

How the Rich Rule in American Foreign Policy

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Abstract:

U.S. foreign policy enactments are more likely to reflect the views of the affluent public than the middle class. We analyze the factors associated with their success. Foreign policy proposals are usually introduced to the public after they are already on the government agenda and they are more likely to be enacted than proposals in other areas. Foreign policy proposals that promote globalism, such as foreign aid, military conflict, international organization involvement, and trade agreements, generate more support from the affluent and are especially likely to pass. Think tanks coalesce in support of these globalist policies; those they favor are more likely to pass. In line with populist critiques of American foreign policy, elite interests and affluent citizens largely succeed in advancing globalization and American international entanglements despite less support from the middle class.

Donald Trump's two-minute closing ad for his 2016 presidential campaign connected Hillary Clinton to a globalist "political establishment." "Those who control the levers of power in Washington" and "the global special interests," he said, were pushing globalization, trade deals, and immigration at the expense of the American public: "It is a global power structure responsible for the economic decisions that have robbed our working class, stripped our country of its wealth, and put that money into the pockets of a handful of large corporations and political entities."¹ Trump targeted a political elite that he said promoted globalization over nationalism, following the views of the rich and well-off interest groups over the public interest.

Research by Martin Gilens (2012) finds that Washington policy outcomes follow the views of the affluent over those of the middle class and business over advocacy groups. Although usually cited in reference to economic policy, he actually finds that the relationship is strongest in foreign policy. Gilens does not seek to explain the concentration of elite influence in the foreign policy domain. But given the history of anti-globalization and populist movements, it is important to pinpoint where and why economic elites have disproportionate influence in these areas. The patterns may even comport with Trump's claims.

We analyze the factors associated with the success of U.S. foreign policy proposals compared to those in other issue areas (returning to Gilens' dataset with new data). Globalist foreign policy proposals indeed generate more support from the richest Americans and are more likely to pass. But all foreign policy proposals are much more likely to be enacted than economic or social policy proposals. A network of think tanks (perhaps the dreaded foreign policy "establishment" in the campaign ad) coalesces in support of globalist policy and helps it pass. And foreign policy proposals are more likely to be introduced into the public debate when they are already on the congressional or presidential agenda.

These patterns of foreign policy influence extend to foreign aid, military conflict, international diplomacy, and trade agreements. The findings are surprisingly consistent with Trump's notion that political elites have been given wide latitude to expand America's role in the world and its international obligations, even when their views are at odds with those of the wider public.

Elite and Public Influence in Foreign Policymaking

Foreign policy has traditionally been a realm where public opinion was assumed to have real but limited effects on policymaking (Aldrich, Gelpi, Feaver, Reifler, and Thomson Sharp 2006). Despite some consistent public views on foreign policy, the public does not ordinarily hold pre-existing views on particular international agreements or foreign interventions that then directly influence the decision-making of Congress and the President. Foreign policy attitudes, instead, are likely to be developed in the context of elite debates—with parties, interest groups, other elites in a competition to influence public opinion and policy (Druckman 2014).

Both Democratic and Republican elites are more internationalist than the mass public, with the low salience of foreign policy issues allowing elite consensus to evolve absent any large move in public opinion (Busby and Monten 2012). Both parties' donors and both parties' top-tier financial supporters are more likely to favor globalization than their voters (Broockman and Malhotra 2020). The inherent challenges of foreign policymaking, including the need for secrecy, speed, and flexibility, make relying on mass opinion more difficult (Holsti 2007). There is thus reason to expect diminished public influence in foreign than domestic policy as well as differences within the public on who holds views consistent with the foreign policy community.

The most comprehensive comparison of public and elite influence on foreign policy (Jacobs and Page 2005) found that outcomes were most influenced by business leaders, followed by foreign policy experts. The general public and labor were less influential. The patterns were consistent

across economic, military, and diplomatic foreign policy issues. Although many factors could influence foreign policy decisions, “business often wins” and the mass public has “comparatively muted influence” (Jacobs and Page 2005, 121).

Historical research adds substance to these findings. A foreign policy elite across Congress, the administration, the intelligence community, and think tanks has long had a culture of expert-led consensus policymaking, with the executive branch often organizing the policy agenda (O’Leary 1967; Milner and Tingley 2015). Although there are different patterns by topic area, the broad story of foreign policymaking is a consensus on liberal internationalism and the rise of American-led globalism (Milner and Tingley 2015; Ambrose and Brinkley 2010). Successive presidents have found new reasons to enlarge international involvement, from human rights to the Cold War to democracy promotion to the war on terrorism (Ambrose and Brinkley 2010).

Democratic and Republican administrations often reflected similar strategies and business community ties, with substantial crossover in administrative personnel (Van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2015). But Republican Party officials have traditionally “owned” the issues of national defense and international affairs, meaning they are traditionally trusted more by the public on those issues (Egan 2013). And think tanks also grew in foreign policy influence at the end of the Cold War, extending their domestic focus on individual rights to the international sphere (Snyder 2018). Issue networks involving business lobbies, administration officials, and think tanks all worked to expand international involvement across institutions (Hook 2015).

The foreign policy literature thus gives plenty of reason to expect strong elite influence relative to other spheres of policymaking. But it tends to see a relatively monolithic foreign policy elite in government, business, and think tanks driving the debate rather than an affluent public economic class. Knowing how the views of public economic classes, interest groups, and political parties intersect—and how they jointly help determine policy—remains important and understudied.

A shared internationalist outlook in foreign policy proposals may help to explain why parties and groups support similar proposals and why (compared to other policy areas) elite ideas are more likely to sail through the policy process.

Assessing Public, Interest Group, and Partisan Influence in Foreign Policymaking

We return to the dataset collected by Martin Gilens (2013) to address the positions of the public and political actors and their success in foreign policymaking. Gilens compiled 1,863 public opinion survey questions between 1981 and 2002 asking Americans whether a proposed policy should be adopted by the federal government and recorded whether each proposal was adopted within four years. Gilens estimates a non-linear relationship between respondent income levels and the proportion supporting each proposal. He then uses the expected level of support among those at the 90th income percentile (the affluent) and those at the 50th income percentile (the middle class) to predict adoption. Gilens found that the more the affluent support a policy proposal, the more likely it is to pass; middle class public support had no effect on policy adoption, after controlling for affluent support.

We have appended Gilens' dataset with additional information on each policy proposal. We divided the topics of the proposals between economic policy, social issues, and foreign policy using the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) codebook at policyagendas.org. Foreign policy issues include immigration, defense, foreign trade, and international affairs.² We also coded for the ideological direction of each proposal based on whether it expanded (liberal) or contracted (conservative) the scope of government spending, regulation, and responsibility. Additionally, we coded each proposal for support or opposition from the Democratic and Republican party leaderships in Congress and the White House. Our five-point party position measures range from strong support to strong opposition for each party. We have previously used these data to confirm that, although Republican

Party elites and business interests typically represent the views of affluent Americans, Democratic Party elites more often represent middle class opinion (Grossmann, Mahmood, and Isaac 2020). Our data and coding materials are available at dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop.

Here we add variables of particular interest to explaining foreign policy success. First, we categorized each proposal based on whether the policy was globalist or isolationist in orientation (or neither). We coded proposals for trade deals, increased immigration, foreign military interventions, foreign aid, international agreements, or international institutional involvement as globalist and proposals to reduce any of these involvements as anti-globalist. We coded both independent U.S. actions and multilateral involvement as globalist, so this dimension relies on level of international involvement rather than deference to international actors.

Second, we assessed the positions of think tanks (using the same procedures used for party positions), including three foreign-policy-specific think tanks: the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Council on Foreign Relations as well as two generalist think tanks that often comment on foreign policy (the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute). Even without taking official positions, these organizations regularly have clear and publicly articulated views that we were able to track in testimony, statements, news reports, or government documents.

Third, we distinguish proposals based on their agenda stage: the extent to which they are under debate for potential adoption in Congress (or in the White House). We separate proposals that—at the time the survey question was asked—were or were not under debate by policymakers (with associated legislation or a policy proposal) and those where a decision was imminent (such as a proposed foreign intervention). We sought to distinguish proposals that were further along toward resolution, which should be more likely to be adopted and more subject to reciprocal elite-mass

influence. Although we cannot claim to assess causal relationships, our goal here is to distinguish how foreign policymaking is different and to identify factors that may account for those differences.

Where Foreign Policymaking Stands Out

An initial look demonstrates some major differences between foreign policy proposals and others in the dataset (as reviewed in Table 1). Most policy proposals cover economic issues (48%) rather than social issues (28%) or foreign policy (24%). But some types of proposals are much more likely to pass, regardless of their public or policymaker support. More than half of the foreign policy proposals pass (53%)—that is more than twice the percentage passing in the other areas.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Compared to economic and social issue proposals, foreign policy proposals were more likely to be at an advanced agenda stage, with 57% close to an imminent decision compared to 31% for other issue areas. Across all issue areas, proposals approaching a decision were more likely to be adopted (44%) than those just under debate (30%) or those not under discussion (4%).

Foreign policy proposals were slightly less likely to generate public support than social or economic proposals, either from those at the median income or those at the top decile of the income distribution. They obtained a bit more support from Republican leaders and business lobbies than those in other issue areas but no more support from Democratic leaders.

Figure 1 illustrates the potential effect of the advanced agenda stage of foreign policy proposals, but also confirms that it does not offer a full explanation. In all three major issue areas, proposals under debate in Congress or the administration are far more likely to pass than those off the agenda. Few foreign policy proposals were off the agenda, but they were no more likely to pass than those in other issue areas. Even once they rise onto the agenda of policymakers, however, something helps foreign policy proposals toward enactment.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The Determinants of Foreign Policy Success

We compare the predictors of policy adoption for foreign policy versus those for other areas in Table 3. We model policy adoption as a product of levels of support among the affluent, the middle class, business groups, think tanks, Republican leaders, and Democratic leaders, while also accounting for the ideological direction and agenda stage of the policy proposal. According to the model, disproportionate affluent influence (compared to the middle class) is clearest in foreign policy but present everywhere. Think tank support (though not business support) is associated with foreign policy success. Only Republican support matters in foreign policy (with Democratic support even negatively signed and insignificant), whereas both parties' positions matter for policy adoption overall. Policies that are already on the policymaking agenda are unsurprisingly more likely to pass; that is true for all policy issues, but the estimated relationship is stronger for foreign policy.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Including the think tank variable in the model substantially reduces the estimated effect of business support (and makes it statistically insignificant). Previous research (Jacobs and Page 2005) suggested that business might influence these foreign policy experts. We can confirm that their preferences are often aligned but cannot adjudicate which is a first mover in the policy process. Think tank support, however, does matter independently of business support.

The Success of Globalist Policies

Does the disproportionate influence of elites and the rich in foreign policy—or the high passage rate for foreign policy overall—reflect a broad agreement on globalism? Figure 2 provides some evidence that it may. Many more of the policy proposals within foreign policy seek to expand

the international role of the United States (57%) than to contract it (11%). And these proposals (from trade agreements to foreign aid to military interventions) are far more likely to pass (62% versus 31%). Most foreign policy enactments advance the breadth of the American role in the world.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Table 4 adds a variable identifying whether a policy is globalist as a predictor of policy passage, building on the model from Table 3. Globalism is a significant predictor of policy adoption, though it does not appreciably change the relationships between partisan and interest group support and policymaking success. We also separately model the success of globalist policies and other foreign policy proposals in the last two columns. Agenda stage is strongly related to passage only for non-globalist policies; it does not seem to be the explanation for globalist policy success. In line with populist critiques of globalism, the coefficient on middle class preferences is strongly negative for globalist policies but not for others. The effect of affluent preferences and think tank support may also be more concentrated within globalist policies. Globalist agenda items generate more support from the affluent public and think tanks; possibly as a result, they are more likely to pass.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Table 5 further breaks down the foreign policy domain by specific issue, with the columns reporting the number of questions in each category, the passage rate, the average agenda state, and the average difference in preferences between the affluent and the middle class. The largest disagreements between income groups are found in proposals for foreign aid and trade agreements (where the affluent are more supportive) and tariffs (where the middle class are more supportive). The specific victorious proposals with the largest disagreements between income groups included the North American Free Trade Agreement and providing aid to post-communist countries. The largest disagreements where the affluent successfully blocked a new policy included proposed restrictions on Japanese automobile imports.

[Insert Table 10 here]

There are other important differences across subtopics. Proposals surrounding defense, international alliances, and trade agreements are much more likely to pass, though nearly all foreign policy subtopics have higher passage rates than economic or social issue policies. This may, in part, stem from their more advanced stage in the policy process. The broad range of proposals shows that the distinctiveness of foreign policymaking is not exclusive to a few policy areas. Rather than a separate policy process with distinct influential factors just for security policy or only for trade agreements, there seems to be a different foreign policy process overall that is more reliant on elite consensus around globalism. Although our findings remain largely identical if immigration and trade agreements are excluded from the analyses, their inclusion helps clarify that the dynamics of these areas match those of foreign issues rather than economic or social issues: policies largely represent the views of foreign policy elites and affluent Americans rather than those of the middle class.

Implications for Unequal Influence and Public Backlash

These findings are instructive for the current global debate over international institutions and trade; recent elections around the world center on perceived lost opportunities and quickening social changes associated with globalization as well as the perception that elites further a globalist agenda at the expense of the middle class. There is evidence in public opinion to support at least part of this story: the middle class is more opposed to globalist American foreign policy than elites and they do not tend to get their way. The view associated with the 2016 Trump campaign, that a global elite more open to internationalism than the middle class has pursued its own preferences in policymaking, draws support here. If think tank support can be deemed a foreign policy establishment, there may be a real organized elite aligned with upper-class public opinion that is more open international entanglements. The affluent favor foreign aid, trade agreements, increased

immigration, lower tariffs, international alliances, and foreign operations more than the middle class—and they win more often.

Our results further specify prior findings on the disproportionate influence of affluent Americans on public policy choices. The support of affluent members of the public is especially associated with the passage of foreign policy proposals, especially those that advance America's role in the world. These results confirm suspicions in the foreign policy literature that the effects of public opinion on policy may have been overemphasized (Adrich et al. 2006; Druckman 2014), but they suggest that at least the most affluent members of the public do have their opinions incorporated in policymaking. The evidence is only somewhat consistent with prior work showing that business elites have their views better represented in American foreign policy outcomes than the public (Jacobs and Page 2005; Van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2015); foreign policy think tank views appear to be more closely aligned with outcomes. Using a broader and longer-running universe of policy proposals than prior studies, we have found evidence consistent with elite influence, but shown that disaggregating the public and the elite show more specific patterns.

More generally, what issue areas policy proposals cover and how close the proposals are to a decision influence their levels of support in the public, their likelihood of passing, and the disproportionate influence of the affluent over the middle class. Although the opinions of the rich are taken into greater account in policymaking (Gilens and Page 2014), the area where the disproportionate representation is strongest may reflect the opinions of a longstanding foreign policy elite as much as contributions from the affluent public. The apparent patterns of public class and interest group responsiveness may suggest distinctions between what goals the public and policymakers support, rather than the independent influence of public economic classes and interest groups on each specific proposal.

Establishing causal direction remains important. We cannot say for sure that political elites follow the opinions of the affluent public, rather than shape it. If affluent Americans hear elite opinions first, we would observe a greater effect for their opinions even if the true channel of influence is from elites to the affluent. Foreign policy think tanks or Republican leaders may have successfully convinced only the richest Americans to support globalist foreign policy. Both parties' elites have also embraced more internationalism than their voters, either because they live in more cosmopolitan social networks (Busby and Monten 2012) or because their donors share pro-globalization attitudes (Broockman and Malhotra 2020).

Adoption of foreign policy proposals is also more likely because the public is usually asked for their opinion after proposals are at an advanced stage (for example, after a trade agreement has been negotiated or after a foreign intervention is in progress). The affluent public's views may thus respond to elite cues rather than independently influence decision-making. The influence of rich individuals in the American public may also work through the influence of political elites ensconced in think tanks or government.

These patterns shed light on recent populist backlashes, including the 2016 American election. Populist critics are correct that policymakers spent decades pushing to further advance the role of the United States in the world through greater international entanglements—from foreign conflicts to trade agreements to immigration to foreign aid. Although often overstated, it is true that these policies had far more support among well-financed elites than the American middle class. The Republican Party, in particular, had been advancing an agenda that may not have aligned with its (more isolationist) public base and doing so successfully, perhaps helping to set the stage for an America-first backlash within the party. It is telling that Republican leaders have been more supportive of foreign policy proposals than Democrats and that their support has been more

influential in passing globalist policies. Trump may have had an opening in Republican leaders' historical failure to represent anti-globalist views.

The Trump administration has attempted to pursue a far different path against the elite consensus, including substantially reduced immigration, international trade, foreign military involvement, and international organization involvement. Despite falling in line behind Trump on most issues, business interests and some Republican politicians have been far more likely to voice opposition to him on this agenda than on his domestic policies. Although he has succeeded in unilateral actions on trade and immigration, he has made far less progress convincing Congress to go along (even when Republicans maintained full control). The Trump administration is thus a test of whether the foreign policy establishment's views can withstand a forthrightly opposed presidency. But Trump's actions have also inadvertently generated a pro-trade, pro-immigration backlash in the American public, especially among Democrats. Having seen the results of Trump's policies, the middle class may be moving more in favor of globalization.

Our findings also raise normative questions about responsiveness to elites and the mass public. Most of the foreign policy agenda supported by elites (and historically more opposed by the middle class) is associated with economic evidence of its effectiveness: immigration, trade, and aid can improve U.S. economic standing while enriching the world (see Clausing 2019). Many of the reasons that the mass public opposes these initiatives are born of nativism, rather than distinct interests or democratic values. If policymakers had followed the views of the middle class over those of elites and the rich, America would have less immigration, less foreign aid, and a more isolationist foreign policy. It is true that, when the middle class and the rich (or the public and establishment experts) disagree, the rich and the elites are more likely to win. But given the issues where these differences of opinion are most likely to transform public policy, the dreaded "political

establishment” can argue that it is simply putting the social and economic interests of the nation and the world over the instincts of underinformed voters.

¹ The ad is available at: <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?418167-101/trump-presidential-campaign-ad>>.

² Reasonable alternative categorizations (such as moving trade to economic policy) did not substantially alter results. We later divide the foreign policy area into more specific subtopics based on the PAP codes.

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Table 1: Characteristics of Economic, Social, and Foreign Policy Proposals

	Economic	Social	Foreign
Proportion of Proposals (%)	48%	28%	24%
Passage Rate (%)	27%	22%	53%
Liberalism (1-7)	4.2	4.8	4.2
Agenda Stage (1-3)	2.2	2.2	2.5
Median Income Support (%)	57%	58%	52%
Rich Support (%)	57%	59%	52%
Republican Leader Support (2 to -2)	0.4	0.1	0.6
Democratic Leader Support (2 to -2)	0.1	0.2	0.1
Business Support (0-1)	0.48	0.47	0.53

Table 2: Predicting Policy Outcomes

	Foreign Policy Only	Full
(intercept)	-4.94*** (1.07)	-3.07*** (0.40)
Middle Class Preferences	-5.84*** (1.68)	-2.62** (0.82)
Affluent Preferences	10.29*** (1.79)	5.71*** (0.88)
Business Preferences	0.04 (1.13)	0.42 (0.43)
Think Tank Preferences	0.74* (0.30)	0.46* (0.22)
Ideology	-0.76 (0.45)	-0.27 (0.21)
Republican Support	0.23* (0.10)	0.27*** (0.05)
Democratic Support	-0.06 (0.09)	0.13** (0.05)
On Agenda	2.96*** (0.84)	1.15*** (0.27)
Imminent Decision	3.11*** (0.84)	1.57*** (0.27)
Economic Policies		-1.20*** (0.15)
Social Policies		-1.37*** (0.17)
AIC	466.14	1808.62
BIC	506.28	1873.79
Log Likelihood	-223.07	-892.31
Deviance	446.14	1784.62
Num. obs.	409	1686

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Predicting Foreign Policy Outcomes, Globalist & Non-Globalist Policies

	FP Passage	FP Passage (with glob)	Globalist FP Pol Pass	Non-Globalist FP Pol Pass
(intercept)	-1.41*** (0.42)	-1.52*** (0.43)	-0.50 (0.54)	-2.70*** (0.75)
Middle Class Preferences	-3.31*** (0.98)	-3.10** (0.99)	-4.09** (1.26)	-0.78 (1.68)
Affluent Preferences	5.92*** (1.02)	5.93*** (1.03)	6.66*** (1.33)	4.10* (1.70)
Ideology	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.04)	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)
Business Preferences	0.35 (0.66)	-0.09 (0.68)	-0.74 (0.82)	1.20 (1.26)
Think Tank Preferences	0.41* (0.17)	0.33 (0.18)	0.52* (0.25)	0.13 (0.27)
Democratic Sup	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.09)
Republican Sup	0.12* (0.06)	0.14* (0.06)	0.17* (0.07)	0.10 (0.10)
On Agenda or Imminent (binary)	0.26 (0.14)	0.21 (0.14)	0.05 (0.19)	0.55* (0.22)
Globalist Policy (binary)		0.47** (0.15)		
AIC	484.42	476.36	276.02	207.81
BIC	520.54	516.50	307.23	236.14
Log Likelihood	-233.21	-228.18	-129.01	-94.91
Deviance	466.42	456.36	258.02	189.81
Num. obs.	409	409	237	172

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 5: Characteristics of Specific Foreign Policy Topics

	Issue	Passage Rate	Agenda Stage	Median_Rich Diff	Partisan Diff	IG Diff	Number of proposals
1	Affairs with Specific Nation	0.53	2.50	6.17	1.44	0.14	32
2	Defense	0.79	2.50	3.89	1.12	0.21	24
3	Foreign Aid	0.61	2.50	8.94	1.32	0.15	38
4	Foreign Operations	0.67	2.48	4.76	1.17	0.11	42
5	Global Affairs	0.25	2.58	4.10	1.83	0.10	12
6	Homeland Security	0.39	2.87	3.99	0.78	0.15	23
7	Immigration	0.20	2.15	5.26	0.95	0.20	20
8	Intelligence	0.55	2.73	6.19	1.18	0.19	11
9	International Alliances	0.77	2.49	5.18	0.94	0.12	35
10	Military Aid	0.49	2.70	6.05	1.62	0.19	37
11	Military Personnel	0.50	2.25	5.21	1.00	0.15	12
12	Nuclear Arms	0.64	2.64	3.46	2.36	0.18	11
13	Tariffs	0.38	2.00	6.89	0.90	0.13	21
14	Terrorism	0.52	2.83	5.97	1.13	0.17	23
15	Trade Agreements	0.72	2.50	8.88	1.38	0.49	32

Figure 1: Proposal Passage Rates as by Policy Agenda Stage

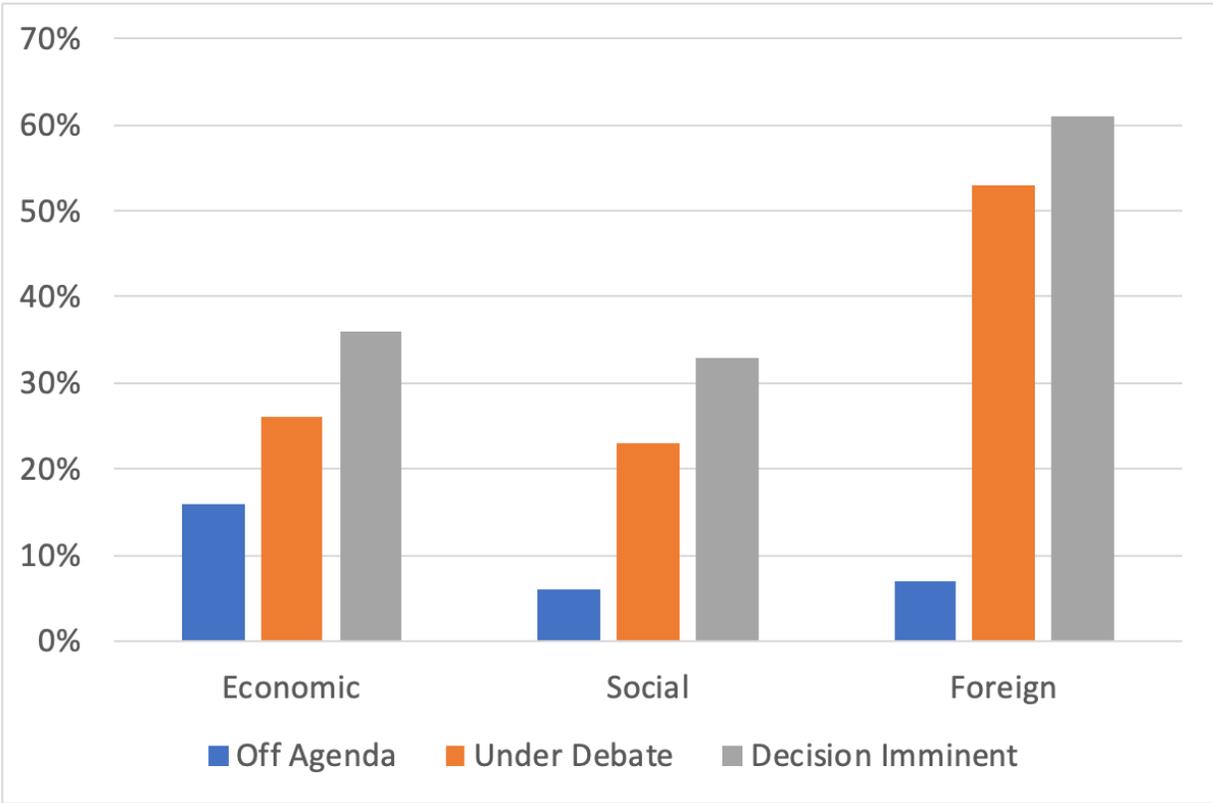


Figure 2: Globalist and Isolationist Foreign Policy Proposals and Policy Passage

