

Homloktér

Divide We Fall

Interview with Jody Jensen, head of the FTI-iASK Polanyi Center

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“World Politics and Economics” asked Jody Jensen for an interview about the American political situation and what to expect in 2023. Jody Jensen is the director of the Polányi Center at the Institute of Higher Studies in Kőszeg, senior researcher at the Institute of Political Science of the Center for Social Sciences, and research director of the ISES Foundation, which operates as the Jean Monnet Center of Excellence. Head of the International Studies Master’s program at Pannon University’s Kőszeg Campus. He was awarded the Jean Monnet Chair for European Solidarity and Social Cohesion (ESSCO) for three years starting in the fall of 2016. He was the national and regional director of the Ashoka Foundation (a supporter of entrepreneurs in the service of social innovation). She regularly teaches abroad, and also takes part in the European Commission’s research application evaluation work.

World Politics: *Joe Biden became a president in quite turbulent times from a political viewpoint. What is your impression, how has the political landscape changed since 2021 (or from 2020 if presidential campaign is involved in the analysis)? How can the Democratic Party be characterized from the point of view of fragmentation in 2023? What is the situation in the Republican Party?*

Jody Jensen: I think that the political landscape, both nationally in the U.S. and globally, has become even more turbulent and uncertain since Joe Biden was elected President in 2020 and inaugurated in January 2021. In response to the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, high energy prices and inflation, there have been clear political shifts somewhat reminiscent of the post-1945 era in Europe recognized by The Economist: “you might expect politics [in richer democracies] to move left, if only in reaction to the mainly centre-right governments that dominated rich democracies during the previous decade.” They mention the leaders at the table of the G7 summit in Bavaria in 2022 where Joe Biden sat at the table with four if not five other leaders from the center-left (Canada, France, Germany, Italy and, more peripherally Japan), in contrast to Obama’s counterparts in 2010 who all came from the right or centre-right parties.¹ So generally, the Biden administration and its policies reflect this movement towards more governmental leadership and intervention into the economy and social safety-net provisions.

Compared to the Republican Party, the Democrats seem to be holding together quite well. Even if you have more progressive representatives in Congress, the Democrats were able to compromise on the infrastructure bill and the election of the new minority House Speaker Hakeem Jeffries, as the first black leader in Congress.

¹ <https://www.economist.com/international/2023/01/01/politics-will-move-further-to-the-left-in-2023>

In contrast, the Republicans appear to be in disarray and very divided. It took an historic and unprecedented five days and 15 votes to reach an agreement on Representative Kevin McCarthy as Speaker of the House after giving major concessions to right-wing (Trump supporting) holdouts. But, as New York Times analyst, Carl Hulse points out “No matter the concessions made to some of those on the far right, they simply will not relent and join their colleagues even if it is for the greater good of their party, and perhaps the nation. ... Their agenda is mostly to defund, disrupt and dismantle government, not to participate in it.”²

The breakdown on the House floor during the vote can be seen as a longer-term trend of assaults by the hard right-wing of the Republican Party on its own leadership, today exacerbated by the influence of Trump and Trump hardliners and played out on national television. This occurred even after Republicans could declare a small victory after winning a meager majority in the House.

World Politics: *The Biden administration launched several big economic projects, for instance in the field of infrastructure, or COVID relief or chip manufacturing. How can they be evaluated not just as an economic stimulus but in the shaping of the new political culture? What do you predict for the next two years in these projects? Will they be accelerated or not?*

Jody Jensen: These initiatives of the Biden administration reflect, perhaps, a “leftish” pendulum swing in political and policy terms. They may be a response to society’s need for more governmental leadership and intervention in order to address the multiple national and global challenges and dangers the U.S. is facing, socially, economically and environmentally (just look at the devastation in California and other regions recently).

Regarding the infrastructure bill, many polls and analysts agree that most Americans find the bill complicated and according to the center-left think tank Third Way and Impact Research, only 24% of voters were aware that the bill became law.³ In addition, it will take many years before voters see and feel it’s impact in their own communities. According to the CNBC All-America Economic Survey, 36% of the public supports the infrastructure plan compared to 33% who oppose it. 31% said they didn’t know enough to form an opinion, suggesting each political party has a chance to convince one third of the public to accept their view.⁴ But having said that, the survey also shows that “Americans overwhelmingly support nearly all the details of the plan” with 87% of the public backing plans to fix roads and bridges, 82% agreeing to increased pay for elderly caregivers and 78% supporting expanding high-speed broadband.⁵

The investment in chip manufacturing is less straightforward. The CHIPS and Science Act will benefit certain states who have lost manufacturing jobs by creating new avenues for employment

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/us/house-speaker-mccarthy-election.html>

³ <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/democrats-bif-opportunity-selling-the-bipartisan-infrastructure-deal-to-american-voters>

⁴ <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/15/cnbc-survey-shows-support-for-infrastructure-spending-much-less-than-previous-stimulus.html>

⁵ Ibid.

but could also endanger the health and environment of the communities that are targeted if not carefully planned and implemented. This priority underscores the desire of the U.S. to take the lead in the clean energy and technology fields, as well as in artificial intelligence and quantum computing. At the same time, it addresses national security concerns regarding China's ability to produce semi-conductors.⁶

COVID relief was among the most popular of Biden's policies, and more Americans approve (69%) than disapprove of the 1.9 trillion-dollar bill that Biden put in place in March 2021.

It is too soon to be able to evaluate the impact of these stimuli and their trajectories. However, it is clear they reflect a developing consensus in terms of political culture that supports more rather than less government, again a swing to the left in political terms. Tangible results of the infrastructure bill may only begin to be seen in two years, and this also depends on the role and functioning of the Congress. With the present chaos and division in the Republican Party, and its right-wing that wants only to disrupt and dismantle state structures, progress may be slow but not stopped. This is especially true since the results of the mid-term elections projected a positive approval for these policies reflected in the Democrats gaining in the Senate and the absence of an expected "red wave".

World Politics: *Some experts reckon the failure of the Biden administration in terms of human resource management (childcare, free college system or the mitigation of the debt burden among students and the health care system). Do you share this viewpoint, or do you see some progress in this field? How is American society divided politically and economically on these questions?*

Jody Jensen: I see an answer to this question on a continuum, specifically regarding childcare, free college, the mitigation of student debt, and healthcare. Social safety net issues were not emphasized in previous Republican administrations in terms of visions or policies, and only attempted, in some cases, by previous Democratic ones. Bringing these issues to the forefront highlights their salience to groups that are becoming progressively marginalized and finding it increasingly difficult to cope in a context of accelerated economic and social inequality. Now they are on the agenda for more public, political and policy debate yet some are being overshadowed by rising economic and world instability concerns. However, they are not the top worries of most Americans in 2023. According to an AP-NORC polls, conducted December 1-5, 2022, the main priorities in order of importance that the government needs to address are: general economic issues (inflation), immigration, environment and climate change, gun violence and related issues, education and student debt, healthcare, and crime and violence.⁷

⁶ <https://thehill.com/opinion/energy-environment/3777051-potential-harms-of-bidens-microchip-boom/>

⁷ https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/AP-NORC_2023-Priorities-Brief-V7.pdf

On these same issues the Democratic and Republican priorities look a bit different.

TOP 5 ISSUES

Democrats	Republicans
Environment/Climate change	Immigration
Gun Issue	Inflation
General Economy	General Economy
Inflation	Crime/Violence
Education	Gas + Oil Prices/Energy Costs

There are other issues that should be mentioned that explain the unprecedented success of an incumbent party in mid-term elections whose President has a low approval rating (around 44%). For example, despite high inflation, only 32% of voters said it was the most important issue and why they voted as they did; nearly an equal percentage, 27%, said the overturning of Roe vs Wade and abortion access was the reason they voted for Democratic candidates.⁸

In addition, after the election, Biden praised young voters. Their impact was felt not in terms of greater numbers in turnout, but because those who voted predominantly voted for Democratic candidates. This also shows that the Democratic agenda had greater resonance among young people than the Republican one.

It should not be forgotten that this positive performance by the incumbent Democrats also impacted their performance at the state level where they made historic gains with three new governorships and where they took control of some state legislatures in swing states. Republicans, however, still maintain control over most state legislatures.

As CNN put it: “When you put it all together, Biden and the Democrats appear to have done something others have tried – and failed – in previous midterms: They turned the election into a choice between two parties instead of the usual referendum on the president’s party”.⁹

At the end of the day, it is the voters who will decide, and many came out in the mid-terms and voted against candidates supported by Trump and election deniers.

World Politics: *What will be the most important challenge ahead of the political class in 2023? What will be the expected response and how will it impact the political system as a whole, if at all, including the structure of the political class?*

⁸ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2022-election/inflation-abortion-lead-list-voter-concerns-nbc-news-exit-poll-finds-rcna56258>

⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/13/politics/democrats-biden-midterm-elections-senate-house/index.html>

Jody Jensen: Most analysts describe great skepticism on the part of the American public concerning prospects for 2023, although Democrats are a bit more optimistic than Republicans. Not only economic problems take the lead, but the bitter and divisive partisan politics will make it difficult to address and manage these complicated challenges. The AP-NORC 2023 poll registered that about three-quarters of U.S. adults say they are not confident in the ability of the federal government to make progress on the important problems facing the country in 2023, and about one-third of Republicans and Democrats name the state of politics as a critical issue facing the country.¹⁰

I think the greatest challenge will be how to bridge the political divide to actually get things done in Congress, but also at the state levels. With the problems and divisions in the Republican Party, and the compromised and weak House leadership position of Speaker Kevin McCarthy, it is hard to imagine effective cross-aisle legislation taking place. With Democrats in the minority in the House, and the incoming “wingnuts” of the Republican Party in positions of congressional power in committees that are more concerned with political stunts and culture wars than in getting anything done, CNN warns:

Ironically, voters who disdained Trump-style circus politics and election denialism will get more of it since the smaller-than-expected GOP majority means acolytes of the ex-president, like expected House Judiciary Chairman Jim Jordan of Ohio and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, will have significant sway. The new Republican-run House represents, in effect, a return to power of Trumpism in a powerful corner of Washington.

But, CNN continues “The GOP could suffer, however, if voters think they overreached – a factor Biden will use as he eyes a second term”.¹¹ This will become more clear soon with the debt-ceiling debate where Republicans have threatened to reduce public spending on medicare and social security, two of the most popular government programs in history.

World Politics: *What kind of international challenges lie ahead of the US in 2023? How will the Biden administration manage conflicts with China, particularly the tariff problem? In what areas do potential conflicts and alignments lie between the US and Europe in 2023?*

Jody Jensen: The war in Ukraine monopolized much of the U.S. foreign policy in 2022 and this is expected to continue with further efforts and commitments to send tanks and weapons in 2023. Additionally, however, the actions of Iran will present international security challenges for the U.S. who hasn't taken a consistent or effective stance against the increasing repression by the Iranian government internally, or against Iranian provision of weapons to Russia.¹² So in the interests of integrated security, Iran may be furthered sanctioned in 2023 with the U.S. taking the lead. Heightened nuclear tensions from Russian threats, as well as the danger of further nuclear

¹⁰ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/democrats-republicans-have-sharply-distinct-priorities-for-2023-ap-norc-poll-finds>

¹¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/02/politics/political-trends-2023-biden-mccarthy-trump/index.html>

¹² The US Congress has yet to enact the Stop Iranian Drones Act.

proliferation since efforts to return Iran to the nuclear deal are at an impasse, will also require a more robust response from the Biden administration especially in a context of the escalation of Palestinian and Israeli tensions. There is also North Korea and its increasingly aggressive threats and record breaking 63 ballistic missile threats by December 2022 that needs attention from the U.S. in coordination with its Asia allies (South Korean, Japan and Taiwan).

US-China

The Pentagon has also warned about China's expanding nuclear arsenal and what the global security consequences might be with these increased capabilities, especially with the U.S.'s continuing and high profile political support for Taiwan.

The major conflict last year arose from the Biden administration's barriers placed on semiconductor exports to China in order to increase U.S. competitiveness in new technology sectors. In the short term these controls may be effective, but the question is how, when and where China might react through a counter-retaliation. There was no obvious global consensus on this issue when Beijing took its complaint to the WTO, and there are other related issues. In more efforts to decouple from China in the tech and communications sector, the FCC¹³ has banned the import of Huawei telecommunications equipment and there are increasing calls to ban Chinese-owned TikTok to restrict data collection the app facilitates.¹⁴ The new House Republican majority is already pushing "to make China a focal point of the GOP's foreign policy"¹⁵ and Rep. Kevin McCarthy quickly introduced legislation to ban TikTok in the United States. This will have domestic impact in the U.S. with its 110 million TikTok users. McCarthy also questioned the use of U.S. tax dollars to subsidize the Chinese solar panel industry.

US-Europe

The U.S. and its European allies, including the EU and NATO, will need to project unity in order to maintain the pressure on Moscow and to deal with the increased military and humanitarian needs in Ukraine, but there are conflicting interests. As Rosa Balfour, from Carnegie Europe points out, although Europe supports Ukraine, the economic, energy, humanitarian costs, and a looming recession, are far greater concerns in Europe than in the U.S.¹⁶ There are also tensions related to relations with China because European economies depend on trade with China.

Another area of tension highlighted by Rosa Balfour relates to the Inflation Reduction Act which subsidizes American industries in the green technology sectors. She states: "The European economy could become collateral damage as U.S. subsidies attract investments away from Europe." However, there are still areas in which the U.S. and the EU are aligned such as norms in cyberspace and in fighting climate change.

¹³ The US Federal Communications Commission.

¹⁴ There are about 1 billion TikTok users globally, and about 110 million users in the US. See: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/tiktok-stats/>

¹⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/02/biden-foreign-policy-2023-russia-ukraine-china-nuclear-energy-congress/>

¹⁶ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/88524>

***World Politics:** After making this interview, a new event disturbed world politics, the Chinese spy balloon scandal. This resulted in Secretary Blinken's postponement of his planned trip to Beijing that was favored by both the US and China to mend bridges between the two countries. Will this incident irreparably damage bi-lateral relations? If so, for how long?*

Jody Jensen: For four days, the US and the world were entertained by tracking a Chinese spy balloon across the US until it was shot down on February 4th. It is still a mystery why the Chinese would even risk such archaic surveillance technology when satellites could provide better and more secure information. Often in heavily controlled bureaucracies, the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing, and this could be the reason for the mishap. At first the Chinese said it was an innocent weather balloon that drifted off course, although most countries know that China has produced a fleet of such surveillance balloons. Later, in a face-saving attempt, the Chinese fired or moved the head of the Chinese Meteorological Administration in response. The balloon was at least the third or fourth to cross into American airspace in recent years (three were tracked during the Trump administration). Once the payload is retrieved and analyzed more will be confirmed about its purpose, but already statements from US government sources confirm that something other than weather data was being collected in the payload that was the size of 3 buses. In fact, officials say they blocked the balloon's instruments from gathering intelligence, and instead gathered intelligence from the equipment itself.

This incident could not have occurred at a more inconvenient time. It is a great embarrassment to the Chinese who were expecting the visit of Secretary Blinken to Beijing to meet with Prime Minister Xi for important bi-lateral talks and was the first signal of thawing relations between the superpowers in years. This visit has subsequently been postponed, and some conspiracists think maybe Chinese hardliners purposely created the circumstances to undermine the meeting. I doubt that this is true, and I do not believe the episode will have any deep or long-term effects on US-China relations. I expect that Blinken's visit will be rescheduled soon as too many grave issues of mutual concern are at stake (global economy and trade, war and nuclear escalation). In fact, "balloon-gate" has become a fantastic source of memes and comedy skits in the US and across the globe.

As Heather Cox Richardson writes: "The Chinese spy balloon shot down off South Carolina on Saturday after spending four days in U.S. airspace will almost certainly make the history books but not because, by itself, it is a hugely significant factor in the changing relationship between the U.S. and China under President Joe Biden. The reason the balloon will be remembered in the future is that the Republican response to it has been so completely unrelated to reality, and has been so magnified by the media, that it has provided a window into the dysfunction of modern politics.