

How US Political and Economic Geography Shapes US Foreign Policy

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This last year, I had the great honour to work under Professor Peter Trubowitz of the Department of International Relations on the project “How US Political and Economic Geography Shapes US Foreign Policy.” The project’s main purpose is to bring to date Professor Trubowitz’s book “Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy” and give an insight into the foreign policy motivations post the cold war and into the 21st century. His book gives an alternative view of defining the national interest arguing that USA’s regional diversity could be understood to explain its foreign outlook. The aim of the project was to look at recent academic literature, congressional voting behaviour and the economic geography of corresponding regions to give a holistic understanding of how regional diversity translates into policy choices in congress and government. My work primarily revolved around conducting literature review of recent academic literature and legislative documents along with tabulation of voting behaviour in the United States Congress.

Methodology

The research methodology applied in this research involved literature review of a diverse set of academic articles. Professor Trubowitz had directed me to focus on a few key themes that I stuck to throughout the project. They were Trade and Foreign Policy post the cold war, the rise of China and subsequent import competition with the country and Defence Spending. I made use of prevalent research material such as on the “China-shock” and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). I also looked at Voting behaviour in congress, especially in the NAFTA vote to determine any regional voting trends. I also presented summaries of each academic article I studied with my comments to Professor Trubowitz.

Data and Findings

The thought behind the research is seeing how different regions have voted and the try to reconcile that behaviour with the economic and political factors of that area

China Shock: A clear divide exists between South and North of the USA. The South, predominantly having a manufacturing base, reacted to the China shock with more protectionist preferences. Cheap imports from China provided competition for the Southern industries who preferred candidates with protectionist policy agenda. Contrary to this, the regions with more services based sectors benefited from the import of technology or “knowledge economy” and took a more liberal stance towards trade with China.

NAFTA: A mixed and confusing reaction to NAFTA. The vote was bipartisanship but had more Republicans behind an agenda of a Democratic President. Some trends that emerged showed that a lot of discontented people moved towards Republican candidates in the next election. This shift to more Republican consolidation is discussed in detail in the academic literature discussed and provided to Professor Trubowitz.

Defence Spending: A particularly interesting theme as there is a lot of literature on this topic yet little that is around a spatial dimension. The basic finding is of surprise as the Defence budget expected to be lowered post the cold war is still observed to be significantly high. A few explanations come to the forefront. Firstly the post 9/11 Iraq war and the invasion of Afghanistan. Secondly, there is an economic bargain between congress and the executive as Defence Industry is a job provider in many states. Representatives of those states have pushed for greater funding to keep those jobs, and their re-election chances, afloat.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, my research will assist Professor Peter Trubowitz by making it easier for him to choose relevant material from a vast array of research papers directing him to recent works of authors like Daron Acemoglu and David Autor. Moreover, it will also help him to segment his book in a way that covers these different themes thoroughly. As the project is ongoing, it is entirely up to him how he structures it. Furthermore, my comments will help him see precise data, like voting records and economic predictions, from a contextual lens providing a solid foundation for economic geography to the study of International Relations.

Working under Professor Trubowitz has indeed been a meaningful experience allowing me to grow both intellectually and personally. As a research assistant, I had the privilege of presenting my preliminary findings at the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) allowing me to widen my horizons as I discussed my work with students from various other universities in the UK. I am profoundly grateful to the US Centre and Professor Trubowitz whose guidance allowed me to further my research skills and contribute to his esteemed work. I would also like to thank the staff in the US Centre who have thoroughly supported me in carrying out my duties as a Research Assistant.