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Caught in a war of identities: Domestic polarization and the loss of U.S. consensus on the Ukraine conflict

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Abstract

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a rare bipartisan consensus was formed in the United States as Republicans and Democrats largely equally saw Russia's actions as a 'major threat' to U.S. interests. However, by the 2024 election campaign, this consensus clearly eroded as a growing partisan divergence was observable, increasingly affecting policy outcomes as well. How did domestic polarization undermine the U.S. foreign-policy consensus about Ukraine? Existing research highlights a difference between mainstream and polarization effects: depending on whether elite contestation occurs, higher public awareness can translate into consensus or division of opinion. Still, it is not clear which one is applicable, and how a case can move between the two models. The paper contends that the polarization effect is especially salient when foreign-policy issues are framed in the context of competing internal identities. As domestic polarization has sharpened, contestation over the preferred global role has undermined the articulation of a coherent U.S. policy. Connecting 'internalist' and 'externalist' accounts of ontological security, the paper examines both changes in public opinion and elite discourses on the Ukraine war during the 2024 presidential campaign; highlighting how fears about internal misrecognition spilled over to foreign-policy debates as threatened substate identities are projected into the international sphere. In an era of closely contested elections, such discord may have significant consequences beyond U.S. politics, even transforming global hierarchies.

Keywords: *United States; foreign policy analysis; ontological security; polarization; Ukraine war*

1 Introduction

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it seemed for a moment that Republicans and Democrats – policymakers and party supporters – can set aside their differences and form a consensus around a strong American response: supporters of both parties equally saw Russia's actions as a 'major threat' to U.S. interests, while dramatic increases in the aid provided to Ukraine were passed by overwhelming bipartisan majorities in both chambers of Congress, 'with few questions asked' (Edmondson & Cochrane, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022a). More than three years later, this consensus has clearly evaporated. During President Biden's last year in office, it took several months for the Republican-led House of Representatives to adopt an extension to the aid package, and when Speaker Mike Johnson finally scheduled a vote, he had to face a possible revolt within his own party and especially from close associates of Donald Trump (Gorman, 2024; Keating, 2024). Not coincidentally, a clear partisan divide also

emerged in public opinion: whereas 45 per cent of Democrats still found the invasion a major threat (which has only slightly decreased from 2022), among Republicans, this number almost halved, dropping to 26 per cent by the summer of 2024. As U.S. politics headed to the general election campaign, about half of Republicans believed that Americans provided 'too much' support for Ukraine, compared to around 30 per cent of all adults and a meager 13 per cent of Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2024). The growing partisan divide about the war in Ukraine has threatened continuous assistance; moreover, it has also raised doubts about the ability of the U.S. to fulfill its global leadership role more generally.

How did domestic polarization undermine the U.S. foreign policy consensus about Ukraine? The paper argues that internal identity contestations have been projected into the realm of foreign policy and, by framing support for Ukraine in identity terms, have actually exacerbated the divide on both sides. Specifically, these debates have taken place in the context of a domestic war of identities, potentially undermining the coherence and ultimately the credibility of American positions on the global stage. Domestic disputes have never really 'stopped at the water's edge' as strong divisions were visible, for instance, over military involvements in Vietnam and Iraq (see e.g., Pillar, 2023, ch. 5). Nevertheless, as American politics have become increasingly polarized along partisan lines in recent years, internal divisions have also spilled over to foreign-policy issues (Jeong & Quirk, 2019; Myrick, 2021; Schultz, 2017; Smeltz, 2022). Three decades ago, John Zaller (1993, pp. 97-113; 1994, pp. 190-193) found that in cases where there was a consensus among elite actors over a favored foreign-policy course, a *mainstream effect* was observable: support for such policies correlated with individual awareness of the issues. However, when elite contestation occurs, the *polarization effect* comes into force: rising awareness then translates into a growing partisan division in policy perception. This is certainly relevant in the support for aid to Ukraine, especially in an election year when such decisions are extremely politicized. It is still not clear, though, what drives such polarization: recent research has shown how pre-existing distribution of opinions over an issue can determine to what extent public opinion is changeable (Guisinger & Saunders, 2017), but this does not seem to be applicable here because of the original near-consensus about the war. Considering the identity-based sources of polarization can shed light on the processes that drive Americans apart on the conflict.

Scholars have studied extensively the role of public opinion in U.S. foreign-policy making: while, initially, conventional takes have emphasized that the general public has a limited understanding of and interest in foreign affairs, more recently, it was shown that the public can still form structured, coherent opinions (Almond, 1956; Converse, 1964; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Page & Shapiro, 1992).[1] Partisan divisions certainly point to such structured views on Ukraine, yet it remains still unclear whether these simply mirror elite cues, or policymakers themselves are to some extent affected by the expectations of an increasingly polarized electorate. This research does not aim to establish a clear causal direction between public and elite views; nevertheless, the objective is to demonstrate that when foreign-policy issues are framed in the terms of clashing domestic self-identities, Zaller's polarization effect becomes applicable, and a mutually reinforcing loop develops between public and elite contestation. While, for instance, Republicans and Democrats can still agree on seeing China as a rival, in the case of Ukraine the initial consensus was replaced with a deepening identity-driven

[1] For overviews of this literature, see: Holsti, 1996; Sobel, 2001.

split.

Hence, by studying both elite-level discourses and the corresponding shifts in public opinion, this paper aims to connect the internal and external sides of identity contestations. The argument to be outlined draws on the concept of ontological security, namely the idea that individuals and composite actors such as states and substate groups alike strive for stable identities, and such salient identities can be activated under perceptions of threat. In the United States, anxiety over long-term demographic changes induces discourses aimed at protecting supposedly threatened groups while solidifying partisanship (Hajnal, 2020; Jardina, 2019). The domestic side of this phenomenon is quite well researched by now: following results of social identity theory, scholars increasingly understand polarization as being 'affective,' i.e. primarily driven by overlapping group attachments instead of being purely based on policy or ideological differences (Iyengar et al., 2012; Achen & Bartels, 2016; Mason, 2018; but see also Abramowitz, 2018). However, grievances about internal misrecognition (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021) are also projected into the international sphere because once-dominant but currently status-losing groups equate ontological insecurities to their substate identities with those affecting the identity of a nation perceived to be in decline. In particular, a section of the U.S. electorate – comprising those Republicans who self-identify with the 'MAGA' (Make America Great Again) movement or declare themselves to be strong supporters of Trump – has developed strong attachments to various identity-related political positions, including views on international and foreign-policy issues. When they talk about their desire to 'take back *their* country' while expressing both pride (for U.S. history) and shame (in terms of the country's current prospects), they also favor policies that defend particularistic interests ('America First') against those deemed as 'globalist'. In turn, Democrats on the other side of the identity divide embrace inclusive interpretations of American nationhood and justify their policies in the name of abstract principles such as democracy. From this, I hypothesize that the polarization effect is observable for foreign-policy issues presented in sharp identity terms, because fears about the loss of internal status are projected into the international sphere. As I show below, competing discourses on the Ukraine conflict have increasingly been framed in such terms, thereby deepening dissensus and making any kind of reconciliation unlikely.

From this, the paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides the theoretical foundations for the analysis by building on existing results of ontological security theory and affective polarization. Connecting ontological security's internal and external components, I argue that threatened *substate* identities are projected into the international sphere, instigating visceral foreign-policy attitudes around certain issues. This directs attention to the sources of U.S. polarization, namely, how strong partisan attachment – and equally strong resentment toward the opposing party – increasingly propels divisions over policy issues, including questions of foreign policy. The following section provides a brief overview of how domestic grievances had already been externalized in U.S. politics before Russia's 2022 invasion. The rest of the paper shows how such developments can be illustrated through shifts in support for Ukraine at the levels of domestic preferences and elite discourses. Data from public opinion underscore how the decreasing support for Ukraine is connected to partisan polarization and especially identity-driven attitudes about the global role assumed by the U.S.; whereas an analysis of the discourses of the Biden-Harris administration and of the candidates in the 2024 Republican presidential primaries confirms

how this issue was increasingly framed in line with affective polarization. In conclusion, I show how a mutually reinforcing loop of supply- and demand-side factors has deepened the division over the aid to Ukraine. Namely, by exploiting identity-related grievances, politicians like Trump tap into deep-seated dissatisfaction with existing international arrangements through their divisive rhetoric. Thus, the analysis has clear practical relevance for policymaking: under a new Trump administration, and as the balance of power in Congress remains closely divided, partisan paralysis can further constrain the set of available (acceptable) policy positions, which can also endanger future American commitments beyond Ukraine.

2 Theoretical framework: Ontological security and affective polarization

2.1 Ontological (in)securities in International Relations

Ontological security has become an especially fruitful research area of International Relations in recent years. Introduced to the social sciences by Anthony Giddens, at the heart of it lies the idea that besides physical security, individuals and composite actors also need a relatively stable 'sense of self,' as they require 'a sense of continuity and order in events' to be able to 'keep up with everyday activity' (Giddens, 1991, as cited in Homolar & Scholz, 2019, p. 356). At the international level, it means that states seek ontological security because they also want to maintain a stable identity: this raises the question to what extent we can associate states with a single identity, but, as Jennifer Mitzen (2006, p. 352) noted in one of the earliest uses of the concept for IR, 'society must be cognitively stable in order to secure the identities of individuals, and as such individuals will become attached to these stable identities.' Still, Mitzen's original conceptualization was criticized for homogenizing the state's collective identity, and later formulations also emphasized identity contestation in the process of adopting ontological security (e.g. Steele, 2008, pp. 17–18, 58–60). Therefore, 'internalist' and 'externalist' sides of ontological security research have developed: one focusing on the narratives constructed within states in order to sustain a stable Self, while the other primarily investigates the external interactions through which ontological security can be managed or maintained (Zarakol, 2010; Solomon, 2018, pp. 938–939). As Hall (2022) demonstrates through the example of the omnipresent U.S. rhetoric of 'winning', the analysis of the two sides can be compatible with each other, and the argument below also starts from the assumption that securing substate identities can spill over to foreign-policy actions.

Internal identity contestation becomes most salient in times of crises: in such situations, states may experience ontological insecurity as their stable cognitive environment is questioned and they develop anxieties over the mismatch between the state's self-conception and its externally recognized status or role (Mitzen, 2006, p. 359; cf. Guzzini, 2012, pp. 46–47). Lack of adequate recognition can activate resentment and induce *autobiographical narratives* which aim to stabilize self-identity. While such grievances over misrecognition have mostly been explored at the periphery of the international system or in states which have experienced a loss of status (e.g. Subotić, 2016; Zarakol, 2010, 2011), some of the recent analyses of the resurgence of dominantly right-wing transnational populism have also connected domestic dissatisfaction at the core of the liberal international order to such processes (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022;

Steele & Homolar, 2019). Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2021, pp. 614–615) examine actors both at the core and the semiperiphery 'who once had or who tell themselves that they once had some standing, and now feel misrecognized particularly because of a loss of stature, real or imagined, in the recent or distant past.' Such discontent can 'fuel a desire to recover the lost "greatness" of a nation in decline,' appealing to nostalgia about a mythical past in which their nation occupied its deserved position, while within the nation, hierarchies were also seen as 'natural' (Agius et al., 2020, p. 432).

As noted in the literature, anxieties over internal differences are often externalized into outside threats through securitization (Huysmans, 1998; Hall, 2022, p. 3). This is definitely the case when once-dominant groups experience their (relative) loss of status; therefore, 'articulating exclusionary (even fundamentalist) conceptions of identity' can be part of attempts at stabilizing ontological security (Browning & Joenniemi, 2013, p. 496), implying that the crisis of a particular identity is perceived as the crisis of the whole nation. In such situations, longing for the greatness of a bygone era can also manifest in a paradoxical sense of both pride (for the past) and shame (in the present) – shame itself, according to Brent Steele (2008, p. 54), can be seen as 'the radical disconnect produced when national ontological security is disrupted' (cf. Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021, p. 618), while the co-existence of strength and weakness in self-representation can also accompany with what Hagström (2021) describes as 'great power narcissism' in American and Chinese discourses. Nevertheless, such contributions still work at the level of state or national identity – even if this identity can be contested or may remain ambiguous. At the same time, the identity division *within* the state can create grievances among different groups, which can ultimately lead to the projection of internal ontological insecurities to the international sphere. This leads us to the conceptualization of domestic polarization from an identity perspective.

2.2 *Social identity theory and affective polarization*

It has become commonplace to talk about domestic polarization – an increasing divide between Republicans and Democrats in specific issue areas and policy positions (Mason, 2018, p. 17) – in the context of U.S. politics; nevertheless, its precise meaning, and especially its sources, remain debated among experts. Regardless of whether one uses the term *polarization* or *partisan sorting* – the phenomenon that while policy positions of the public generally do not become more extreme, they are increasingly aligned with partisan identity (Fiorina, 2017, pp. 17–29, 67–79) – it is clear that supporters of the two parties are further pulled apart from each other, which requires explanation. Although some authors focus on individual-level factors such as personality traits like authoritarianism (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Stenner & Haidt, 2018), others, like Lilliana Mason (2018, pp. 17–23), argue that, at least in part, 'social polarization' also occurs between Democrats and Republicans. According to social identity theory, pioneered by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner, individuals strive for recognition as members of groups, which can reinforce in-group bias and out-group hostility even when group memberships are decided largely arbitrarily (for applications in political science, see: Iyengar et al., 2012, pp. 406-408; Mason, 2018, pp. 9–16; Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 228–231). This logic assumes that partisans do not arrive at policy positions from an ideologically coherent worldview, but rather discern ideology from group attachment; strong partisans are more interested in seeing their side 'winning' (and the hated Other 'losing') than in particular policy outcomes; thus, the

process is also termed 'affective polarization.'

In recent U.S. politics, various social identities have become increasingly fused together, forming what Mason (2018) calls 'mega-identities' around partisanship: '[a] single vote can now indicate a person's partisan preference as well as his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store' (p. 14). Arguably, the most important element of this development has been the racial realignment (Abramowitz, 2018, pp. 125–131) of the two parties since the civil rights era; furthermore, the election of the first African American president and increasing racial anxieties over demographic changes have activated a sense of white identity among a substantial part of the white electorate (Jardina, 2019; Hajnal, 2020; Sides et al., 2018, pp. 87-90, 165-166). The sorting and polarization around identity categories mean that there are fewer 'cross-pressured' voters whose partisan orientation is not aligned with social group memberships, making negative feelings toward out-group politicians and voters more hostile and seriously constraining the possibilities for political compromise.

However, there are relatively few contributions which explore the foreign-policy impact of affective polarization. Certainly, the divergence between Republicans who tend to favor muscular, unilateralist actions and Democrats who prefer multilateralist, diplomatic solutions is not new, but the dividing lines have arguably become much sharper as supporters of the two parties have formed diverging interpretations of the role they believe the United States should play in international politics.[2] Although some scholars have examined how the relative absence of external threats may have led to higher domestic polarization, and, in turn, how affective polarization may undermine a president's ability to mobilize the public in support of an intervention (Maxey, 2022; Myrick, 2021), the consideration of ontological security at a substate level can further shed light on the process through which certain foreign-policy issues like the Ukraine aid become polarized.

The sorting of the American public into two increasingly all-encompassing groups has raised the stakes of any contestations that can be translated into conflicts over identities. This is exactly what happens when foreign policy issues are interpreted as a choice between 'globalist' and 'America First' solutions, reinforcing zero-sum perceptions about certain disputes. The breakdown of the consensus over basic questions about *what* and *who* makes America great both internally and externally (and whether it had been great in the first place) connects anxieties over threatened substate identities to the fear of status loss at the international stage, resulting in divergent understanding of America's position in the world. From this, a hypothesis can be formed that foreign-policy issues articulated through identity terms will become more contested, thereby activating the polarization effect described by Zaller. In such situations, as the case of Ukraine exemplifies, internal grievances about ontological insecurities are projected into international issues, undermining the possibilities for domestic consensus.

[2] The growing discrepancy between Republican and Democratic attitudes have been clearly demonstrated across many cases, e.g. Friedrichs & Tama, 2022, pp. 771-772; Smeltz, 2022, pp. 789-797. On the connection between authoritarianism as a personality trait and certain foreign-policy positions like militarism, see: Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, pp. 79-83, 97-108.

2.3 Operationalization and methodology

It is not the aim of the current research to draw definitive conclusions about whether pre-existing elite polarization has led to the diverging foreign-policy views of the general public, or, the other way around, whether partisan elite views on certain international issues themselves are rather the results of deeper social divisions. Instead, I intend to show how such polarizing attitudes can be mutually reinforcing, especially when the underlying issue is framed in terms of clashing identities: in some sense, the supply of elite rhetoric fulfills the social demand of affective polarization, thus, public opinion partly follows elite cues, but these cues themselves are conditioned by expectations from partisan audiences. Then, the case study of the Ukraine aid debate in this paper can be seen as a plausibility probe for the above-mentioned hypothesis; the logic of the argument is substantiated, but a more rigorous testing would require a different research design (i.e. a comparison between polarizing and non-polarizing foreign-policy issues) which is beyond the scope of the present paper.

For the purpose of this analysis, the relevant substate identity groups within the United States are Democrats and Republicans, while within the latter group, 'Trump' and 'non-Trump' Republicans are further differentiated. Recent polls have identified around half of Republican voters as 'Trump Republicans' or supporters of the 'MAGA' agenda (Blake, 2023; Smeltz, 2024). The exact wording of the question varies from survey to survey, and the different characterizations might imply slightly different groups, but altogether an increasingly salient, more-or-less stable identity has emerged – even if the size of this group does not amount to more than about one sixth of the general public, they have significant influence on Republican primary elections and their voices are amplified in the right-wing media ecosystem. 'Trump' Republicans also clearly diverge from 'non-Trump' Republicans, Independents and Democrats on specific foreign-policy attitudes: they are less likely to support American involvement in the world, they are more pessimistic about spreading certain values such as democracy, and they are also the ones who are most likely to disagree with continued aid provision to Ukraine (Smeltz, 2024; Smeltz & Kafura, 2024). Then, the ontological insecurities here can be identified as fears of Others, such as migrants, characterizing an 'America First' worldview, which translates into particularistic foreign-policy preferences, whereas Democrats rather champion a universalist American identity centered on the defense of human rights and democracy. (Non-Trump Republicans and Independents, as we will see, are often located somewhere in the middle between the two opposing poles.)

In order to trace the formation of substate identities and to avoid essentializing such collective self-understandings, this paper looks at both demand and supply, manifested in both the grassroots mobilization of a wider audience and in elite-level rhetoric, understood here as the utterances of leading politicians from the major parties. On the demand side, drawing on public opinion data and on contributions from secondary literature – especially ethnographic studies covering the 'MAGA' movement – the objective here is to show how a significant section of the electorate has connected domestic grievances with international issues such as the U.S. support given to Ukraine, further deepening polarization. In terms of the supply of identity-driven rhetoric, I conduct a brief analysis of discourses on Ukraine as they appeared during the 2024 presidential campaign. Following Wæver (2002, p. 29), discourses can be conceived as structures that 'organise knowledge systematically, and thus

delimit what can be said and what not,' which here means uncovering the systems of meanings associated with the Ukraine conflict by major party candidates. With that, we cannot say that certain use of terms directly fueled further polarization, but politicians' choices of words still have consequences, as their interpretations enable certain diverging paths while foreclosing the possibilities for others. But before this analysis, a short review of the relevant literature on the U.S. identity divisions is in order.

3 From 'Mega' to 'MAGA' identities: Externalization of domestic grievances in the U.S. before the Ukraine war

As was mentioned above, Steele (2008) describes shame in connection with the development of national ontological insecurities; however, in the U.S. case, we may instead talk about the disruption of a particular group's ontological security. In the past few decades, a clear divide has emerged between two competing self-understandings, with starkly different implications for the U.S. global role. On the one hand, Democrats often emphasize a steady though uneven progress through American history which also justifies the extensive involvement in international affairs; on the other hand, many Republicans have co-existing feelings of pride and shame, closer to Hagström's 'narcissistic great power' identity. Such divisions and even 'Trump' Republicans did not simply appear with Trump himself, as their attitudes reflect what scholars such as Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williams (2013) had already documented years before the 2016 election in their study of the Tea Party movement: an intense feeling in a segment of the U.S. electorate 'that the United States as they have known is slipping away.' Tea Parties repeatedly talked in a language such as expressing their desire to 'take back *their* country' and fears about 'losing the nation they love, the country they planned to leave to their children and grandchildren' (p. 7).

Public opinion data have also shown an increasingly polarized understanding about anxieties over the loss of global position for the U.S. and nostalgia about its past greatness.[3] For instance, already in 2010, a majority of Tea Party supporters believed that 'America's best years are behind us' (Skocpol & Williamson, 2013, p. 30). Similarly, in her ethnographic study of rural America, Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016, p. 225) points out that Trump's 'supporters have been in mourning for a lost way of life. [...] They yearn to feel pride but instead have felt shame. Their land no longer feels their own.' These articulations of ontological insecurities are triggered by threats to their substate identity due to demographic changes and cultural transformations, especially among those who increasingly see themselves 'strangers in their own land.' This phenomenon is certainly further propelled by the rising salience of white identity: those whites who strongly identify with their racial group 'are especially likely to view themselves as prototypical [Americans], in part because what imbues their group with privileges and status is, in fact, this ability to define what it means to be American' (Jardina, 2019, p. 120). Although white identifiers do not completely overlap with 'Trump' or 'MAGA' Republicans, partisanship is strongly correlated

[3] According to the American Values Surveys, 80 per cent of Republicans but only around half of all Americans and merely a third of Democrats would agree that America 'is in danger of losing its culture and identity' and two thirds of Republicans believe that 'American culture and way of life has mostly changed for the worse' (PRRI, 2021, 2022). The values are even higher for those who 'most trust Fox News' or 'far-right news' so while these surveys do not distinguish between 'Trump' and 'non-Trump' Republicans, it can be assumed that the divergence is primarily driven by the hardcore GOP base.

with the development of 'white consciousness,' a mobilized and politicized form of white identity (Jardina, 2019, p. 40); thus, for our purposes, such racialized identity concerns can indeed be connected to 'Trump' Republicans' ontological insecurities.

Since these threatened groups inflate domestic identity threats to external threats on the whole nation, they articulate specific defensive foreign-policy positions. For instance, Jardina (2019, pp. 207–211) demonstrates that those whites who develop higher racial consciousness tend to oppose globalization and embrace a more isolationist attitude about international affairs. Then, a grievance about a loss of internal status is projected into the perceived loss of status of the United States, which reinforces visceral foreign-policy attitudes that favor particularism ('America First') and defensive pessimism over openness ('globalism') and optimistic value-laden foreign policy (supporting democracy). As the Ukraine conflict was increasingly portrayed in such framing, the continuation of American support was caught in the war between competing domestic identities.

4 How 'America First' took over the GOP: Rising demand for opposition to the Ukraine aid

The polarization effect, as outlined by Zaller (1993, pp. 100-102; 1994, pp. 190-192), does not explain to us why certain issues polarize more than others, and especially how partisan polarization emerges in the first place. Then, it is still puzzling how it became relevant instead of the mainstream effect in the case of Ukraine: after all, one at least could imagine an alternative line of events in which Republicans and Democrats agree to move the aid provision out of political contestation by references to overriding national interests, similarly to how the rivalry with China is treated by bipartisan elites.

In the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion, it indeed seemed that a common ground could be found around the responses to Moscow's behavior. In March 2022, Republicans were actually more likely than Democrats to claim that the U.S. did not provide enough aid to Ukraine, and Russia was seen as a threat by equal proportions within both parties, while there was broad support to work closely with U.S. allies (Pew Research Center, 2022a,b). However, this apparent consensus has concealed the fact that identity-related divisions over such issues were already deeply rooted. Not long before Vladimir Putin's decision, Republicans had a much less favorable view of international institutions like NATO, and they were less likely to hold strongly unfavorable opinions about Russia, perhaps as a result of previous polarizing issues such as the Russian interference in the 2016 elections and subsequent investigations.[4] With the open invasion, attitudes about Russia and NATO became temporarily depolarized, but this did not last long: Pew Research has regularly asked the public about Ukraine aid, and Republican support has already significantly dropped by September 2022. At the beginning of 2023, just before the list of presidential contenders began to formulate, a huge partisan division over Ukraine was already clear: among Republicans, a plurality (40 per cent) believed that the U.S. provided too much aid, while only a much smaller fraction of Democrats (15 per cent) had similar views (Pew Research Center, 2023).

[4] In a 2021 Pew poll, 44 per cent of Republicans, while 77 per cent of Democrats had favorable view of NATO; in 2020, only 32 per cent of Republicans, but 49 per cent of Democrats had very unfavorable opinion on Russia. In the immediate aftermath of the war these numbers have converged, but disagreements later came to surface once again (Pew Research Center, 2022b).

There is further evidence from the 2023 Chicago Council Survey that this growing dissensus was almost entirely due to the rising opposition from those who considered themselves 'Trump' Republicans: whereas 'non-Trump' Republicans' views closely matched those of Independents and the general public, Democrats and 'Trump' Republicans were increasingly located at the two ends of the spectrum. Overall, 63 per cent of Americans wanted to send additional arms and military supplies to the Ukrainian government. Among Democrats, there was an overwhelming (77 per cent) support, which remained practically unchanged from the previous year (79 per cent). The drop was more substantial among Republicans (from 68 to 50 per cent), and this dissent mostly came from 'Trump' Republicans (only 40 per cent of them supported military aid), whereas 'non-Trumpers' (59 per cent) have similar positions to Independents (60 per cent) and to the general public (Smeltz, 2024; Smeltz et al., 2022; Smeltz & Kafura, 2024).[5]

In addition, Trump Republicans have blamed Ukraine's President Zelensky and NATO – or even American policies – for the outbreak of the war in much bigger numbers than either non-Trumpers or Democrats.[6] Moreover, the opposition to the continued support of Ukraine was fused with the already-existing dissatisfaction with international order, which had been documented in the ethnographic works mentioned in the previous section. From this perspective, Zelensky was increasingly seen as the figure supported by 'globalist' elites, while Russia's anti-order behavior was connected to its 'anti-woke' defense of 'traditional values' (which was in fact manifested in its harsh anti-LGBTQ+ policies and in authoritarian ethno-nationalism), something that is especially appealing for elements of the 'MAGA' base. Specifically, as Perry et al. (2023, p. 446) show, Americans who score higher on the Christian nationalism scale – an important part of the pro-Trump coalition – are also more likely to say that 'Vladimir Putin exhibits leadership qualities I respect.' They associate these qualities with the defense of identities that are perceived as being threatened in a 'declining West,' while they reject foreign assistance – helping Others instead of Americans, – especially if it is done in the name of universal values such as providing support for democracy (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Therefore, the fears about threatened identities did not simply activate negative feelings about *any* policies that the out-group proposed and prominent members of the in-group for some reason disputed; these attitudes have been tied to *specific* policies that were understood to prioritize some Others at the expense of the Self, manifested in an exclusionary interpretation of the nation. In contrast to the segment of the Republican electorate that has consistently embraced 'America First', Democrats also found certain domestic ideas and identities (such as being defenders of democracy) to be at stake in the conflict, which found expression in competing political discourses.

5 Competing discourses: The supply-side of the identity-foreign policy nexus

For the following brief analysis, I have looked at mentions of the Ukraine conflict in campaign speeches, other disseminated remarks, official statements, and televised de-

[5] Unfortunately, the 2022 survey did not make a distinction between 'Trump' and 'non-Trump' Republicans to see how their views changed with relation to each other.

[6] There is also qualitative evidence to the 'MAGA' turn against Ukraine and President Zelensky in interviews with attendees of Trump rallies (MSNBC, 2024).

bate performances by major 2024 presidential candidates. For Republican candidates, this was relevant within the time period between the formation of the primary field in early 2023 and the major party conventions in the summer of 2024; however, in the case of Democrats, due to the exceptional situation arising from the late replacement of Joe Biden with Vice President Kamala Harris as the presidential nominee, the Trump-Harris debate is also included here.[7] Texts were collected from *The American Presidency Project*, from transcripts available at *Rev.com*, and from other official sources such as *The White House* website. I have identified the relevant sections discussing the Ukraine conflict and categorized the remarks in terms of the proposed behavior and the identity claims invoked to justify such actions. While due to the limitations of space, this paper can inevitably only provide a glimpse of the full picture, preliminary conclusions can still be drawn based on characteristic differences.

Major candidates can be put into three main categories based on their rhetoric: Democrats, 'traditional' Republicans, and Trumpist / 'MAGA' Republicans, including, first and foremost, Trump himself. While the first two groups mostly agreed on the preferred policy action (i.e. providing substantial military aid to Ukraine), slight differences are observable in the identity components mobilized for action; in contrast, Trump and his followers embraced a markedly different identity discourse, giving rise to policy disagreements as well. On the Democratic side, even with concerns over President Biden's ability to run a campaign before his withdrawal, there has been a continuity on Ukraine: Biden's few challengers have not distanced themselves on an identity dimension, and, following her late entry, Kamala Harris also defended the administration's policies in similar tones as Biden had done before.[8] At the same time, among Republicans, clear divisions came to surface, even if President Trump's renomination was never under serious threat. With 'MAGA' or strongly committed 'Trump' Republicans accounting for around half of those identifying as Republicans, a more competitive primary race would have been possible at least theoretically. Nevertheless, the better organization of the base, divisions among those less likely to support Trump, and most elected Republicans' active or passive acquiescence in Trump's return prevented the emergence of a strong alternative.

In Joe Biden's articulation, supporting Ukraine was closely tied to the U.S. role of global leadership and to the value-laden aim of defending freedom and democracy internationally. Already on the day of the invasion, Biden emphasized how the United States could not tolerate such a blatant violation of a rules-based international order, not only because this is against American interests, but because of basic elements of American identity: Americans 'stand up to bullies,' 'stand up for freedom,' because '[t]his is who we are' (Biden, 2022). Furthermore, in his 2023 State of the Union, Biden (2023a) talked about how the invasion itself was a 'test for America' whether it would 'stand for the most basic principles,' including the defense of democracy against tyranny. In December 2023, standing next to President Zelensky, he reiterated how 'Ukraine and America can strengthen democracy's arsenal' (Biden, 2023b). By this

[7] Donald Trump announced his run for re-election on November 15, 2022, just after the midterm elections, but most other Republican candidates launched their campaigns only in early 2023. The analysis of the Republican field in the first place draws on presidential primary debates, however, because Donald Trump did not participate in those, other remarks also had to be considered.

[8] Apart from the brief attempt by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., to run as a Democrat. However, his later switch to become an Independent candidate before ultimately endorsing Donald Trump and receiving a position in his cabinet is also in line with identity-related polarization, because his views have diverged substantially from those of mainstream Democrats.

time, Biden became increasingly frustrated with the unwillingness in the House of Representatives to consider continued assistance; in his last State of the Union, he directly scolded the Republican majority for 'want[ing] to walk away from our leadership in the world' by blocking the renewed aid package (Biden, 2024).

Biden's themes were further reinforced in Kamala Harris's remarks once she entered the race. In her acceptance speech during the Democratic Convention, she reiterated that as President, she would 'stand strong with Ukraine and our NATO allies' (Harris, 2024). In the debate with Donald Trump, her response about Ukraine also discerned the U.S.'s international role from its identity, showing clear contrast with her opponent: 'The reality is, it has been about standing as America always should, as a leader upholding international rules and norms. As a leader who shows strength, understanding that the alliances we have around the world are dependent on our ability to look out for our friends and not favor our enemies because you adore strongmen instead of caring about democracy' (Rev.com, 2024).

However, the issue of global leadership itself and especially the question of whether the U.S. should defend democracy abroad have become increasingly polarized (Smeltz et al., 2022, pp. 18, 22). Therefore, it is likely that this framing could have further strengthened the attitude divergence between Republicans and Democrats, reinforcing Democrats' belief that assistance to Ukraine is connected to a specific self-understanding of 'being American,' while further moving 'Trump' Republicans away. In this sense, the strong identity-related dimension among those who supported further assistance could inadvertently have undermined the chances of reaching consensus on the subject.

On the Republican side, leading candidates such as Trump and Ron DeSantis were originally not necessarily hostile to supporting Ukraine; they rather argued that the Biden administration did not do enough to deter Russia, which was actually raised in Trump's stump speeches as he still continues to claim up until today – without much evidence – that the attack would not have happened under his watch.[9] Altogether, however, DeSantis and Trump largely avoided the issue of Ukraine aid and rather focused on internal grievances related to culture war issues and the previous presidential election. Nevertheless, already in March 2023, in a response to a questionnaire posed by then-Fox News host Tucker Carlson, Trump claimed that it is *not* the 'vital national strategic interest' of the United States to oppose Russia in Ukraine, 'but it is for Europe,' which justified his position that Europe should pay more for the aid (Carlson, 2023a), and DeSantis also warned against 'becoming further entangled in a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia' (Carlson, 2023b). In a CNN townhall later in May, Trump further distanced himself from more aid to Ukraine, arguing that Americans were 'giving away so much equipment' so they 'don't have ammunitions for [them]selves' (CNN.com, 2023).[10] By September, the DeSantis campaign also boasted how his position on Ukraine – compared to others such as Nikki Haley and Mike Pence – was 'most in line with what GOP voters actually believe' (DeSantis, 2023), suggesting that here the expectations about preferences among the base at least partially played a role in formulating a response.

Similarly to how 'non-Trump' and 'Trump' Republican supporters divide on this

[9] E.g. Trump (2023a) said in a January 2024 Iowa town hall that 'It would've never happened. And it didn't happen. And it was unthinkable. I used to talk to Putin about it. It was the apple of his eyes. And I said, "Don't ever do it. Don't ever do it."'

[10] I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this quote.

issue and on the connected questions of America's global leadership, the presidential primaries unearthed the differences between the traditional wing of the party, represented by Haley, Pence, and Chris Christie, and those who are more aligned with the 'MAGA' base, like Vivek Ramaswamy, DeSantis, and Trump himself. When Ukraine came up in the debates, the traditionalists evoked America's historical obligations to global leadership, for instance, with the reference to the 'arsenal of democracy' in the spirit of the 'Reagan Doctrine' (by Pence), or by invoking 'moral clarity' (Rev.com, 2023a). In the second debate, Haley even attacked DeSantis for previously characterizing the war as a 'territorial dispute'; nevertheless, DeSantis rather highlighted his intention to 'end the war,' while Ramaswamy repeated more openly anti-Ukraine talking points such as 'just because Putin is an evil dictator does not mean that Ukraine is good' (Rev.com, 2023b). Although Haley won praise for her debate performances, the responses she gave in this example were more remote from the preferences of a base that increasingly viewed the support of Ukraine with suspicion and rather wanted an 'America First' policy to protect threatened identities.

This was, of course, most evidently outlined in Trump's speeches, who contrasted his approach with Biden's, who 'puts China first,' 'puts Asia first,' 'puts Ukraine first,' 'puts illegal aliens first' (Trump, 2023b). By comparing Ukraine to other external threats to U.S. identity, such as the perceived border crisis, he has moved toward more particularistic solutions in international policy, successfully tapping into discontent over 'globalism' among those experiencing internal domestic ontological insecurities. Moreover, Trump (2023c) has repeatedly connected the Ukraine war to a perceived decline of the United States, being taken advantage of and humiliated globally under Biden's leadership, which can only be reversed through his more inward-looking policies. The simultaneous references to shame (under 'globalist' leadership) and pride (in the past and under a potential future 'MAGA' direction) can reflect what Hagström understood as 'great power narcissism,' and what can be seen as the recognition of domestic grievances earlier mentioned here.

From this, it is unsurprising that during the campaign Trump did not pay too much attention to how the conflict could actually be resolved; after all, for him, it was more of a symbol of America's humiliation and its wasting of resources, which *Others* who are more closely affected – Europeans, NATO allies – should have mobilized. He also maintained that he could settle the conflict in one day – or even before taking office (Trump, 2023a) – simply because 'he knows' Putin and Zelensky; however, this did not indicate a resolution based on principles such as defense of democracy or recognition of territorial integrity. In this language, being the 'peacemaker' becomes the primary stated aim (Trump, 2023a) – even when such 'talking peace favors the aggressor,' which strikingly resembles the rhetoric used by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán about the Ukraine conflict (Peragovics, 2024), a politician Trump frequently praises in connection with his attitude to the war, and whom he also evoked in the debate against Harris (Rev.com, 2024).

Of course, by hindsight, we know that Trump did not create peace either in twenty-four hours or even during the first few months of his presidency; still, his oscillating approach to the conflict deviated from the policies of the previous administration. Although at some points he tried to put pressure on Putin as well, many times he blamed Ukraine or personally Zelensky for the conflict, in line with the expectations of the 'MAGA' base. Most prominently, at the disastrous meeting with Zelensky in the White House in February 2025, some concerns related to ontological insecurity surfaced, for

instance, when Vice President Vance insisted that Zelensky should thank Trump (The Guardian, 2025). Consequently, the war in Ukraine has also become part of the global struggle over the meanings of major issues in international politics between liberals and forces of transnational populism.

6 Findings and conclusion: Who polarizes whom?

The aim of the research was to demonstrate how a feedback loop can develop in the polarized understanding of certain identity-laden foreign-policy issues between public opinion and elite discourse due to mutually reinforcing ontological insecurities. In this way, the analysis served as a plausibility test for the hypothesis about how issues discussed in such terms can especially polarize both decision-makers and the general public by projecting internal grievances into the international sphere. Indeed, the Congressional delay of the adoption of new aid packages to Ukraine visibly shows that diverging identity constructions do not merely affect foreign-policy rhetoric, but can ultimately also constrain outcomes in policy-making. Furthermore, while it was not the intention here to draw definitive conclusions on the 'who polarizes whom' question between public opinion and the elites, a brief timeline of the findings can still reveal some of the mechanisms through which the domestic consensus over Ukraine has vanished.

First, even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there were some observable pre-existing identity-related divisions over the general contours of American foreign policy: going back to the Tea Party movement, we could identify a demand for a more sceptical and inward-oriented, less universalist direction, which was further substantiated in Trump's 'America First' slogan. Specifically, probably due to the domestically polarized views of the interference in the 2016 elections, Russia itself was a divisive issue, but overall there was less public awareness about the topic of Ukraine. Once the invasion began in February 2022, elites temporarily consolidated behind a common position, and the rising awareness – in line with the theory behind Zaller's mainstream effect – translated into a near-consensus among the public. However, there were already signs of potential weaknesses in this consensus: besides the pre-existing divisions over Russia, it was also notable that some 'MAGA' influencers like the political activist Charlie Kirk emphasized that the 'U.S. southern border matters a lot more than the Ukrainian border' in the very morning following the invasion (Hounshell & Askarinam, 2022). Moreover, while Trump and leading Republican politicians originally condemned the invasion, the relative absence of remarks later could further destabilize the consensus, especially as President Biden embraced a value- and identity-laden discourse in the meantime. Pew Research surveys in September 2022 and January 2023 found a growing gap between Republican and Democratic identifiers, and this gap was, arguably, further deepened by mid-2023, partly due to the inputs coming from 'MAGA' influencers, but increasingly also because of some remarks by Trump and DeSantis, as the responses to Tucker Carlson's questionnaire in March exemplify. The Chicago Council Survey, taken in September 2023, shows a rapidly growing dissensus compared to the previous year's results, especially because of the growing scepticism of 'Trump' Republicans, and the presidential primary debates around the same time also underscore the divide between the 'MAGA' movement and the traditional wing of the Republican Party. Trump himself could afford to skip these debates, but by late 2023, his own 'America First' rhetoric had also intensi-

fied, and a growing number of Congressional Republicans deserted their support of Ukraine.

Then, a plausible conclusion to draw is that an already *generally* sceptical part of the public received cues about these *specific* policies from certain opinion-leaders, and ultimately, from presidential candidates; however, the absence of forceful support for Ukraine itself could also weaken the consensus. In the meantime, Trump and DeSantis could also perceive that in order to fulfill expectations from their supporters, they have to approach the issue from an 'America First' angle, especially while traditional Republicans and Democrats justify the aid in identity-driven terms. At this point, higher awareness meant higher divergence, confirming Zaller's polarization thesis, while the tracing of these developments has shed light on how an originally seemingly non-partisan issue gradually turned into something more partisan. Therefore, the theoretical contribution here is more than simply to confirm the relevance of Zaller's two models, but also to show how one may turn into the other. The results do not necessarily contradict the findings of Guisinger and Saunders (2017) either: while originally baseline public opinion was indeed depolarized, underlying deeper tensions already existed, whereas the weaker initial pro-Ukraine signals by Trump and other Republicans were quickly overridden by more forceful identity-related divisions. Moreover, by connecting 'internalist' and 'externalist' components of ontological security, the paper showed how identity issues below the state-level can impact outcomes in international politics.

Whereas his model primarily stresses the top-down nature of preference formation, Zaller (1994, pp. 202–204) himself notes that it remains somewhat unclear to what extent 'elites really lead' rather than, for instance, follow public opinion by calculating possible expectations. Further research is certainly needed to decide who drives whose polarization, but the case of the U.S. divide over Ukraine suggests that for issues that touch upon crucial aspects of identities, it is incredibly difficult to depolarize debates even if temporary consensus is found. With Trump's return to the White House and following the disastrous meeting with Zelensky, the future of aid provision to Ukraine has become highly uncertain (and it was completely halted at some point), though other examples, such as his turnaround in the Iran case, suggest that the 'America First' expectations may constrain, but do not fully determine his political room for maneuver.

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