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475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274
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POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

Volume 127 · Number 2 · Summer 2012

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The China Card: Playing Politics with Sino-American Relations

PETER TRUBOWITZ
JUNGKUN SEO

Perhaps no country will figure more prominently in America's future than China. China's rapid ascent is already an issue on Capitol Hill, and with over 50 percent of Americans worried about the implications of China's rise for the United States, relations with China are a hot-button electoral issue.¹ Indeed, the 2010 midterm election campaign witnessed a flurry of anti-Chinese television ads, linking America's economic troubles to China's emergence as an economic powerhouse. The most memorable of these was the so-called Chinese Professor ad, which depicted a China-dominated future in which confident Chinese intellectuals chuckle over America's relative decline.² Alarmed by the spread of "Sinophobia," China responded in early 2011 by launching its own media blitz in the United States, hoping to soften its image among American voters.³

¹ On public views of China, see PEW Research Center, "U.S. Seen as Less Important, China More Powerful," 3 December 2009, accessed at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1428/america-seen-less-important-china-more-powerful-isolationist-sentiment-surges>, 30 December 2010; Zogby International, "Americans Say Debt to China More Serious Threat Than Terrorism," 3 March 2010, accessed at <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.cfm?ID=1824>, 30 December 2010; Rasmussen Reports, "50% See China as Long-Term Threat to U.S.," 25 February 2010, accessed at http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/current_events/china/50_see_china_as_long_term_threat_to_us, 30 December 2010.

² David W. Chen, "China Emerges as a Scapegoat in Campaign Ads," *The New York Times*, 9 October 2010.

³ See Loretta Chao, "China to Air Pro-China Ad in U.S. during Hu Visit," *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 January 2011, accessed at <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/01/14/china-to-air-pro-china-ad-in-us-during-hu-visit/>, 15 January 2011.

PETER TRUBOWITZ is professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton University Press, 2011). JUNGKUN SEO is assistant professor of political science at Kyung Hee University in Seoul, Korea and author of articles in the *Journal of Legislative Studies*, *Party Politics*, *American Politics Research*, *Journal of American Studies*, and *Asian Perspective*.

This is hardly the first time that China has roiled America's politics. From the earliest campaigns against the importation of cheap Chinese labor after the U.S. Civil War, to Cold War attacks over "who lost China" to Mao Zedong and the Communists, to the current fears about China's rise to great powerdom, China has often been labeled a threat to American values and livelihoods. Scholars often interpret these spikes in anti-Chinese sentiment through the prism of culture, race, and identity politics. There is little question that nativism, racism, and xenophobia have infused debates in the United States about China.⁴ At other times, American political leaders have been quick to extol China's promise as a solution to problems at home.⁵ In the late nineteenth century, for example, U.S. leaders looked to China's fabled market as a remedy to overproduction at home. Today, some see Beijing as a "stakeholder" and an essential partner in keeping world markets open. A systematic reading of the work of historians and contemporary observers suggests that periods of Sinophobia and Sinophilia cannot be easily divorced from partisan ambition and electoral politics.

In this article, we explore how and when America's party leaders politicize Sino-American relations. Our purpose is twofold. First, we seek to advance an argument about *when* China becomes a divisive electoral issue in American politics. Under what conditions do politicians play "the China card" for political gain? Generalizing from our earlier work and from theories of wedge politics in American politics, we argue that foreign policy setbacks create strategic opportunities for the party out of power to put the president and his party on the political defensive.⁶ Leaders are especially prone to play what we call "the China card" in response to setbacks in Sino-American relations—policies that the public deems to be misguided and wrongheaded. Historically, party leaders have used foreign policy failures of all kinds to discredit sitting presidents, exploit latent divisions within the president's party, and win

⁴ See, for example, Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 26–54; Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 81–114; Stanley B. Lubman, "The Dragon as Demon: Images of China on Capitol Hill," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13 (August 2004): 51–65; Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 45–112; Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

⁵ In the late nineteenth century, enterprising politicians often pointed to the fabled China market to win votes. See Thomas J. McCormick, *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893–1901* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1967).

⁶ Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jungkun Seo, "Wedge Issue Dynamics and Party Position Shifts: Chinese Exclusion Debates in the post-Reconstruction Congress, 1879–1882" *Party Politics* 17 (November 2011): 823–847.

over independent and swing voters. We show that setbacks in American policy toward China are no exception.

We also seek to focus greater attention on the domestic sources of U.S. foreign policy toward China. The bulk of the political science literature on Sino-American relations gives pride of place to geopolitics in explaining U.S. actions. We do not doubt the importance that U.S. leaders attach to balance-of-power and other strategic-military considerations in dealing with Beijing. Our analysis stresses that presidents have a powerful domestic political incentive to take geopolitics seriously—their desire to hold on to power. Presidents seek to avoid geopolitical failures because such missteps weaken presidencies. By logical extension, we argue that presidents and other elected officials also think about how foreign policy might help them domestically. We argue that this is especially true when foreign policy gives the party out of power an opportunity to gain domestic political advantage by attacking the president for “incompetence” and weak leadership.

We test this argument through an analysis of Sino-American relations in the 1870s, 1950s, and 1990s. In each period, the party out of power sought to exploit widespread popular frustration over U.S. foreign policy toward China. During the depression-racked 1870s, Democrats advocated a policy of Chinese exclusion to spread havoc in Republican ranks. In crucial Western states, Democrats sought to attract voters who strongly opposed Republican policies that gave Chinese citizens easy entry into the United States. In the 1950s, Republicans turned the “fall of China” to communism into a national referendum on Harry Truman’s leadership, in an effort to divide the Democrats along North–South lines. Forty years later, Democrats attacked George H.W. Bush’s pro-China policies, seizing upon the massacre at Tiananmen Square to attract moderate Republicans and independents troubled by China’s military crack-down and Bush’s tepid response.

Our analysis begins with a general argument about how party leaders try to exploit widely perceived foreign policy failures for electoral gain. We turn next to three cases involving Sino-American relations: rewriting the Burlingame Treaty between Washington and Beijing in the 1880s, responding to the Chinese Communist revolution of 1949, and weighing economic sanctions against China in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. In each instance, we use a quantitative analysis of congressional roll call votes as well as qualitative analysis of secondary sources to show that the party out of power sought to use setbacks in Sino-American relations as a wedge issue to divide the president’s party, and to create a new set of party allegiances and alignments. Where available, we supplement the roll call analysis with survey data on U.S. public opinion about China. In these cases, party leaders’ use of Sino-American relations as a tool of partisan politics came at considerable cost to America’s geopolitical interests and/or domestic civil liberties. The implications of these episodes for theories of foreign policymaking and U.S. domestic politics at a time of growing Chinese power are discussed in the conclusion.

THE POLITICS OF FAILURE

Leaders who misjudge in the making of foreign policy often pay a stiff price. In democracies, they rarely pay with their lives, but the political costs of foreign policy failure can be high. The rise of an unanticipated foreign threat, the loss of a valuable foreign ally, or the headlong pursuit of a misguided foreign adventure can seriously damage a leader's reputation and credibility, at home as well as abroad. Foreign policy failure throws open the door to domestic opponents and would-be challengers. This dynamic is especially clear in democracies, where political opponents are better able to scrutinize leaders' foreign policies and heighten public awareness of their shortcomings.

In the United States, the fragmentation and decentralization of power make it comparatively easy for the party out of power to make political hay out of foreign policy setbacks. A large literature analyzes foreign policy failures and fiascos that have been grist for the electoral mill, and not just in presidential election years.⁷ Frequently, party leaders in Congress are the ones who seize upon foreign policy failures, using them to divide the opposing party or peel off voters who align with it.⁸ In the 2006 midterm election, for example, Democrats exploited popular frustration over the Iraq war, using the war to divide the electorate and peel off voters who had voted for George W. Bush and the Republicans in the 2004 election.⁹ The Democrats' strategy contributed to the Republicans' loss of Congress that November.

Party leaders often seek to improve their party's electoral chances by introducing divisive issues to appeal to some segment of the opposing party's political base. In the lingua franca of contemporary American politics, these are known as "wedge issues." However, as democratic realists like E.E. Schattschneider and William Riker have made clear, the politics of "divide

⁷ See John H. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida, "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates 'Waltz before a Blind Audience'?" *American Political Science Review* 83 (March 1989): 123–141; Miroslav Nincic and Barbara Hinckley, "Foreign Policy and the Evaluation of Presidential Candidates," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35 (June 1991): 333–355; Stephen Hess, "Foreign Policy and Presidential Campaigns," *Foreign Policy* 8 (Autumn 1972): 3–22; William A. Galston and Christopher J. Makins, "Campaign '88 and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy* 71 (Summer 1988): 3–21; Robert A. Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections: 1940 and 1948* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974); Robert A. Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections: 1952 and 1960* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974); Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Julian E. Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security—From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

⁸ Foreign policy failures often take the form of external shocks such as the Soviet launching of Sputnik and the 1973 OPEC boycott, but they may be more incremental in nature (for example, declining international competitiveness).

⁹ On the Democrats' use of the Iraq war in the 2006 election against Bush and the Republicans, see Hannah Goble and Peter M. Holm, "Breaking Bonds? The Iraq War and the Loss of the Republican Dominance in National Security," *Political Research Quarterly* 62 (June 2009): 215–229.

and rule” is as old as the Republic itself.¹⁰ Wedge issue politics involves the mobilization of resentment over unpopular policies, social prejudices, or fears to weaken a political opponent by dividing his or her base of support.¹¹ “Wedge issue politics” refers to any calculated use of those policies or social prejudices to divide the opposing party’s political coalition, either by appealing to its core constituencies, or by peeling away “swing” voters and groups who might otherwise align with it.¹² Wedge issues are “positional” or polarizing issues that are strategically selected to exploit latent cleavages in the opposing party, and to shift the locus of party struggle to more-favorable electoral terrain.¹³

Here we focus on the use of foreign policy failures by the party out of power to divide and weaken the president’s party. Party leaders have a number of means at their disposal to politicize such failures. They can launch media campaigns, incorporate the issue into their own party’s platform, and support grassroots groups that have been galvanized by the policy misstep. Party leaders can also use the levers of power in Congress to intensify public scrutiny of foreign affairs. One classic maneuver is to force members of the president’s party to cast roll call votes on the president’s foreign policy, making legislators choose between the president and his unpopular policies. Such maneuvering is easiest, and most likely to succeed, when the opposing party is in the majority in Congress. However, even when the party out of power is in the minority, its leaders can usually find ways to force votes on

¹⁰ E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), 60–75; William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹¹ See D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1–17, 107–144; Jack Snyder, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, “Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home,” *World Politics* 61 (January 2009): 155–187. For related work on how congressional members use issues to divide their political opponents and mobilize disaffected voters, see Douglas R. Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Benjamin G. Bishin, “Constituency Influence in Congress: Does Subconstituency Matter?” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 25 (August 2000): 389–415; Tracy Sulkin, *Issue Politics in Congress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 19–42.

¹² In principle, wedge issues can be used either by the party in power to solidify its hold on power or by the party out of power to improve its political fortunes. Here we focus on the party out of power since it has the most to gain strategically from trying to exploit foreign policy failure. On the minority party’s incentives to exploit foreign policy failure, see Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Kristopher W. Ramsay, “Politics at the Water’s Edge: Crisis Bargaining and Electoral Competition,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (August 2004): 459–486; Jack S. Levy and William F. Mabe, Jr., “Politically Motivated Opposition to War,” *International Studies Review* 6 (December 2004): 65–83; Joe D. Hagan, *Oppositions, Leaders, and War: How Domestic Politics Shapes International Conflict* (Saddle Brook, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004).

¹³ See Donald E. Stokes, “Spatial Models of Party Competition,” *American Political Science Review* 57 (June 1963): 368–377.

the president's foreign policies.¹⁴ The press of external events and crises often leads the majority party itself to put divisive foreign policy issues on the legislative agenda.¹⁵

In each of the cases examined below, the party out of power sought to exploit popular frustration over U.S. policy toward China. These efforts were met with varying degrees of success. Yet in each instance, the party out of power tried to capitalize on popular disaffection with U.S. foreign policy toward China to divide and weaken the president's party and/or mobilize swing voters. Evidence from both secondary and primary sources bears out this argument.

Chinese Exclusion and the Burlingame Treaty

Twenty years of Republican hegemony came to an abrupt end in 1874. In the midterm election that year, the moribund Democratic Party staged a dramatic comeback, seizing control of the House of Representatives and putting the Republicans on the defensive for the first time since Abraham Lincoln was elected President in 1860. An exceptional period of party competition began, with Republicans and Democrats fighting on virtually equal footing for the next two decades, Republicans dominating most of the Northern states and Democrats the Southern states.¹⁶ Voter turnout rates during the Gilded Age were usually as high as 90 percent. Party identification rates ran nearly as high. As a result, national elections were won or lost at the margin. Voters who did not align squarely with either major party regularly determined the outcome, leaving Republican and Democratic leaders in constant search for issues to woo the "swing vote."¹⁷

¹⁴ On legislative stratagems used by minority parties, see Charles O. Jones, *The Minority Party in Congress* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1970); Sarah A. Binder, *Minority Rights, Majority Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 86–166; Keith Krehbiel and Alan E. Wiseman, "Joe Cannon and the Minority Party: Tyranny or Bipartisanship?" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 30 (November 2005): 479–505.

¹⁵ On the implications of international events for agenda setting, see B. Dan Wood and Jeffrey S. Peake, "The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Agenda Setting," *American Political Science Review* 92 (March 1998): 173–184.

¹⁶ Party control of the White House changed hands four times in the next six presidential contests. In Congress, neither party dominated. In the Gilded Age of the 1870s and 1880s, divided rule was the norm, with Republicans usually controlling the Senate and Democrats, the House. On party politics during this period, see George Mayer, *The Republican Party, 1854–1964* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), chap. 6; Lewis Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (New York: Random House, 2003); H. Wayne Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley: National Party Politics, 1877–1896* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1969), chaps. 1–3; Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System, 1853–1892* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

¹⁷ On this point, see Scott C. James, *Presidents, Parties, and the State: A Party System Perspective on Democratic Regulatory Choice, 1884–1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–35.

Much of that effort was directed at one region of the country: the West.¹⁸ In contrast to the North and South, party loyalties were weak in the Western states, and third parties like the Workingmen's Party, the Greenback Labor Party, and later, the Populists, ran strong in parts of the West. Winning these voters often meant little in terms of the popular vote, but they were essential to securing victory in the electoral college. No issue was above politics in this scramble for Western votes, and few impinged more directly on America's relations with other nations than the drive to scrap the so-called Burlingame Treaty between Washington and Beijing.

Ratified by Congress in 1868, the Burlingame Treaty was part of a larger Republican geopolitical design to secure an East Asian toehold and gain access to the fabled China market. Under the terms of the treaty, Secretary of State William Henry Seward offered China most-favored-nation (MFN) status, on the assumption that the unrestricted Chinese immigration that this would permit would cost the United States little and, in the aftermath of the Civil War, help resuscitate a labor force thinned by war casualties.¹⁹ Seward's geopolitical gambit involved little domestic downside for Republicans, at least until the international depression known as the Panic of 1873 hit. Popular opinion, especially in the West, where the overwhelming majority of America's Chinese population resided, swung sharply against the Republicans' pro-China policy, as white workers came to see the Chinese immigrants working in the region's mines and factories as a threat to their livelihoods.²⁰ Anti-Chinese agitation mounted, and Western calls to repeal the treaty soon began to attract national attention.

Democrats were well positioned to capitalize on the growing resentment over Chinese immigration.²¹ Playing the anti-Chinese card resonated well in the Party's Southern stronghold, where white racism and resentment ran deep. At the same time, restrictions on Chinese immigration (that is, "Chinese exclusion") generated little opposition from the various blocs of immigrant Catholic voters that Democratic leaders assiduously courted in big Northern urban centers such as New York, Chicago, and Boston.²² When Democratic

¹⁸ As a result, electoral competition was especially intense in the West. On this point, see Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 95–96, 99–106.

¹⁹ On Seward's views, see Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 26–33.

²⁰ Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 3–91.

²¹ For a discussion of the Democratic Party's stance on Chinese exclusion, see Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 148–149, 228–230.

²² Because Democrats had long stood against anti-Catholic nativist movements, Chinese exclusion also encountered little resistance from Irish and East European immigrants who voted Democratic in New York, Chicago, and Boston. See Alan Ware, *The Democratic Party Heads North, 1877–1962* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 99.

presidential hopefuls like Senators Thomas F. Bayard of Delaware and Allen G. Thurman of Ohio urged repealing the Burlingame Treaty in hopes of attracting Western voters in crucial battleground states like California, they could do so knowing that they would not forfeit support in the Party's Southern base or Northern ethnic enclaves. They also did so knowing that the strategy was guaranteed to spread havoc in Republican ranks.

For Republicans, the Burlingame Treaty was "a source of bitter conflict."²³ On the one hand, presidential hopefuls such as Senator James Blaine of Maine saw the exclusion issue as an opportunity to win over Western voters and strengthen the Party's hold on urban white workers elsewhere at a time when class tensions were running high. On the other hand, Republican support of Chinese exclusion risked Northern support because it made a mockery of the party of Lincoln's long-standing commitment to equal rights, and because it threatened powerful commercial interests along the Eastern seaboard. Commercial interests worried that a national anti-Chinese law that violated the Burlingame Treaty would invite Chinese retaliation against America's burgeoning trade with the Middle Kingdom.²⁴

Democrats did not hesitate to exploit the Republicans' vulnerability on the question. Wielding Chinese exclusion as a political axe, Democratic leaders at the Democratic National Convention in 1876 pilloried the GOP for the "failings" of the Burlingame Treaty and called on Congress to unilaterally bar further Chinese immigration to protect (white) American workers.²⁵ Democrats pressed the case in Congress, backing a "killer amendment" advanced by Western lawmakers to scrap the Burlingame Treaty. Hoping to depoliticize the issue, Eastern Republicans offered a compromise in 1877: the creation of a bipartisan Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration. It was to little avail. In 1879, the Democratic-controlled House and Senate used the Committee's report to impose sharp limits on the flow of Chinese immigrants. Known as the Fifteen Passenger Bill, it barred vessels from transporting more than 15 Chinese passengers at a time.

Democratic unity was not enough to guarantee passage of Chinese exclusion measures, however. Eastern Republicans prevailed on President Rutherford

²³ Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 99.

²⁴ Writing from Beijing, George Frederick Seward, U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to Beijing and nephew of the former Secretary of State, echoed these concerns, arguing that China would probably seize any opportunity to declare null and void treaty provisions they found objectionable. On U.S. Minister Seward's views, see David L. Anderson, "The Diplomacy of Discrimination: Chinese Exclusion, 1876-1882," *California History* 52 (Spring 1978): 32-45.

²⁵ When the anti-Chinese plank was announced to Party delegates, "cries of 'Good!' 'Bully!' and cheers" went up from the convention floor. Democrats knew that two weeks earlier at the Republican convention, GOP leaders had sought unsuccessfully to avoid a platform fight between Western and Eastern delegates by offering a milder, compromise plank that urged Congress to investigate the effects of Chinese immigration. On the 1876 Democratic and Republican conventions, see Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 99.

Hayes in 1879 to veto the bill. Hayes did not actually oppose curbing the inflow of Chinese, but he was reluctant to give the Democrats a victory. Moreover, he found the proposed regulations difficult to defend, given existing treaty obligations with Beijing and accepted diplomatic practices. In an effort to mollify Western Republicans and steal some of the Democrats' political thunder, Hayes proposed to renegotiate the terms of the Burlingame Treaty with Beijing.²⁶ Hayes's gambit bought time, and in 1881, it produced a revised treaty with Beijing. It did not, however, stop the anti-Chinese crusade or prevent Democrats from arguing that the President's new treaty, which recognized the right of the United States to "regulate, limit, or suspend" but "not absolutely prohibit" Chinese immigration, did not go far enough.

The decisive moment came in 1882. Seizing upon the new treaty, Western lawmakers pushed Congress to suspend the admission of Chinese workers for 20 years. Put on the defensive, Eastern Republicans vigorously opposed the bill. Yet the Democrats' unflagging support for Chinese exclusion had taken its toll on the GOP. When votes were tallied, Republican support now stood at 50 percent. This was a far cry from the nearly unanimous support that the 20-year ban received from Democrats (97 ayes, 4 nays), but it was a clear sign that the political ground under Republicans' feet had shifted. President Chester Arthur promptly vetoed the bill due to "treaty obligations," but made it clear that he would sign off on a modified version of the bill.²⁷ The revised bill sailed through Congress, winning large Republican as well as Democratic majorities. The battle was over. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 into law and in so doing, effectively drained the partisan venom from the issue. Future legislation banning the Chinese would be even more draconian, but it would also enjoy broad bipartisan backing.

A logit regression analysis of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 reveals how differently the two parties responded to the issue. As Table 1 suggests, Chinese exclusion united Democrats while dividing Republicans. Support for exclusion was strongest in the West and South. As one might expect, party label was of little consequence in the West. The region's seven congressional representatives (four Republican and three Democratic) supported exclusion. In the South, where Democrats held 72 of region's 83 congressional seats, support for exclusion ran 60 to 21. By contrast, the GOP was split. Midwestern Republicans aligned with Democrats (and Western Republicans) to ban Chinese laborers. The predicted probability that a Western or Midwestern Republican would vote for exclusion was about 17 percent higher than it was for lawmakers

²⁶ For a discussion of Hayes's thinking, see Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 165–167.

²⁷ In his veto message, President Arthur argued that the 20-year suspension violated the Angell Treaty of 1881, which allowed the Chinese to "regulate, limit, or suspend," but did not completely forbid Chinese immigration. As Gyory notes, Arthur was primarily concerned about the length of exclusion, not exclusion itself, and proposed instead that Chinese immigration be suspended for less than 20 years. For a discussion of Arthur's veto and the modified bill, see Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 244.

TABLE 1

Logistic Regression Model of the Chinese Exclusion Act, 23 March 1882

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Support for Chinese Exclusion</i>
Democratic Party	1.237 (0.298) *** (+29%)
(Mid)Western GOP	0.703 (0.352) ** (+17%)
1880 Electoral margin	-0.009 (0.008)
Years in chamber	0.010 (0.028)
Population	0.001 (0.001)
Catholic	0.029 (0.040)
Manufacturing output	-0.003 (0.001) *** (-62%)
Wheat output	-0.003 (0.001) **(-49%)
Constant	0.144 (0.374)
Log-likelihood	-164.59
Correctly predicted	65.6%
Pseudo R^2	0.11
<i>N</i>	270

Source: Stanley B. Parsons, Michael J. Dubin, and Karen Toombs Parsons, *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990); compiled by authors.

Note: The numbers in parentheses reflect the percentage point change in the predicted probability of voting for Chinese exclusion when a relevant independent variable moves from minimum to maximum values, while holding all other variables at baseline values (continuous variables are held at mean values and dichotomous variables are held at zero).

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

hailing from other parts of the country. In New England, all of the region's Republican lawmakers voted against exclusion. Overall, the likelihood that a Democratic member would support Chinese exclusion was 29 percent higher than for a Republican.

As Table 1 indicates, lawmakers from the manufacturing and farm belts staunchly opposed Chinese exclusion. Because these were largely Republican districts, Democrats had much to gain and little to lose by holding the Republican Party accountable for what they defined as the Burlingame Treaty's "failings." Democrats used the Burlingame Treaty to put the Republicans on the defensive and exploit latent divisions within their ranks. Playing the China card proved so politically potent that Democratic efforts ultimately resulted in an increasingly elaborate system of immigration control that was supported by both parties. Indeed, the 1882 law suspending Chinese entry into the United States set a precedent that was subsequently applied to Asians in the early 1900s and against Europeans in the 1920s.²⁸

If the domestic consequences of Chinese exclusion were far-reaching, the geopolitical impact was not. To be sure, the campaign against Chinese immigration complicated U.S.–Sino relations. Beijing protested the 1882 law. In the end, though, China could do little but accept the outcome. This was

²⁸ It also had ripple effects beyond America's borders, in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. On the international consequences, see Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 113.

partly because Beijing had few levers at its disposal to retaliate against the United States. More fundamentally, China's response reflected "insurmountable internal problems" and Beijing's desire to maintain good relations with the United States.²⁹ Beijing hoped to secure Washington's diplomatic support in its efforts to counter European and especially Japanese geopolitical intrigue and pressure.³⁰ In short, for U.S. lawmakers, the geopolitical repercussions of playing the China card in the nineteenth century were negligible.

The "Fall of China"

Playing the China card did not come without a high geopolitical cost in the 1950s. When China agitated America's politics this time, the issue was not Chinese immigration into the United States, but rather political upheaval in China itself. The Chinese revolution that brought Mao Zedong and the Communists to power in October 1949 sparked a political firestorm in Washington. "Who lost China?" Republicans bellowed from Capitol Hill. "Harry Truman," they thundered. Pushed onto the defensive, Truman flailed, trying to correct a widely held impression that his administration had willfully sacrificed China at the altar of its policies to rebuild Europe and contain Soviet adventurism there. As James Reston of *The New York Times* observed, Truman appeared inconsistent, "blocking communism in Europe and letting communism run wild in Asia."³¹

The fall of China is remembered as a seminal event in American foreign policy for good reason. Mao's triumph, and Washington's reaction to it, pushed East and West farther apart, extinguishing whatever hopes remained for détente and accommodation.³² Meanwhile, the flogging that Harry Truman took from Republicans over "losing" China seared the minds of an entire generation of future leaders, both Democrat and Republican, including John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon. Each one drew exactly the same lesson: whatever else you do as president, "don't lose a country to communism" on your watch.

Why did the fall of China become such a partisan football? Certainly, part of the answer has to do with deepening fears of communism in the United States, especially after the 1948 Berlin Crisis. Democrats were the first to see the political advantages in exploiting those fears, starting in 1947 and

²⁹ Anderson, "The Diplomacy of Discrimination," 44.

³⁰ On this point see Cohen, *America's Response to China*, 32–33.

³¹ Cited in Thomas G. Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat: Truman to Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 70.

³² For a discussion of how the American reaction helped Mao consolidate his hold on China and later emboldened him in Korea and elsewhere, see Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 138–193.

1948.³³ Republicans were also politically vulnerable to pressure from segments of the business community that had a stake in a free and open Asia. The so-called China Lobby had been trying unsuccessfully to nationalize the China question ever since 1946, when the civil war between the Communists and Nationalists that had been interrupted by World War II resumed in earnest.³⁴ The China Lobby's fortunes began to improve when the Republicans went down to defeat in the 1948 presidential election.

Truman's dramatic come-from-behind victory in November 1948 against Thomas Dewey stunned the Republican Party. 1948 had been the Republicans' best shot at retaking the White House after 16 years in the political wilderness. Two years earlier, the Party had taken control of Congress for the first time since Franklin Roosevelt's punishing defeat of Herbert Hoover in 1932. Moreover, Truman was unpopular in 1946 and 1947, even among Democrats. With Southern Democrats bolting from their Party over Truman's public embrace of African-American civil rights, and Henry Wallace's Progressive Party attacking Truman from the left, most seasoned political observers believed that the 1948 election was the Republicans' to lose.³⁵

Having squandered that opportunity, Republicans in 1949 were left sniping at each other over what went wrong. Conservatives, led by Senator Robert Taft, who lost out to Dewey in the fight for the Republican nomination in 1948, had the upper hand in this internal party struggle. Taft believed that Dewey's biggest mistake was failing to attack the Democrats over foreign policy.³⁶ Never a fan of bipartisanship to begin with, the Senator from Ohio blamed the Republicans' defeat on Dewey's decision to take foreign policy off the table in the campaign. Most rank and file Republicans shared Taft's assessment of Dewey's campaign.

Taft's appraisal squared with political facts on the ground. If the 1948 election demonstrated anything, it was that Republicans desperately needed fresh issues.³⁷ The party could not win by opposing the New Deal, or, as Dewey's

³³ On the Democrats' use of foreign policy for electoral ends, see Robert A. Divine, "The Cold War and the Election of 1948," *Journal of American History* 59 (June 1972): 90–110; Zachary Karabell, *The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election* (New York: Vintage, 2003); and Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat*, 35–94.

³⁴ Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 32–33. For the members of the China bloc in Congress, see James Alan Fetzer, *Congress and China, 1941–1950* (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1969), 88.

³⁵ For an excellent account of the 1948 election, see Karabell, *Last Campaign*.

³⁶ Many observers had anticipated that the Republicans would launch a full-scale attack over Truman's foreign policies, especially those dealing with China and Asia. See Leonard A. Kuznitz, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: America's China Policy, 1949–1979* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 29.

³⁷ On the meaning and consequences of the 1948 election for Republicans, see David W. Reinhard, *The Republican Right Since 1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 54–74; Nicol C. Rae, *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans From 1952 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 25–40; and Gould, *Grand Old Party*, 302–326.

“me too” campaign had made clear, by echoing New Deal rhetoric.³⁸ The Republicans’ best opportunity for winning new voters, or convincing independently-minded Democrats to vote Republican, lay in the foreign policy field. From the standpoint of electoral politics, the strategy of bipartisanship on foreign policy matters was self-defeating. Bipartisanship had allowed Truman and the Democrats to avoid electoral accountability for a number of foreign policy missteps and failures.³⁹ It also allowed the Democrats to wage national campaigns on economic issues, which they had effectively “owned” politically since the 1930s.⁴⁰

If the Republicans hoped to produce a different outcome in the 1950 mid-terms or the 1952 presidential contest, they had to change the national issue agenda. For conservative Republicans, this meant capturing the issue of anti-communism. The Alger Hiss spy case broke just before the November election, and it revealed just how much of a vote-getter the issue might be. Public attention was riveted on the hearings and the trials.⁴¹ Conservatives believed that this was a public that the Republicans could win over, provided the Party took the gloves off when international (or in the case of espionage, domestic) opportunities arose. Anti-communism also offered a way for Republicans to exploit the rift that had opened in the Democratic Party between Northern liberals and Southern conservatives. Already frustrated with Truman over civil rights, Southern Democratic support on foreign policy could no longer be taken for granted.⁴²

³⁸ Mayer, *The Republican Party*, 475. As a staunch opponent of the New Deal, Taft could never concede, certainly not publicly, that opposing the New Deal in presidential contests was a losing proposition. However, Taft was pragmatic enough to recognize that those who wanted to elevate foreign policy had a point. On Taft’s thinking about the 1948 election and what it meant for the Party, see James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company 1972), 419–456.

³⁹ This was a common refrain among conservative Republicans, during and after the 1948 campaign. In particular, conservative Republicans argued that Dewey had failed to exploit the opening that Moscow’s 1948 Berlin blockade of the access routes to Berlin from West Germany had opened up. Because Dewey followed Vandenberg’s advice to eschew foreign policy matters in the campaign, Truman was given time politically to turn humiliation into triumph. According to conservative Republicans, that should not be allowed to happen again. On the impact of the Berlin Crisis on Republican thinking, see Robert A. Divine, “Cold War and the Election of 1948.”

⁴⁰ See E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, 64–66. On the main axis of party competition during this period, see Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of The American Party System since the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Scott C. James, *Parties, Parties, and the State: A Party System Perspective on Democratic Regulatory Choice, 1884–1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chap. 4; Herbert Stein, *Presidential Economics: The Making of Economic Policy From Roosevelt to Clinton* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1994).

⁴¹ On the impact of the Hiss case on Republican politics, see Mayer, *The Republican Party*, 475–478.

⁴² In the late 1940s, foreign policy became a new source of coalition building between Republicans and conservative Democrats. Originally, the so-called Conservative Coalition focused on the domestic issues. It arose in response to Roosevelt’s efforts to “purge” Southern conservatives and pack the Court, but as Truman expanded the internationalist agenda to areas outside of Europe, international issues increasingly became a rallying point for conservatives. On the changing character of the Conservative Coalition, see Mack C. Shelley II, *The Permanent Majority: the Conservative Coalition in the United States Congress* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1983), chap. 3.

Fears of anti-communism ran especially strong in the South.⁴³ The idea of penetrating this Democratic stronghold no longer seemed fanciful, especially given the Republicans' striking gains in the region's metropolitan centers (for example, Dallas, Atlanta, and Richmond) in the 1948 election.⁴⁴ A new "metropolitan Republicanism" was afoot in the South. Meanwhile, Southern Democratic resentment over Truman's handling of civil rights (the integration of the military) made the region more vulnerable to Republican penetration than at any time since Reconstruction. In the 1948 presidential election, many white Southerners registered a protest vote by backing the breakaway Dixie Democrats.⁴⁵ Finally, anti-communism offered conservative Republicans political leverage over the Dewey wing of their party.

In short, for conservative Republicans like Taft, the fall of China presented a chance to get the Party, and themselves, back into the political game. The issue could be played to put Truman and the Democrats on the political defensive; to exploit the new electoral possibilities that regional fissures in the Democratic Party had opened to Republicans in the South; and to weaken the hold that moderate Republicans exercised within the party. Any doubts Taft may have entertained about the issue's political salience were surely eased by the rise of the so-called China Lobby in the 81st Congress (1949–50). Dominated by Republicans, the China Lobby's ranks expanded as the reports from China grew grimmer and the victory of Mao and the Communists looked more certain.⁴⁶

Developments in Asia following the Communist victory only strengthened conservative Republicans' political hand. The February 1950 Friendship Treaty

⁴³ On Southern attitudes toward communism, see Alfred O. Hero, Jr., *The Southerner and World Affairs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965); Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); and Joseph A. Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789–1973* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), chap. 7.

⁴⁴ On Republican gains in the South during the 1940s and 1950s, see James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983), chap. 12.

⁴⁵ On the role of race in party politics during this period, see William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970); Cabell B.H. Phillips, *The Truman Presidency: The History of a Triumphant Succession* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); Richard L. Rubin, *Party Dynamics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*.

⁴⁶ On the impacts of the 1948 election on the China bloc, see Robert M. Blum, *Drawing the Line: The Origin of American Containment Policy in East Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 18–23. The China bloc was composed of 45 Republicans and 6 Democrats from the House and 12 Republicans and 2 Democrats from the Senate. In the House, the leading members included Walter Judd (R-MN), John Vorys (R-OH), and John Davis Lodge (R-CT). In the Senate, the leaders were William Knowland (R-CA), Styles Bridges (R-NH), Alexander Smith (R-NJ), and Pat McCarran (D-NV). See Fetzer, *Congress and China*, 88.

between Moscow and Beijing, the North Korean invasion of South Korea later that June, Truman's firing of General Douglas MacArthur the following year, and the frustrating stalemate that took hold at the 38th parallel were all developments that Republicans could exploit for political gain. The rightward shift in the locus of power within the Republican Party was so evident that looking ahead to 1952, moderates like Dewey were forced to go outside the party for a candidate who could first defeat Senator Taft before beating the Democrats.

The Republicans' actions over China must be understood against the backdrop of this internal party struggle. China was a sharp arrow in the conservatives' quiver. Blaming Truman for the fiasco was guaranteed to play well domestically, and there was little risk that playing the China card would come back to haunt them internationally. After all, the international damage was done: China had gone over to the Communists. Truman was surely wise to the Republicans' game. Months before Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang fled to Formosa, Truman tasked the State Department to prepare a White Paper to explain the administration's strategy in dealing with China. Once China fell, the White House was quick to distance itself from calls to recognize Mao's regime.⁴⁷ Yet few Americans read the 1,000-page White Paper, and many of those who did found that it read more as an apology than an explanation.⁴⁸ Talk of non-recognition could not erase the fact that China had fallen on Truman's watch.

The China issue alone does not explain the Republican turnaround in the 1950 election, but there is little doubt that Communist threats contributed to the power shift. Republicans picked up 28 seats in the House, cutting the Democrats' edge from 234 to 199.⁴⁹ Republicans also won half of the senatorial contests that year, leaving the Democrats with only a 49 to 47 edge.⁵⁰ Predicting Republican gains, *The New York Times* stressed the importance of Korea and communism in the Republicans' electoral comeback.⁵¹ Democratic leaders shared that interpretation, blaming the election

⁴⁷ It also side-stepped calls to recognize Chiang's regime on Formosa. For a brief but helpful discussion of the report, see Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, 96–97.

⁴⁸ Republicans dubbed it a “whitewash.” Looking back on the political reaction to the report, John Melby, who drafted the report observed: “We all believed this would call off the dogs, but of course it did nothing of the kind.” *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁹ As Zelizer notes, “In several of the most watched campaigns, the Republican national security strategy worked perfectly.... Republican opposition to Truman's China policies was crucial.” See Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, 96–107.

⁵⁰ On the impact of foreign policy on the Senate races that year, see Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1949–51* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 80–81.

⁵¹ Cabell B.H. Phillips, “Four National Issues Play Role in Election: Korea, Communism, Fair Deal, and Efficiency Are the Major Topics,” *The New York Times*, 29 October 1950.

TABLE 2

Logistic Regression Model of Support for Korean Aid, 19 January 1950

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Support for Aid to Korea</i>
Republican Party	-3.475 (0.352) ***(-70%)
Southern Democrats	-1.345 (0.461) **(-32%)
1948 Electoral margin	-0.0002 (0.004)
Farmers	-0.002 (0.0007) ***(-66%)
Manufacturing	0.005 (0.0003) **(+46%)
Coast	-0.173 (0.278)
Constant	2.345 (0.341) ***
Log-likelihood	-205.60
Correctly predicted	77.9%
Pseudo R^2	0.30
<i>N</i>	429

Source: *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* of 1950; Scott E. Adler, "Congressional District Data File, [81st Congress]," University of Colorado, Boulder, CO; Compiled by authors.

Note: The numbers in parentheses reflect the percentage point change in the predicted probability of voting for aid to Korea when a relevant independent variable moves from minimum to maximum values, while holding all other variables at baseline values (continuous variables are held at mean values and dichotomous variables are held at zero).

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

on Truman's foreign policy missteps in Asia.⁵² Taft and other conservatives who had promised that partisan warfare over foreign policy would lead to electoral gains had reason to boast. Politics inside Congress also broke pretty much the way Taft had hoped. Southern Democrats began crossing the aisle with greater frequency on foreign policy, while few moderate Republicans strayed from the fold.

One indicator of the impending electoral shift was the political reshuffling that had occurred earlier in the year over a \$60 million Korea Aid package. Conservatives viewed the administration's request as an opportunity to turn up the political pressure over Communist China and to get the White House to furnish aid to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist China. "If not Formosa," conservatives asked, "why Korea?" Republicans used the Korea Aid bill to wage a proxy battle over China.⁵³ The roll call analysis reported in Table 2 indicates

⁵² As the editors of *TIME* observed shortly after the election, "The Democrats, painfully asking themselves 'What happened?', were inclined to blame it on last week's bad news from Korea, which gave point to the Republicans' charge of Administration bungling in foreign policy, especially in Asia." See "1950 Election: A Sharp, Pointed Rebuke for Truman," *TIME*, 13 November 1950, 19.

⁵³ The Truman administration had stopped providing military aid to Chiang and the Nationalists, when they were forced off the mainland in December 1949 and established a temporary capital on Formosa. As Robert Blum and other analysts note, Republicans refused to support the Korean Aid bill unless the White House renewed its commitment to Chiang. On the significance of the vote on the Korean Aid bill for U.S. policy toward China, see Blum, *Drawing the Line*, 184-185. See also the discussion in Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, 115-117, and H. Bradford Westerfield, *Foreign Policy and Party Politics: Pearl Harbor to Korea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955), 366.

that the Republicans' strategy paid political dividends. Conservative Southern Democrats broke with their party and aligned with Republicans against the bill. The predicted probability of a GOP member casting a vote against the Korea Aid bill (and for aid to Nationalist China) was 70 percent. Meanwhile, Southern Democratic opposition to the Korean bill was 32 percent higher than it was for Democrats from other parts of the country. Indeed, the very manufacturing districts in the North that sent New Deal-style Democrats to Washington favored aiding Korea, displaying little sympathy for Chiang Kai-shek's cause. If the Korean aid bill divided Democrats, it united Eastern seaboard and agrarian Midwestern Republicans. Taft and the Republicans could play the China card knowing that it would not have a negative effect on their partisans' interests.

The New York Times called the defeat of the Korean Aid bill "the first major setback for the Truman administration at the hands of Congress on a matter involving foreign affairs since the war's end."⁵⁴ It was also a harbinger of things to come. Buttressed by their legislative victory, Taft and conservative Republicans stepped up their public attacks on Truman's foreign policy. Foreign policy had become a tool in Republican hands for shifting electoral competition away from the domestic issues that benefited the Democrats, for weakening the North–South pillars of the New Deal coalition in Congress, and for gaining political traction in the once-solid Democratic South. It would be 40 years before Democrats would find themselves in a position to turn the tables by playing the China card against the Republicans.

The Tiananmen Crackdown

Two decades after Richard Nixon's dramatic rapprochement with China, Americans had come to believe that China's leaders were committed to political as well as economic reform. Washington had repeatedly assured Americans that by steadily engaging Beijing—economically, politically, and culturally—China would gradually become more liberal. In a single weekend in June 1989, the perception of a liberalizing China was shattered. The Chinese government's massacre of unarmed students and workers horrified and outraged Americans. According to Gallup surveys, the proportion of Americans holding a favorable attitude toward China plummeted, falling from 72 percent in a 1989 poll before the Tiananmen crackdown to 39 percent afterwards.⁵⁵

The events of June 1989 also brought to an end two decades of uneasy bipartisan cooperation over China on Capitol Hill. With the Cold War winding down, the traditional geopolitical argument for close Sino-American ties—China as a strategic counterweight to Soviet aspirations in Asia—was already

⁵⁴ Clayton Knowles, "2 Votes Block Korea Aid Bill; House Test a Blow to Truman," *The New York Times*, 20 January 1950, 1.

⁵⁵ David G. Skidmore and William Gates, "After Tiananmen: The Struggle over U.S. Policy toward China in the Bush Administration," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27 (Summer 1997): 514–539.

less compelling politically than it had been in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁶ George H.W. Bush's tepid public response to the June massacre (and his efforts to privately conciliate Chinese leaders) only made it easier for Democrats to seize the initiative. Democratic leaders like Senator George Mitchell (Maine) believed that the White House was out of touch with public opinion, and they were right.⁵⁷ By a 5-2 margin, Americans disapproved of Bush's handling of relations with China. The President's conciliatory approach was considered weak and unprincipled.

Rarely had the public faulted Republican leaders for mismanaging foreign policy. Since the 1970s, Republicans had "owned" foreign policy and national security as electoral issues. The public viewed Republicans as more-competent guardians of the national interest. As a result, Republicans regularly sought to wage presidential and even midterm electoral contests on foreign policy. Democrats, in turn, regularly sought to shift the national agenda each election cycle to domestic issues, such as education and health care, where they were perceived to be more competent. With the Tiananmen crackdown, Democrats suddenly had an opportunity to regain lost ground in foreign affairs and put Republicans on the defensive on their "home turf." Democrats used the events of June 1989 to divide the Republicans and weaken the Bush administration's support in Congress.

At the forefront of the Democrats' effort was China's most-favored-nation trade status.⁵⁸ This was no accident. MFN was at the core of the Sino-American economic relationship.⁵⁹ With MFN status, China could trade with the United

⁵⁶ On this political shift in Congress, see James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage, 2000), chaps. 11–12.

⁵⁷ As Mann puts it, "China was an issue where the Democrats in Congress could oppose the Republican administration and know, with certainty, that they had public opinion on their side. It was the one foreign policy issue where Bush was clearly out of touch with the views of ordinary Americans." Mann, *About Face*, 199.

⁵⁸ In addition to MFN, Democratic efforts to punish Beijing and embarrass the White House covered issues ranging from student visas, to arms sales, to human rights. See Mann, *About Face*.

⁵⁹ There is a large literature on the politics of China's MFN in the 1990s. We draw here on several empirical studies: David J. Jackson, and Steven T. Engel, "Friends Don't Let Friends Vote for Free Trade: The Dynamics of the Labor PAC Punishment Strategy over PNTR," *Political Research Quarterly* 56 (December 2003): 441–448; David Karol, "Party Coalitions, Interest Groups, and the Limits of Unidimensionality," *Institute of Governmental Studies*, WP 2005-46 (University of California, Berkeley, 2005); Yitan Li and A. Cooper Drury, "Threatening Sanctions When Engagement Would Be More Effective: Attaining Better Human Rights in China," *International Studies Perspectives* 5 (November 2004): 378–394; Timothy P. Nokken, "The Ideological Ends Against the Middle: House Roll Call Votes on Normal Trade Relation Status for China, 1990–2000," *Congress and the Presidency* 30 (Autumn 2003): 153–170; James Shoch, *Trading Blows: Party Competition and U.S. Trade Policy in a Globalizing Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of US–China Relations 1989–2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); Tao Xie, "Congressional Roll Call Voting on China Trade Policy," *American Politics Research* 34 (February 2008): 732–758.

States on the same basis as virtually every other nation in the world. Without MFN benefits, Chinese products would be subject to duties so prohibitively high—on average about 40 percent higher—that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to sell most of them in the United States.⁶⁰ For Beijing, MFN approval meant more than just access to the American market. Chinese leaders viewed annual MFN approval by Congress in the context of the larger strategic relationship: it was a barometer of Washington's commitment to Sino-American cooperation and a means of gauging the credibility of the president's commitments.

Economic interests closely aligned with the Republican Party benefited disproportionately from American trade and investment in China. Key business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the U.S.–China Business Council campaigned on behalf of MFN renewal, coordinating lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill and rewarding supportive Republican lawmakers with campaign contributions.⁶¹ This “pro-China” coalition included big export-oriented corporations like Boeing, Ford, and Microsoft, as well as wholesale and retail importers such as Wal-Mart, Sears, and Toys “R” Us. By contrast, key Democratic constituencies, especially labor unions like the AFL-CIO, took a dim view of U.S. investment and trade with China and were quick to punish Democratic lawmakers who were supportive of free trade with China.⁶²

This helps explain why Democrats sought to make MFN approval conditional on Beijing's human rights performance and other issues watched closely by Democratic constituencies, such as weapons proliferation. MFN had huge symbolic as well as material value. And it proved potent politically. The Tiananmen massacre and Bush's cautious, jaded response made it difficult for many Republicans on Capitol Hill to defend the White House on MFN. For the next three years, when MFN came up for annual approval each spring, Bush declared his intention to extend China's MFN status for the coming year. Each time, the Democrats responded by proposing bills to reverse the President's decision. In 1990, the House passed strong anti-MFN legislation. In 1991 and 1992, both chambers passed bills that severely conditioned the extension of MFN to China on Beijing's human rights record.

Although support in the Senate for the more-restrictive approach was never broad enough to override Bush's vetoes, Democratic leaders viewed actually passing the legislation as a secondary concern. The immediate goal was to use votes on MFN approval to chip away at Republican cohesion by peeling off socially conservative Republicans. Democrats understood that Republicans whose districts and states benefited from free trade generally, and from trade with China in particular, would stick with the President. Staunch

⁶⁰ Skidmore and Gates, “After Tiananmen,” 530.

⁶¹ Ibid., 532–534. See also John W. Dietrich, “Interest Groups and Foreign Policy: Clinton and the China MFN Debates,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29 (June 1999): 280–296.

⁶² Jackson and Engel, “Friends Don't Let Friends Vote for Free Trade,” 441–443.

TABLE 3
*Logistic Regression Model of Extending China's Most-Favored-Nation (MFN) Status,
 12 July 1992*

Variables	Opposed to MFN Extension for China
Democratic Party	0.741 (0.217) *** (+18%)
Strange bedfellows	1.016 (0.621) * (+20%)
1990 Electoral margin	0.000 (0.003)
Farmers	-0.329 (0.092) *** (-54%)
Blue collar	0.037 (0.051)
Military base	0.121 (0.072) * (+28%)
Wholesale/retail	-0.191 (0.082) *** (-41%)
Constant	1.259 (1.060)
Log-likelihood	-270.42
Correctly predicted	65%
Pseudo R^2	0.08
N	435

Source: *Congressional Quarterly Almanac of 1992*; Scott E. Adler, "Congressional District Data File, [102nd Congress]," University of Colorado, Boulder, CO; Compiled by authors.

Note: The numbers in parentheses reflect the percentage point change in the predicted probability of voting against MFN extension for China when a relevant independent variable moves from minimum to maximum values, while holding all other variables at baseline values (continuous variables are held at mean values and dichotomous variables are held at zero). DW-NOMINATE Scores, from -1 (liberal) to +1 (conservative).

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

social conservatives were another matter. Many had already noticed Bush's tepid commitment to conservative social policies at home and considered Bush's unwillingness to confront China over its poor human rights record, which included religious intolerance, as an opportunity to signal their displeasure. Ironically, for conservative Republicans, this meant joining hands with liberal Democrats. A stunned Richard Nixon called it a "strange coalition of China bashers."⁶³

Table 3 captures the effects of the Democrats' strategy. We analyze a 1992 House resolution to reverse President Bush's waiver of the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment's free emigration standards. Under the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the 1974 Trade Act, the president had to renew China's MFN status annually by waiving a requirement that denied MFN to communist countries that prohibited free emigration of its citizens. The renewal came due each July 3. Congress could vote to reject the extension, but such an action was also subject to presidential veto. The debate over MFN for China reached a decisive state in the 102nd Congress (1991-92). In 1991, and again in 1992, the House of Representatives approved joint resolutions linking China's human rights record to continued MFN status. We focus here on the 1992 House vote because it occurred during an election year and is thus a better indicator of lawmakers' true preferences.⁶⁴

⁶³ Skidmore and Gates, *After Tiananmen*, 522.

⁶⁴ HJ Res 502 passed 258-135; Republicans 76-79; Democrats, 181-56; Northern Democrats 121-41; Southern Democrats, 60-15.

A vote for the resolution was a vote against MFN approval for Beijing. As is evident in Table 3, Democrats, the party out of power, were highly united (76 percent) in opposing MFN for China. On the GOP side, the vote split the party: 76 yeas against 79 nays. Socially conservative Republicans joined members on the Democratic side of the aisle to block the President. The Table 3 variable “Strange bedfellows” captures this “ends-against-the-middle” voting coalition between liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans.⁶⁵ Even controlling for Democratic opposition to Bush’s waiver, the “Strange bedfellows” variable adds roughly 20 percent to the predicted probability of a member voting against the waiver for China. Indeed, Democrats could play the China card knowing that it would cause little political heartburn in their own caucus while pitting key Republican constituencies against one another.

As Table 3 indicates, lawmakers from districts with large numbers of farmers and retail industry employees—mostly Republican-leaning districts that benefited from trade with China—clearly opposed the Democrats’ political gambit, preferring to extend MFN to China. By contrast, lawmakers with military bases in their districts, many of them held by Republicans, were more likely to oppose extension. For their constituents, security considerations apparently trumped the promise of international commerce. Table 3 also indicates that although not statistically significant, blue-collar districts opposed granting MFN to China. This was increasingly true as the decade wore on. Because Democratic lawmakers represented most of these districts, it was that much easier for the Party’s leaders to use MFN as a political wedge.⁶⁶

In the 1990s, Democrats used the Tiananmen massacre just as Republicans had used the fall of China in the 1950s: as a wedge issue. At one level, the Democrats succeeded. Few socially conservative Republicans voted for MFN approval, at least not without strings attached.⁶⁷ The Democrats also succeeded in making MFN an issue, albeit a secondary one, in the 1992 presidential campaign. Bill Clinton seized upon Bush’s repeated vetoes to condemn him for appeasing Beijing. Yet in the end, Democrats gained less electoral traction playing the China card than Republicans had a generation earlier.

The Democrats’ limited success in exploiting Tiananmen for political gain also reflected broader economic and political shifts in the balance of power in the United States. Once in the White House, Bill Clinton quickly

⁶⁵ Following Nokken, we use absolute values of DW-NOMINATE scores to measure lawmakers’ ideological orientation. See Nokken, “Ideological Ends Against the Middle,” 160–161.

⁶⁶ On the impact of blue-collar voters on MFN trade preferences in Congress, see Jungkun Seo, “Vote Switching on Foreign Policy in the U.S. House of Representatives,” *American Politics Research* 38 (November 2010): 1072–1101.

⁶⁷ Some socially conservative Republicans in fact worked closely with the Democratic leadership. Rep. Gerald Solomon (R-NY), for example, wrote and co-sponsored legislation disapproving MFN renewal. As Solomon noted in 1993, “For me, this has been such a deep moral issue that I have been compelled to go against my own Republican president.” See John R. Cranford, “Trade: Clinton Ties MFN for China to Human Rights Gains,” *CQ Weekly Online*, 29 May 1993, 1349.

reversed course, jettisoning his anti-China campaign rhetoric and devising a political formula to make it easier for Beijing to qualify for MFN approval by Congress. Later, Clinton took the lead in backing China's entry into the World Trade Organization by granting China permanent normal trade relations in 2000.

Clinton's reversal had as much to do with his own political calculations as with the burdens of being Chief Executive. On many issues, Clinton's political interests were at odds with those of liberal Democrats on Capitol Hill.⁶⁸ Moreover, Clinton came to see expanded trade with China as a means to improve his reelection chances by winning over fast-growing, internationally competitive high-tech and service sector industries.⁶⁹ These economic sectors were not strongly attached to the Republican Party, and were a huge potential source of votes and campaign contributions. Hammering China for human rights abuses could not win over this new class of voters and investors. What *could* help move them into the Democratic column were the promise of greater access to foreign markets and investment opportunities, and a new image of Democrats as pro-business and forward-looking.

CONCLUSION

Previous work suggests that foreign policy failures can create strategic openings for the party out of power to discredit the president and divide his party. This article shows that this holds in the case of U.S.–China relations. In the 1870s, Democrats who were eager to break the Republicans' "lock" on the post-bellum presidency seized on voters' misgivings about the Burlingame Treaty's "failings" to divide the Republicans along East–West lines. Republicans searching for an issue to campaign on in 1950 were quick to blame Harry Truman and the Democrats for "losing" China to the communists the year before. Four decades later, Democrats, having lost the presidency three times in a row, blasted Republicans for relying too heavily on free trade to liberalize China.

Politicians' willingness to play the China card has not been governed by the prevailing level of geopolitical risk. Party leaders played the China card during the Gilded Age, when the nation faced little danger from abroad. Similar geopolitical conditions prevailed in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet empire. However, politicians also exploited China policy during the Cold War, when international tensions ran high and the international and domestic consequences of playing the China card were arguably much greater. The domestic backlash over the Chinese revolution in 1949 contributed

⁶⁸ On Clinton's relationship with liberal Democrats, see Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 447–464 and Joe Klein, *The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

⁶⁹ On Clinton's trade strategy toward China, see Shoch, *Trading Blows*, 233–253.

significantly to the rise of McCarthyism. For two decades, rational deliberation in the United States over how to deal with China was effectively silenced.⁷⁰

In the cases examined here, leaders exploited “failures” abroad to gain partisan advantage at home. Party leaders used foreign policy in highly selective and discriminating ways, surgically targeting specific voting blocs and regional electorates. Their decisions to exploit foreign policy depended on whether the issue could be used to divide and weaken their opponents, and/or mobilize their supporters or swing voters. Strategic opportunity appears to be more important than “issue ownership” in explaining when party leaders will seek to use foreign policy for electoral gain.⁷¹ Voters may consider one party more competent on foreign policy, but this does not appear to affect the willingness of the opposition to exploit foreign policy failure. As we have seen, Democrats were just as quick to exploit foreign policy failures in the 1870s and 1990s for partisan ends as the Republicans were in 1950.⁷² All three cases cut against “issue ownership” theory.

Finally, our analysis puts the contemporary debate over China’s rise as a great power in some perspective. This is not the first time that Republicans and Democrats have debated the implications of developments in China for the United States, or the relative advantages of “engaging” Beijing. If the past is any guide, we should expect American leaders to search for ways to capitalize politically on the growing friction between Washington and Beijing, and on mounting concern among the American public about China’s rise. Democrats in Congress are likely to focus on the domestic economic costs (for example, the outsourcing of American jobs) of engagement. Republicans, by contrast, are apt to stress the possible geopolitical ramifications of Chinese behavior in Northeast Asia and beyond. One thing is all but certain: America’s leaders will be playing the China card with one eye on boosting their party’s electoral fortunes.

⁷⁰ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 165–166.

⁷¹ On party competition and “issue ownership,” see John R. Petrocik, “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study,” *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (August 1996): 825–850. See also David B. Holian, “Trust the Party Line: Issue Ownership and Presidential Approval from Reagan to Clinton,” *American Politics Research* 34 (November 2006): 777–802; Goble and Holm, “Breaking Bonds.”

⁷² Moreover, minority status in Congress did not prevent either party from trying to exploit the strategic opportunity. In the case of Chinese exclusion, the Democratic minority was able to capitalize on Western Republican demands that the House leadership permit a divisive vote on exclusion. Harry Truman’s desire to win House backing for aid to Korea in 1950 made it possible for Republicans, then the minority party, to use the occasion to sharpen debate over the President’s policies toward China.