

RESEARCH ARTICLES

The Special Exception: A Bipartisan Consensus on Defense Spending in an Era of Extreme Political Polarization

Samaara Patil^a

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This paper examines why defense spending has remained a bipartisan priority in U.S. politics, despite ideological differences between the Democratic and Republican parties and the rise of polarization in other areas of government. This research utilizes secondary resources, including policy papers, intelligence reviews, polling studies, recordings, and the results of Senate hearings, as well as primary public media. As seen in major political topics such as immigration and healthcare, there has been a deepening divide as the two major parties are often straying further away from any agreement on those topics. While ideological divides shape discussions on military funding, defense spending remains a rare area of consensus due to its perceived significance for national security and economic factors. The study reviews historical defense budgets, presidential policies, and congressional voting patterns to assess trends in bipartisan support. The results indicate that despite increasing political polarization, both parties consistently approve substantial defense budgets, as reflected in the broad bipartisan passage of National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) across multiple administrations. These findings suggest that while polarization dominates many policy areas, defense spending remains an exception, driven by strategic and security imperatives. The study shows that while polarization is complex, bipartisan support for defense proves that the government can still function on key national issues.

Introduction

History is filled with moments of deep division and rare instances of unity. The concept of *them versus us* shapes everything from childhood social dynamics to political debates and media portrayals. Even in fiction, this theme is ever-present—Batman once said, “*We don’t have to like each other, but we do have to work together.*” This sentiment mirrors the reality of political negotiations, where ideological opponents often refuse to see eye to eye but recognize the necessity of compromise. Nowhere is this more evident than in defense spending, the one area of the federal budget where bipartisan agreement persists despite deep partisan divides.

Polarization is not a new phenomenon, but in recent years, it has become particularly pronounced in issues like healthcare and immigration policy. These topics dominate political discourse, with parties refusing to find

^a Samaara Patil is a student at the Harker School.

common ground, leading to legislative gridlock. However, one aspect of government spending that consistently avoids this deadlock is defense. Despite ideological clashes on nearly every other issue, both sides of the political spectrum continue to rally behind military funding.

This thesis will investigate why defense spending remains the last of bipartisan agreement in an era of increasing political polarization. It will examine how historical precedent, economic interests, and national security concerns shape this consensus. To analyze this, we will focus on defense spending in response to polarization through the campaigns of the United States presidents from 2012 to 2024, consisting of three presidents: Former President Barack Obama, former President Joe Biden, and former President Donald Trump.

Methodology

This paper uses a policy-oriented thematic analysis to explore defense spending as a unique area in government that still experiences bipartisanship in the most polarized state of the United States. By contrasting defense policies with other divisive policies, such as healthcare and immigration, the study highlights the exceptional nature of defense spending, bridging the ideological divide between the two parties. This analysis focuses on the presidential administrations of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, who represent different political parties and span a wide ideological spectrum from liberal to conservative. These three consecutive presidencies were also marked by rapid global modernization and shifting geopolitics, both of which provide an additional layer for the meaning of the continued bipartisanship in defense spending.

Using secondary sources – including congressional records, policy papers, media coverage, and public opinion data– this paper identifies consistent patterns of bipartisan support for defense spending. At the same time, the analysis acknowledges growing intra-party divisions within both Democrats and Republicans on specific defense issues such as military aid, Pentagon budget increases, and international interventions. These internal fractures, while less visible in final vote outcomes, suggest that full agreement on defense spending may face new challenges.

Literature Review

Polarization has been researched extensively in all aspects of our lives. Polarization, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is the division into two sharply distinct opposites. Nancy Rosenblum describes polarization as the deepening divisions between groups, particularly within the political sphere, resulting in a rigid alignment of viewpoints and a lack of compromise (Rosenblum, 2008). Lenka Hrbková further explains polarization as the process by which political parties and groups become ideologically distinct and divided, fostering an “us vs. them” mentality (Hrbková et al., 2024). Additionally, Morris P. Fiorina highlights that polarization encompasses not only ideological extremes but also a disconnect between elite and mass

opinions, suggesting that while political elites may become polarized, the general public does not necessarily follow suit to the same extent (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). In this paper, we define polarization as a deep ideological divide that fosters a strong reluctance to compromise. It appears that the exception of polarisation in defense spending has been a topic that has not been deeply reviewed.

Differences between Democrats and Republicans are found in all aspects of government. The Republicans historically favored war taxes during the early years (when tariffs and excise taxes were big), aligning with their manufacturing base. In contrast, Democrats, supported by agricultural interests, were generally opposed to taxes that would negatively affect their constituents. Adam Smith (*The Wealth of Nations*) voiced that governments typically avoid taxation due to its unpopularity, preferring to finance wars through borrowing. Conversely, Schumpeter ([*Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*]) suggested that states would have to resort to taxation when faced with urgent revenue needs (Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013).

Historically, Republicans have been associated with higher military spending, often advocating for robust defense budgets as a means to maintain U.S. global supremacy. In contrast, Democrats typically emphasize diplomacy and more strategic military funding allocation. For instance, Mintz and Huang (1990) highlight that military expenditures can negatively impact economic growth, noting that every 1% of the Gross National Product (GNP) dedicated to military spending could detract a significant portion (approximately 0.5%) from economic growth. As such, Democrats often argue for reallocating these funds toward social programs and infrastructure development, which they believe would yield greater economic benefits.

The economic frameworks of both parties also reflect their ideological orientations. Democrats tend to support Keynesian economics, advocating for government intervention during economic downturns, as seen in responses to the 2008 financial crisis with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This act focused on stimulating the economy through increased government spending on infrastructure and social services. On the other hand, Republican strategies often align with supply-side economics, emphasizing tax cuts as a means to incentivize production and consumption. To understand the impact of polarization, it is important to look at governmental fields such as healthcare and immigration.

Healthcare

A study done in 2023 reports that healthcare and immigration take up two of the top five most polarizing issues in the U.S. Research indicates that partisan attitudes toward the Affordable Care Act (ACA) have generated significant polarization, impacting not just public opinion but also the decisions made by political elites within states. For example, states with aligned partisan environments, where Democratic policymakers support ACA implementation while Republicans oppose it, exhibit heightened polarization in public attitudes toward the legislation. Certain conservative

states, like Iowa, Michigan, Arizona, and Indiana, adopted Medicaid expansion early, signaling that even in traditionally Republican spaces, there can be substantial support for expansive healthcare policies.

This variance complicates the broader narrative of polarization, suggesting that public opinion can sometimes transcend partisan lines, particularly when proposed policies are framed as beneficial for constituents. Advocacy groups have strategically used ballot initiatives to push for Medicaid expansions in states such as Idaho, Utah, and Nebraska, areas that previously resisted ACA provisions but later showed a willingness to engage with them.

The role of state governors further exemplifies how partisan polarization affects legislative outcomes. Research has found that in states where Republican governors have endorsed Medicaid expansion, the public's attitudes toward the ACA become less polarized. Contrastingly, Democratic governors supporting state-based exchanges may not see the same decrease in polarization, indicating the complex interplay of partisanship and public policy.

Bartels (2008) discusses the disparities in democratic responsiveness and how these affect political outcomes during divided governance, which can directly relate to public attitudes toward the ACA. Studies such as those by Pacheco (2019) highlight trends in public opinion regarding the ACA, showing fluctuations linked to the changing political landscape.

A wide-ranging analysis of survey data from national polling sources, such as the Kaiser Family Foundation and Gallup, reveals how partisan responses to the ACA can shift based on the political climate and the stance taken by state leaders. Multilevel regression and poststratification are crucial in estimating these public attitudes at a subnational level.

Immigration

A Pew Research Center survey reveals that while an overwhelming 80% of American voters disapprove of the current approach to migrant management at the US-Mexico border, opinions on solutions are starkly divided along party lines. Approximately half of Americans, including 42% of Democrats, advocate for mass deportations of undocumented immigrants, while a majority, 56%, endorse the expansion of legal immigration opportunities, with notable support coming from 43% of Republicans.

The comparisons between the immigration policies of former President Trump and President Biden further underscore this divide. Trump's administration favored more stringent measures, exemplified by his issuance of Executive Orders aimed at constructing physical barriers along the southern border and expanding deportation priorities, which included any undocumented migrants with criminal offenses. In contrast, Biden's administration has focused on reversing many of Trump's policies, including halting border wall construction and implementing new directives that reduce the detention of pregnant women and revitalize asylum processes.

Trump's "zero-tolerance" policy led to family separations and systemic risks for migrants, a practice that Biden has worked to counteract through measures such as establishing a task force aimed at reuniting families. This ongoing tug-of-war over immigration approaches not only reflects individual party priorities but also indicates broader societal disagreements on how to handle immigration reform effectively. Republicans prioritize border security and deportation of undocumented immigrants, with 91% deeming border security an important goal, including 72% who consider it very important. In contrast, only 59% of Democrats believe border security is somewhat important, with just 22% seeing it as very important.

In regards to pathways to legal status for undocumented immigrants, particularly those who arrived as children, 80% of Democrats support this compared to only 37% of Republicans. Additionally, both parties show significant support for taking in refugees, although this sentiment is stronger among Democrats (85%) than Republicans (58%). Overall, while there are shared goals, such as increasing support for refugees, the ideological rifts take precedence: conservative Republicans strongly advocate for restrictive measures like increased deportations (79% support), while liberal Democrats favor broader protections for undocumented immigrants. This division highlights the complexities of U.S. immigration policy preferences across the political spectrum.

The last significant immigration reform occurred during Ronald Reagan's presidency, and since then, attempts to pass comprehensive legislation have failed due to intense polarization. In recent events, Senate Republicans initially backed a bipartisan bill to tighten border security, but support quickly collapsed under pressure from former President Trump, reflecting how party dynamics can stifle compromise. The history of partisan conflict has overshadowed legislative efforts, with many Republicans perceiving immigration reform as an opportunity to strengthen their political stance rather than seek a middle ground. Moreover, Democrats have shifted their approach, considering only border security measures without addressing the status of undocumented migrants, signaling a retreat from previous negotiations that sought broader reforms. Rather than working collaboratively, both parties are increasingly entrenched in their positions.

Defense Budget

Historically, in defense budgeting, Republicans have been associated with higher military spending, often advocating for robust defense budgets to maintain U.S. global supremacy. In contrast, Democrats typically emphasize diplomacy and more strategic military funding allocation. For instance, Mintz and Huang (1990) highlight that military expenditures can negatively impact economic growth, noting that every 1% of the Gross National Product (GNP) dedicated to military spending could detract a significant portion (approximately 0.5%) from economic growth. As such, Democrats often

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While military expenditures can generate some positive externalities, their overall size effects are negative, leading to a decrease in GNP. The analysis suggests that reducing military spending could provide a “peace dividend,” potentially increasing economic output (Ward & Davis, 1992). Defense spending has been a significant and resilient component of the national budget, consistently outpacing cuts in other sectors, such as social services. This phenomenon is largely attributed to the lobbying power of military contractors and the political calculus surrounding job preservation in key districts, which reinforces the commitment to maintaining a robust “industrial base” in defense. As calls for reducing wasteful military spending gain traction, the discourse surrounding the defense budget has evolved to encompass broader issues of national security and strategic efficacy (Kuhn & Akers, 1997).

President Barack Obama’s Term

The extreme partisan polarization during Barack Obama’s presidency is significant because it represents a dramatic escalation of a long-term trend. The 70% gap between Democratic and Republican approval ratings during his sixth year, ranking among the highest in 60 years, showcases a deeply divided nation. This wasn’t just about Obama; each of his years ranked in the top ten most polarized, highlighting a broader societal shift (Jaffe, 2015).

Vox points out that the gap between party approval has dramatically widened in recent decades, exceeding previous levels by a significant margin, a trend dating back at least to the Reagan administration. This isn’t simply about differing policy preferences; it suggests a fundamental breakdown in shared understanding and trust between opposing political groups. The American Prospect further argues that factors like the balkanization of media, gerrymandering, and the influence of money in politics contribute to this polarization, creating vastly different realities for citizens despite their shared daily experiences. (Prokop & Katakam, 2015)

This polarization hampers presidential governance and weakens national cohesion. Obama himself expressed regret over his inability to bridge this divide, highlighting the political risks and pressures involved. The sheer magnitude of the partisan split during his presidency, with approval ratings reaching 86% among Democrats and a mere 10% among Republicans in one year, underscores a profound challenge for American democracy. (Waldman, 2015)

In October 2016, President Obama's job performance garnered 54% approval from the public, marking his highest rating since December 2012. However, this approval was characterized by significant polarization: only 14% of Republicans expressed approval compared to 81% of Democrats. This level of polarization is greater than that experienced by any president since the 1950s. (Tyson, 2016)

When Obama released his new defense strategy and budget in 2012, there was a decent amount of pushback from Republicans. However, a close study of prior presidents' spending and strategies conducted by Salon revealed that Obama's plan mimics the plans of Republicans before him, such as Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and H.W. Bush (Korb, 2012). The following year, the 2013 fiscal year defense bill passed 315-107 in the House of Representatives. (U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2014)

President Donald Trump's Term

The 2016 election reveals deep partisan divides. The Democratic party, despite internal disagreements between Clinton and Sanders supporters, unified against Trump in a coordinated effort involving prominent figures, significant donors, and numerous organizations. This response to Trump highlights a strong partisan opposition to his candidacy, perceived as an existential threat to American democracy. (French, 2020). Conversely, Trump's appeal rested on a blend of "ascriptive republicanism" and neoliberal policies, attracting Republican voters despite contradicting the preferences of party elites. The Republican establishment's acceptance of Trump stemmed from expectations of neoliberal governance, but his rhetoric remained rooted in populist and divisive appeals, revealing a significant ideological gap between elites and rank-and-file voters. Both Republican and Democratic elites condemned Trump's divisive rhetoric, contrasting sharply with the acceptance shown by their constituents. (Nolette, 2020)

This divergence underscores the deep partisan polarization and the chasm between elite and mass opinion on cultural and identity-based issues during the Trump presidency. The different reactions to the dismissal of the DNC lawsuit further illustrate partisan divides. (Neumeister, 2019) Donald Trump's presidency (2016-2021) was characterized by significant partisan divisions, with Republicans and Democrats fundamentally disagreeing on his performance and character. (Debenedetti, 2016) His administration implemented substantial tax cuts and pursued deregulation, while also taking international actions such as withdrawing from multilateral agreements and instigating a trade dispute with China. Furthermore, this period witnessed a

surge in misinformation and conspiracy theories, undermining public trust in the media and deepening existing political polarization. (Gramlich & Dimock, 2021)

The NDAA for FY 2015 provides \$577.1 billion for national defense programs. The Senate and House Armed Services Committees have reached a bipartisan agreement on the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2015. This act authorizes funding for the Department of Defense, along with various national security programs. Both Senator Levin and Senator Inhofe have underscored the strong bipartisan support for this bill, emphasizing its key provisions aimed at enhancing national defense and providing support for military personnel and their families. This agreement is a testament to the collaborative efforts in addressing critical national security challenges while also navigating the complexities of budgetary constraints. (U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2014)

President Joe Biden's Term

The 2024 election exposed a deeply polarized America, with President Biden's leadership a central factor in this division. Shadi Hamid's *Washington Post* article describes a shift from policy disagreements to outright animosity between Democrats and Republicans, a "dangerous new norm" reflected in Biden's question, "Who are we?". This, contrasted with the relative civility of the early 2010s, highlights a dramatic deterioration in political discourse. Reader concerns about fascism, electoral fairness, and bipartisanship underscore the crisis.

A *New York Times* study reveals significant residential sorting by political affiliation, exacerbating geographical polarization and impacting elections. David French's *TIME* analysis, focusing on the post-2020 landscape, highlights persistent partisan loyalty and animosity despite intervening crises. A *Washington Post* midterm preview echoes this, noting continued polarization and accusations of authoritarianism within the Republican Party. These analyses collectively paint a picture of a deeply fractured electorate, with the 2024 election serving as a stark illustration of this profound divide.

President Biden's average job approval rating reveals striking partisan divides: only 6% approval among Republicans, compared to 39% among independents and 85% among Democrats. This 79-point gap is among the largest in presidential history, underscoring a trend toward heightened political polarization over recent decades. The last nine years have been marked as some of the most politically polarized periods for presidential job approval. (Jones, 2025)

The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) has successfully passed the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) with an overwhelming 23-3 vote. This legislation incorporates 223 bipartisan amendments out of 433 considered. Named in honor of retiring Senator Inhofe, the NDAA includes a 4.6 percent pay raise for troops and emphasizes strengthening national security, supporting allies, and advancing technological capabilities. (U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2023a)

The Senate passed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (NDAA) with an overwhelming bipartisan vote of 86-11. This year's act incorporated 121 amendments, marking the highest number in recent years. Chairman Reed hailed the bipartisan collaboration as a significant victory for the military, acknowledging the teamwork with Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, and Senator Wicker. In addition, Ranking Member Wicker voiced his gratitude for the Senate's efforts and the vital partnership with Chairman Reed. (U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2023b)

Discussion

Despite deep political polarization on most issues, the defense budget remains a rare and consistent area of bipartisan agreement in the U.S. government. While healthcare and immigration policy fuel ideological divides, military spending routinely garners support from both Democrats and Republicans. This unity stems from shared national security concerns, economic interests tied to defense contractors and job preservation, and the strategic importance of maintaining global military dominance. Even under deeply polarized presidents like Obama, Trump, and Biden, defense bills have still passed with strong bipartisan support. Ongoing support for the defense budget shows that national security rises above party politics, offering rare stability in a divided government.

Several systems and rules help keep defense spending separate from the strong political divides seen in other issues. First, the defense industry has a powerful economic footprint, incentivizing lawmakers from both parties to support continued funding. Institutionally, the annual passage of the National Defense Authorization Act is viewed as essential for national security, making it politically risky to oppose. Ideologically, defense spending appeals to both conservative values of strength and liberal concerns about global stability and humanitarian intervention. These overlapping incentives foster a bipartisan alignment that other departments lack.

Just as defense spending often brings both parties together due to shared national security interests, similar strategies could be applied to other areas of policy. By framing issues through a lens of mutual benefit, such as economic growth or national well-being, policymakers can create more opportunities for bipartisan collaboration. Emphasizing common goals across different departments, whether it's social programs, infrastructure, or security, could help transcend partisan divides and encourage more unified decision-making. This approach could foster greater cooperation, even in the most polarized political climate.

Mechanisms that sustain bipartisanship consensus on defense, such as shared national security narratives, economic interdependence, and strategic framing, offer valuable models for bridging divides in other policy areas. For instance, healthcare or other infrastructure initiatives could be framed as essential to national resilience or economic competitiveness, appealing to both conservative and liberal priorities. Similarly, emphasizing job creation,

technological innovation, or public safety in climate and immigration policies may foster broader support. By creating narratives that highlight common national interests, policymakers can reframe polarized issues to reach more bipartisan results. This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources, which may introduce bias. The focus on 2012-2024 presidential campaigns limits historical scope, and the analysis lacks in-depth exploration of defense spending's exception to broader polarization. Aggregate data may overshadow nuanced intra-party disagreements, and the study omits the influence of lobbying and public opinion.

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