

Explaining Bipartisan Support for the US Innovation and Competition Act

Written by Benjamin Smith

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BENJAMIN SMITH, SEP 17 2021

The US Innovation and Competition Act (ICA) authorises \$110 billion for technological research to allow the United States (U.S.) to better compete with China. It began life as the initial Endless Frontier Act (EFA), which was put forth to congress by Democrats Ro Khanna and Chuck Schumer during the Trump administration in 2020. The act aimed to authorise \$110 billion to a new technology directorate at the National Science Foundation (NSF) (double the NSF's traditional funding) (Vox, 2021). Although initially rejected during the Trump administration, Khanna and Schumer put forth the act again during the Biden administration in 2021. Since the act was posed to receive bipartisan legislation, 'Schumer threw it into the traditional Senate process, letting it work through committees and get marked up by lawmakers' (Vox, 2021). These negotiations resulted in the bill transforming into the ICA. The senate expanded the bill to include 'loosely related' expenditures and 'rolled NSF's existing funding into the \$100 billion, cutting the amount of actual new funding by about half' (Vox, 2021). Following these amendments, the bill passed with bipartisan support.

However, the ICA's bipartisan support is exceptional, since the U.S. is otherwise highly polarised. While seemingly inexplicable, this article finds that Democrats and Republicans have shared ideological motivations for said support. Although they have otherwise conflicting partisan ideologies, Democrats and Republicans ideologically converge in opposition to China's authoritarianism. The result is that there is bipartisan support for the ICA because it promotes competition with China. Understanding this bipartisan support is of both scholarly and political importance, since Democrats and Republicans are highly polarised over almost all other policies and should thus be unlikely to cooperate over foreign policy.

Nevertheless, conflicting partisan ideologies remain evident throughout negotiations. Democrats advocate expenditures in a variety of sectors and tend to criticise China for being authoritarian – rather than communist. Conversely, Republicans prioritise military expenditure over all other sectors, and explicitly criticise China's communist ideology as a threat. Republicans also often utilise bipartisan negotiations to push their partisan agendas. They do so by claiming that policies implemented under prior Democrat administrations weakened the U.S. and thereby, enabled China's rise. These conflicts illustrate that smaller, partisan ideologies continue to remain active within a shared, bipartisan anti-authoritarian ideology. Thus, although ostensibly a bipartisan effort, partisanship still occurs during negotiations over foreign policy toward China.

Klein describes polarisation in American politics as group division 'over fundamental identities that tend[s] to generate intolerance and hostility' (2020: 43). Heltzel and Laurin found that 'polarization recently reached an all-time high in the U.S. [...] across all issues' (2020: 179). Given this, it is unclear as to why Democrats and Republicans then provided bipartisan support for the Biden administration's ICA (CNBC, 2021). This unexpected bipartisan support even extends to the electorate, wherein the general American public expresses support for the Biden administration to 'promote human rights in China even if it harms economic relations between the two countries' – regardless of their party alignment (PEW Research, 2020). For context, the American public is otherwise highly polarised along party alignment (PEW Research, 2020). To clarify this unexpected bipartisan support, this article poses the following research question: why is there bipartisan support for the Biden administration's ICA aimed toward China?

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To answer this question, I examine statements from Democrat and Republicans to identify potential motivations for their bipartisan support. In addition, I seek to identify how and why they may diverge in their ostensibly bipartisan support. Data sources for my analysis comprises of U.S. Senate Congressional Reports and various news outlets.

Perspectives on the presence (or lack of) domestic polarisation over U.S. foreign policy differ. At the advent of the Cold War, Republican senator Arthur Vandenberg famously stated that the US must stop 'partisan politics at the water's edge' (Senate.Gov, 2020). Nevertheless, the 'water's edge' thesis has been questioned as studies have continually shown that 'bipartisanship in foreign policy has broken down [...] since the end of the Cold War' (Jeong and Quirk, 2019: 59; McCormick et al, 1997; Marshall et al, 2001; Parent et al, 2008). Furthermore, post-Cold War studies have found that partisan ideologies often shape foreign policy decision making (Khong 1992; Kaarbo 1997; McDermott 1998; Schafer and Crichlow, 2002; Keller, 2005; Renshon 2008). To identify the specific ideologies that now shape partisanship over foreign policy, I turn to Gries' framework of small *i* and big *I* ideologies (2014).

Gries distinguishes dominant American political ideologies into a "big *L*" Liberalism and "small *i*" partisan ideologies (2014: 33; 35). Big *L* liberalism refers to a bipartisan ideological belief that 'seeks to maximize individual freedom' and thus 'sets the boundaries of the thinkable in American foreign policy' (Gries, 2014: 33). As a result, this bipartisan liberal ideology 'ensures that Americans will always be wary of tyrannies of any guise, whether fascisms and dictatorships of the right or communisms of the left' (Gries, 2014: 33). Conversely, small *i* ideologies are those that result in 'differences in [partisan] worldviews [and] foreign policy preferences [...] within the overall constraints of a shared "big *L*" Liberalism' (Gries, 2014: 33-34). The most dominant small *i* ideological differences within the U.S. are between liberals and conservatives. Such differences include liberals being 'much more supportive of spending on social welfare programs than conservatives, while conservatives [are] much more supportive of spending on national security programs' (Gries, 2014: 41-42). Throughout the following analysis, I will illustrate how these opposing small *i* ideological preferences remain active throughout foreign policy negotiations – despite a bipartisan concern for China's authoritarianism.

Adopting Gries' theoretical framework, I thus predict the following: bipartisan support for the ICA is due to a shared big *L* liberalism ideological belief that China's authoritarianism is a threat. However, partisanship still occurs throughout negotiations since small *i* ideological differences (liberalism and conservatism) remain active.

To identify why bipartisan support occurred, I turn to my previously outlined theoretical framework. Partisan ideologies took causal primacy throughout negotiations. While Democrats and Republicans evidently have opposing ideologies (i.e., regarding governmental expenditures, foreign intervention etc), they also share a negative view of authoritarianism (Gries, 2014: 34). As elaborated on later, Democrats and Republicans equally describe China's authoritarianism as a threat to both U.S. homeland security and the ideological survival of democracy. Both parties emphasise that the U.S. must match China's overall increases in power to maintain homeland security (albeit, with Democrats and Republicans differing on which sectors expenditure should be prioritised on) (Foreign Affairs, 2021). Similarly, there is bipartisan concern that China's authoritarianism will displace the established, American-led liberal democratic order (Foreign Affairs, 2021). Biden himself described the U.S.-China rivalry as part of a greater "contest with autocrats" over "whether democracies can compete [...] in the rapidly changing twenty-first century" (Foreign Affairs, 2021).

Admittedly, it is debatable as to how committed either Democrats or Republicans are to the defence of democracy. A large portion of the Republican party continues to provide support for prior President Donald Trump's unconstitutional actions, failed to condemn the anti-democratic 2021 storming of the U.S. capitol and perceive the 2020 election result as illegitimate (BBC, 2021). Likewise, the Biden administration claims to uphold a democratic international order, yet fails to provide support for poorer democracies in the Global South (Foreign Affairs, 2021). Regardless, both Democrats and Republicans still describe foreign authoritarian states as threatening and thereby, ideologically converge in opposing China. Thus, bipartisan support can be credited to shared anti-authoritarian sentiments overriding otherwise conflicting partisan ideologies (Gries, 2014: 34). In other words, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend".

Nevertheless, differences in how the parties approach negotiations illustrate that partisanship still occurs within this

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ostensibly bipartisan support. Democrats advocated for expenditures in a variety of sectors for the ICA. These sectors include climate change mitigation, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductor manufacturing, student scholarships and other areas of technological and scientific innovation (Vox, 2021). Democrat senator Jon Ossoff stated that since 'China [is] steadily investing in their own semiconductor manufacturing [...] the United States needs to compete, and in order to do so, we need to pass this essential funding' (Congress.gov: S2774). Ossoff claimed that attempting to manipulate the issue for partisan gain is pointless, as it only expands wage requirements and thereby impedes manufacturing expansion: 'Imposing additional costs on the construction of these advanced fabrication facilities [...] actually expands the role of prevailing wage requirements because this is essentially private construction, funded in part [...] by U.S. Federal tax dollars. So now is not the time to let politics get in the way of our progress.' (Congress.gov: S2774).

Conversely, Republicans prioritised military expenditure over all other sectors during negotiations for the act. Republican senator Jim Inhofe argued that the bill 'is not doing anything in terms of the military that we are suffering under right now' (Congress.gov: S2774). Inhofe and other Republicans put forward an amendment to 'make sure that any increase in nondefense, discretionary spending will be matched by the same level of increase to the defence spending' (Congress.gov: S2774). Inhofe attempted to present this amendment as a bipartisan effort, claiming 'this is not something that is just Republican. This is something that was agreed upon some 10 years ago by Democrats and Republicans' (Congress.gov: S2775). Yet, in the same speech, Inhofe criticised the Obama administration having 'reduced the budget for defence by 25 percent [while] [d]uring the same timeframe, China had increased theirs by 83 percent' (Congress.gov: S2775). In doing so, Inhofe implicitly blamed China's rise on the Obama administration's reduction of defence investments. Inhofe then went on to criticise President Biden as 'not willing to make the [defence] investment we need' (Congress.gov: S2775).

Other Republican senators echoed Inhofe's sentiments regarding military expenditure. Tommy Tuberville argued that 'the President's skinny budget is disappointing [and] a disservice to our men and women in uniform' (Congress.gov: S3920). Rand Paul criticised the bill's expenditures in non-defence related sectors, going as far as to describe the National Science Foundation as 'one of the most wasteful agencies in government' (Congress.gov: S3916). Paul described these expenditures as contradictory to combating China, since government-funded research is a tenant of socialism: 'We complain about Chinese socialism, which is the government running everything a spending all of the money. So, what are we going to do? The same thing [...] We are going to have government-directed research, to which we will all say: "Oh, socialism isn't good, but the government directed this"' (Congress.gov: S3916). These comments reveal that the Republican party's predominately anti-socialist, conservative small / ideology remains a motivating factor during negotiations (Gries, 2014: 42). While seemingly a bipartisan effort, partisan conflict over expenditure priorities is thus apparent throughout the negotiations.

Partisanship is further apparent when examining how Democrats and Republicans differ in describing China's ideological threat. Democrats, including Biden himself, tend to criticise China only for being authoritarian, rather than communist or socialist (Foreign Affairs, 2020). Senator Chris Van Hollen described China's authoritarianism as an ideological threat to democracy, emphasising 'the importance of democracy overseas' and to 'criticize China, rightly, when it begins to snuff out the right to vote in Hong Kong' (Congress.gov: S3405). While discussing competition over 5G technology, Senator Mark Warner criticised China's monitoring practices as a reflection of its authoritarian ideology and thus, incompatible with the U.S.'s democratic values: 'We are suddenly seeing China flood the zone with these standard-setting bodies, and when you set the standards, you also reflect your values. So, values that we bring to the table, like transparency and respect for human rights, go out the window when China sets the rules around 5G that basically allow traffic to always pass-through Beijing. Even if you are making a phone call between St. Louis and San Francisco, why does that traffic have to be routed through Beijing unless there is a malicious interest at stake?' (Congress.gov: S3188). Democrats thus consistently describe China's authoritarian practices as an ideological threat to the U.S.'s democratic regime, but do not tend to criticise China's communist or socialist ideology.

Although Republicans similarly denounce China's regime for being authoritarian, they also tend to explicitly criticise China's communist or socialist ideology as a threat. Senator Joni Ernst put forward an amendment to prevent 'providing additional U.S. funds to subsidize any state-run lab in China' so as to 'ensure that not another dime of taxpayer dollars goes to subsidizing Communist China' (Congress.gov: S3409). While criticising China's soft-power

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influence over U.S. universities, Senator Dan Sullivan stated that 'censorship, oppression, and one-sided thoughts are characteristics of Communist China, not America, and certainly should not be the characteristics of America's great universities' (Congress.gov: S3477). Senator Mike Lee similarly claimed that the U.S. 'cannot meaningfully compete with Communist China' so long as the U.S.'s federal regulatory system continued 'costing the American economy \$2 trillion the American economy \$2 trillion' (Congress.gov: S3493). Lee's comments are particularly revealing, since he simultaneously targets China's communism *and* advocates a key tenant of conservatism: the reduction of government expenditure (Gries, 2014: 42). As a result of their party's dominant conservative small *i* ideology, Republicans consistently address China's communism or socialism as threatening (Gries, 2014: 42). Thus, despite bipartisan support for the ICA, partisan ideologies remain active throughout negotiations.

It should be noted that there are select ideas which are shared across parties during negotiations. Since the initial introduction of the EFA, Democrats and Republicans alike have appealed to America's national identity and history to mobilise bipartisan support. The initial bipartisan supported bill claims: 'For over 70 years, the United States has been the unequivocal global leader in scientific and technological innovation [...] Today, however this leadership position is being eroded and challenged by foreign competitors' (Congress.gov: S2597). Republican senator Tuberville cited the U.S.'s identity as a global hegemon while identifying the threat that China poses: 'It is no secret that the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP, wants to replace the United States as the world's top power.' (Congress.gov: S2535). Republican senator Todd Young similarly appealed to the U.S.'s global significance, claiming that China is 'locked in a global competition with this great nation' (Congress.gov: S23841). Democrat senator Maria Cantwell also referred to America's identity as a leader and its expansionist history when discussing the nation's need for technological and scientific innovation: 'We are a nation of people who know how to innovate, who know how to use science to transform our economy, and we have done it over and over and over again [...] Maybe it came with, in getting in a boat and coming all the way across the ocean, you had to be an adventurer to begin with.' (Congress.gov: S2573). These appeals to American national identity and history are thus a tactic employed across parties.

The influential legacy of the Trump administration is also evident in both parties. Republican senators explicitly encourage maintaining policy decisions from the Trump administration. In reference to Trump's halting of the Thrift Saving Plan's investment in companies with ties to the CCP, Tuberville claimed that 'we need congressional action to make President Trump's decision with the thrift savings plan permanent' (Congress.gov: S2537). It should be noted that Tuberville was amongst the Republican senators who attempted to overturn Biden's electoral victory. Tuberville's desire to retain policy decisions from the Trump administration is thus part of a broader partisan view that the Biden administration is illegitimate.

The influence of the Trump administration is also observable within the Democrats – albeit less directly. The preceding Democrat Obama administration generally pursued a less competitive foreign policy toward China (Christensen, 2009: 28). The successive Republican Trump administration initiated a strategy of hegemonic competition with China: most notably in the form of a trade-war (Schweller, 2018: 37). Despite polarisation over the Trump administration's trade war, Democrats have nonetheless become more hostile toward China, and the Biden administration has thus continued a strategy of hegemonic rivalry. The Trump administration thereby shifted the ideological spectrum for both parties toward pursuing hegemonic competition with China.

Yet, these select shared ideas between parties are relatively exceptional. As I have illustrated above, it is partisan small *i* ideological preferences that have predominately shaped negotiations (despite operating within a bipartisan big *L* liberalism ideology) (Gries, 2014: 42). Therefore, although there is ostensibly bipartisan support for the ICA, partisanship remained active throughout negotiations.

To conclude, the ICA received bipartisan support due to both parties perceiving China's authoritarianism as an ideological rival. Nevertheless, their smaller, partisan ideologies remained active within this shared, bipartisan anti-authoritarian ideology. The result is that partisanship occurred throughout negotiations and substantially altered the contents of the act. While other ideational factors (including appeals to America's national identity and the legacy of the Trump administration) held some influence, partisan ideologies ultimately took causal primacy throughout negotiations. Looking forward, scholars and policymakers should more closely examine the complex dynamics of

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ideologies within foreign policy – rather than assume it is solely bipartisan or partisan.

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