while Trump defeated Kamala Harris by 14 percentage points among voters without a college degree.²⁰ As a result, a party that had relied on upper-income and highly educated voters for more than a century and a half began, in the Trump era, to reposition itself as the party of the ethnically diverse American working class.

In connection with the previous chapter, it is increasingly evident that the 2016 election and the subsequent years marked — and continue to mark — a significant political realignment in the United States,²¹ one with substantial implications for American foreign policy.

4. American foreign policy in the Trump era

In his first presidential campaign, Donald Trump articulated a foreign-policy worldview encapsulated in the slogan "America First," although this phrase can encompass a wide range of messages and interpretations. Some observers argue that Trump's foreign policy essentially represents a continuation of earlier U.S. approaches, with no fundamental strategic shift — only a change in tactics. Others maintain that Trump is reshaping America's global role at a foundational level and is actively seeking to disrupt the existing international order and its institutions.

As early as 2015–16, Trump campaigned on the claim that NATO was an obsolete organization and that the United States' alliance relationships with Japan and South Korea were not beneficial from an American perspective. He also argued that U.S. free-trade agreements were disastrous and that other countries were "taking advantage" of the United States. In his rhetoric, Trump made clear his aversion to liberal internationalism as a global framework, instead envisioning a transactional foreign-policy system in which international negotiations are zero-sum contests determined by raw power.²²

Based on Trump's full first term and the first year of his second term, the main characteristics of "Trumpian" foreign policy can be identified. The Trump administration withdrew the United States from numerous international organizations and agreements — including the World Health Organization, the Iran nuclear deal, and the Paris climate accord — and reconceptualized America's global role around bilateral rather than multilateral engagement. A strong non-interventionist impulse also emerged, particularly in the reluctance to deploy U.S. ground forces abroad. At the same time, Trump did authorize the use of

¹⁹ SHEAR, Michael D.: [Obama's Victory Presents G.O.P. With Demographic Test](#). *The New York Times*, November 7, 2012. (online, 2025.10.29)

²⁰ OLSEN, Henry: [The New Republican - American Compass](#). *American Compass*, 2024.11.18 (online, 2025.10.22)

²¹ YASMEEN, Abutaleb et. al.: [Trump Coalition Marks a Transformed Republican Party](#). *The Washington Post*, 2024.11.06. (online, 2025.11.01)

²² AGRAWAL, Ravi: [Trump Is Ushering In A More Transnational World](#). *Foreign Policy*. 2025.01.07. (online, 2025.10.15)



non-ground military force when he believed it served the interests of the “America First” agenda, such as the 2017 airstrikes in Syria or the 2025 aerial attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.

It would be inaccurate to characterize Trump’s foreign policy as isolationist.²³ During his first term, he oversaw a peace process in the Middle East, and in his second term he has expressed a firm intention to broker at least a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine. He has also concluded various economic and/or military agreements with multiple countries.

However, one of the earliest decisions of his second term was viewed by some as a clear signal that an era in U.S. foreign policy — at least on the Republican side — had come to an end: shortly after taking office, the Trump administration abolished the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the flagship institution of American soft power. The following section examines how this decision, and the broader “America First” agenda, relate to the voter realignment that has taken place within the Republican Party.

5. The Relationship Between the Trump Administration’s Foreign Policy and the Republican Party’s Electoral Base

The scope of this analysis is limited to the Republican Party for two principal reasons: first, because the incumbent administration is Republican, and second, because the Clinton, Obama, and Biden administrations differed only marginally in their approaches to foreign affairs. By contrast, Trump’s foreign policy represents a far more substantial departure — even when compared to the agenda of the George W. Bush administration — and not merely along the traditional hawk–dove axis. The most significant and tangible shift introduced by Trump has been the explicit abandonment of American soft power.

5.1. American Voters’ Attitudes Toward Soft Power

Joseph Nye’s work in international relations distinguishes two primary ways through which a state can achieve its foreign-policy objectives: hard power and soft power. Hard power refers to the military and/or economic instruments of coercion that a state employs in its external relations.²⁴ Soft power, by contrast, is an intangible form of influence derived from a country’s culture, ideological appeal, and institutions.²⁵ Non-military, civilian foreign aid is also considered a component of soft power. In 2023, U.S. foreign assistance covered the following areas: economic development, humanitarian aid, health, peace and security, democracy, human rights and governance, education, social services, and environmental protection.

To understand how American society views these issues, it is first necessary to consider how Americans perceive their country’s role in the world. In a 2004 essay, Nye argued that the United States is not an empire. Although it maintains numerous military bases around the globe, it does not exercise direct political control over other nations — unlike the former European colonial powers. The main exceptions were the decades during which the United States governed the Philippines and exerted control over several countries in Central America and the Caribbean. American public opinion does not support imperialism. Most Americans believe in multilateralism and think that global problems should be addressed primarily through the United Nations. Nye also notes that both the public and Congress lack the willingness to engage in nation-building abroad. Even those who support intervention tend to favor quick, successful military operations rather than long-term nation-building efforts. This helps explain why foreign aid has historically accounted for roughly one-twentieth of U.S. federal spending compared to military expenditures.²⁶

5.2. The Political Economy of Soft Power

Because Trumpism significantly increased the proportion of working-class voters within the Republican Party, it is particularly important to examine attitudes toward foreign aid within this group. A 2010 study,

²³ WERTHEIM, Stephen: [Trump’s Foreign Policy: ‘He Wants to Turn the Tables, Not Leave the Room](#). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025.04.17 (online, 2025.10.12)

²⁴ NYE, Joseph S.: Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, (4): 160–163.

²⁵ NYE, Joseph S.: Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, 80 (80): 153–171.

²⁶ NYE, Joseph S.: Soft Power and American Foreign Policy. *Political Science Quarterly*, 119 (2): 255–270.



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drawing on two well-known economic models — the Stolper-Samuelson and Heckscher-Ohlin frameworks — analyzed foreign-policy preferences across U.S. congressional districts. The study found that in districts with higher capital endowments, voters were more likely to support foreign aid, whereas in districts with higher labor endowments, voters were far less inclined to support this form of foreign policy.²⁷ Since Donald Trump expanded Republican support in districts dominated by blue-collar workers beginning in 2016, the findings of this political-economy study help explain why one of Trump's earliest foreign-policy decisions was the dismantling of USAID, thereby weakening American soft power.

5.3. Elite Cues and American Voters' Foreign-Policy Attitudes

The classic "chicken-or-egg" dilemma also arises in this context: Does Trump's foreign policy reflect pre-existing voter preferences, or did the foreign-policy messages promoted by the Trump campaign reshape Republican voters' worldview?

One of the foundational studies on this question is Foyle's analysis of the first Taiwan Strait crisis in 1954. Foyle conducted a qualitative content analysis of statements made by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles during the crisis, concluding that elite beliefs and worldviews constitute an important variable in shaping the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy.²⁸ This insight is highly relevant to Trump's foreign policy. For many Republican voters, Trump functioned as a charismatic leader who repeatedly articulated his view that previous U.S. foreign policy — across both parties — had failed, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or the Iran nuclear deal. He frequently attributed America's domestic economic and social challenges to its global commitments.²⁹ Working-class voters who felt left behind in recent decades proved particularly receptive to these messages.

5.4. Foreign-Policy Preferences Among Lower-Status Voters

One of the most significant domestic political developments of the past fifteen years has been the voter realignment that transformed the Republican Party from a party of upper-income and college-educated groups into a party increasingly rooted in the working class. The factors discussed above describe attitudes within the general American population; this section focuses specifically on the preferences of less-educated voters.

Martin Patchen's 1970 study examined the relationship between social class and attitudes toward foreign policy. Using nationwide survey data disaggregated by education, income, and occupation, Patchen measured public views on U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and U.S. policy toward the People's Republic of China. His findings showed that lower-status individuals generally preferred non-involvement in foreign affairs. The lower a respondent's position on the socioeconomic ladder, the more likely they were to support withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam. Another key finding was that lower-status groups were less supportive of cooperation with communist China than Americans with higher levels of education.³⁰

Other studies corroborate these patterns. There is clear evidence that lower-status Americans are more likely to hold isolationist and nationalist views than other segments of society. They are also less supportive of policies—such as maintaining international organizations or sustaining foreign aid — that reinforce the United States' global role.³¹

²⁷ MILNER, Helen V. – TINGLEY, Dustin H: The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Aid: American Legislators and the Domestic Politics of Aid. *Economics & Politics*, 22, no. 2 (June 14): 200–232.

²⁸ FOYLE, Douglas C.: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Elite Beliefs as a Mediating Variable. *International Studies Quarterly*, 41 (1): 141–170.

²⁹ WRIGHT, Thomas: [The 2016 presidential campaign and the crisis of US foreign policy](#). Lowy Institute, 2016.10.07 (online, 2025.10.19)

³⁰ PATCHEN, Martin: Socio Class and Dimensions Of Foreign Policy Attitudes. *Social Science Quarterly*, December 1970, Vol. 51. No. 3, pp. 649–667.

³¹ ALMOND, Gabriel: *The American People and Foreign Policy*. Praeger, New York, 1977 180–192



6. Consequences in international politics

The Trump era brought substantial shifts in American foreign policy, and one of the underlying causes was the voter realignment through which the working class increasingly supported the Republican Party. It is important to emphasize, however, that this trend is ongoing, and it cannot be stated with certainty that Trump has bound this group to the Republicans for decades — certainly not in the way Lyndon B. Johnson's civil-rights legislation in the 1960s anchored Black voters to the Democratic Party. Ronald Reagan, for example, won 56 percent of the white working-class vote in his 1984 landslide reelection, yet by the 1990s partisan support within this group had evened out.³² Although Trump secured a comfortable majority of white working-class voters in each of the three presidential elections in which he ran, Joseph R. Biden narrowed the Democratic deficit in 2020, indicating that even in Trump's case the trend is not linear or irreversible.

These dynamics carry significant implications for international politics as well. Populist and anti-elite movements have emerged not only on the political right but also within the Democratic Party. In 2016, Senator Bernie Sanders — an independent from Vermont — came unusually close to defeating Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, and in the 2020 primaries he won the most votes in the first three states before the party consolidated behind the centrist Biden, partly due to perceived or real fears of nominating a radical left candidate. Other populist figures have also gained influence within the party, such as progressive Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Zohran Mamdani, the socialist elected mayor of New York City in November 2025.

Because Donald Trump increased Republican support not only among the white working class but also among groups that had traditionally leaned Democratic — Latinos and African Americans — the Democratic Party will likely attempt to win back at least a portion of the white working-class electorate, regardless of whether moderates or progressives dominate the party. Given that U.S. presidential elections are decided in a handful of swing states—and that in the last three elections several Rust Belt states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania were among them, all with sizable white working-class populations — it is highly plausible that some of Trump's foreign-policy messages will appear in the platform of a future Democratic nominee as both parties compete for these voters.

If a progressive Democrat were to win the 2028 presidential election, the resulting changes in U.S. foreign policy could be no less significant than those associated with Trumpism. Conversely, if the current vice president, JD Vance, or another Republican succeeds to the presidency after January 20, 2029, America's partners should prepare for the likelihood that U.S. foreign policy will not return to the trajectory that characterized the decades after 1945.

Under such scenarios, Europe should anticipate that transatlantic relations may not fundamentally reset after Trump's presidency, while Israel may face the possibility that the unconditional support it has enjoyed since its founding could diminish. The former would stem from the stronger isolationist tendencies of American workers compared to the broader public; the latter from declining pro-Israel sentiment within labor unions.³³ U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific may also confront the foreign-policy consequences of intensified domestic competition for working-class support.

In the global economy, the bipartisan consensus in favor of free trade is clearly eroding, driven in part by efforts to improve the economic position of American workers. It is also important to note that the rise of populism on both sides of the political spectrum may increasingly push federal resources toward domestic spending. Given the United States' demographic profile, major welfare programs — such as Social Security and the public health-insurance programs for seniors and low-income individuals (Medicare and Medicaid) — place growing pressure on an already heavily indebted federal budget. A future populist administration might therefore seek to reduce defense spending in order to preserve these welfare systems. If a left-wing populist government were to pursue an expansion of public health insurance, it is almost certain that the foreign-policy budget would be squeezed.

Although the Democratic Party's progressive wing holds a worldview very different from that of Trump-era Republicans, it could reach similar conclusions regarding soft power — namely, that fewer

³² DILULIO, John J.: The 4 Working-Class Votes. *Brookings*, December 2, 2024. (online, 2025.10.28)

³³ PRESS, Alex N.: [The US Labor Movement's Pro-Israel Consensus Is Starting to Crack](#). *Jacobin.com*, 2023.11.21. (online, 2025.11.02)



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resources should be devoted to foreign aid and democracy promotion in order to free up funds for domestic priorities such as welfare spending or infrastructure.

Given the intense competition expected for blue-collar voters in the coming years, the foreign-policy narratives Trump has embedded in the minds of these voters will likely exert long-term influence on U.S. foreign policy and, by extension, global politics. The populist wave now visible in both parties may produce consequences such as reduced U.S. contributions to NATO over the long term and, if defense spending declines more broadly, a contraction of America's global military presence.

7. Conclusions

According to some observers, Donald Trump's second administration has brought significant changes to American foreign policy. A comprehensive assessment of the Trump era can, of course, only be undertaken after January 20, 2029, but it is undeniable that the 45th and 47th president of the United States employs a markedly different language in both domestic and foreign policy. He openly challenges the liberal international order and its institutions, breaks with the decades-long bipartisan consensus on free trade, favors bilateral and transactional approaches over multilateralism, and substantially weakens American soft power.

In addition to the substantial body of research demonstrating that political leaders' messages can measurably influence public attitudes toward foreign policy, this analysis highlights a further conclusion: lower-educated social groups already possess a foreign-policy orientation that aligns closely with the one Donald Trump articulates. The working class is significantly more isolationist and nationalist than groups higher on the socioeconomic ladder. Blue-collar voters are also less supportive of international organizations and of U.S. foreign aid. Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that Trump distanced himself sharply — already during the 2016 presidential campaign — from the hawkish foreign policy of the last Republican president before him, George W. Bush, and that during his first term he made numerous gestures designed to accommodate the foreign-policy preferences of working-class voters. Winning over this constituency and integrating it into the Trump coalition was an explicit objective.

There is considerable debate about what will become of the Republican coalition after the Trump era. Some argue that the coalition will fragment and the party will revert to Reagan-era politics; others contend that there is no path back to the "country-club" Republicanism of earlier decades and that the party will remain, in a durable sense, the primary political vehicle of the working class. Regardless of how events unfold, voter realignments are a constant feature of the American two-party system, and it is entirely plausible that the Democratic Party will attempt in the near future to win back segments of the working-class electorate. Should such an effort succeed, a future Democratic administration could well produce foreign-policy outcomes similar to those the world has confronted during Donald Trump's presidency.



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Publisher:

John Lukacs Institute for Strategy and Politics
Eötvös József Research Centre
Ludovika University of Public Service

Editors:

Gábor Csizmazia, Viktor Eszterhai, Balázs Tárnok

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