

An exploration of how a member of US Congress decides on a policy agenda, using the Subject of Congressman Gus Bilirakis (R-FL)

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Internship Paper

How a Member of Congress Decides

An exploration of how a member of US Congress decides on a policy agenda, using the Subject of Congressman Gus Bilirakis (R-FL)

Washington Internship Program 3016

Prof. Don Debats

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Executive Summary

Congress and the House of Representatives' unique and complex division of roles has created an environment that fosters success for Congresspeople to develop and pursue various policy agendas. It provides freedom to Representatives to build upon their policy objectives and continue to legislate within their given interests. The decision-making process of a member of Congress has multiple influences and how they decide their policy agenda is based on their constituents' concerns, committee roles, personnel agenda, and current events. These factors directly and indirectly affect policy in US Congress and are vital to understanding the rationale behind a Congress person's decision-making process. In order to grasp in greater detail how a Congressperson decides on their policy agenda, this paper has utilised Florida Representative Gus Bilirakis' shift in foreign policy objectives and aimed to describe what factors have influenced Bilirakis' decision-making process.

Over time Bilirakis has developed his stature and role within Congress as a stable and reliable entity. Whilst encouraging bipartisanship on multiple issues within the Energy and Commerce Committee and Veterans' Affairs Committee, his devoted role in Greek foreign affairs has been a staple of his foreign policy success. This continued success in Congress has given him the freedom to expand his legislative capacity, extending beyond previous foreign policy roles. This paper details my experience interning in the Congressman's office in Washington D.C. at the onset of the 118th Congress, as well as my surprise at Bilirakis' development of a new foreign policy role.

In order to investigate the pivot in foreign affairs, research is required into Bilirakis and his past and current foreign policy portfolio. Then to garner a greater understanding of what might have sparked these changes in policy approach, the paper will speculate as to why the Congressman is altering his role in foreign affairs policy. I will also examine how Bilirakis and his office plan to cement the Congressman's role in the Energy and Commerce committee and as a force against China. Utilising my own experience in Congress and my observations of the Congressman, I will develop my own conclusions on whether Bilirakis will be successful in his new bid to combat China.

Introduction

At the beginning of 2023, I spent January and February interning within US Congress in Washington DC. I interned for a Republican member of Congress, Rep. Gus Bilirakis who is currently serving his ninth term in the House as a representative of Florida. As a part of the Washington Internship Program that Flinders University offers, I was extremely lucky to be interning for Bilirakis. Bilirakis has been serving in Congress since 2007 and is a well-regarded senior member. He has developed a strong presence as a member for foreign affairs within the House, and over the years has focused on a wide range of issues. His portfolio has spanned across veteran's affairs, Hellenic and Mediterranean affairs, and most recently, Chinese interference in American cybersecurity. In order to understand these shifts in policy agenda, it is essential to understand how a Congressman decides what to focus his policy agenda on. I will utilise the first-hand experience I gained throughout my internship to understand the decision-making process of Bilirakis and therefore determine how Congressman Bilirakis decided his policy focus in the new Congress.

Introducing Congressman Bilirakis

Congressman Gus M. Bilirakis is a member of the Republican Party in the House of Representatives. He represents Florida's 12th Congressional District, which is located north of the Tampa Bay Area and encompasses Citrus County, Hernando County and Pasco County.¹ Having held his seat in Congress since 2007, he continues to have outstanding success, winning 70% of the vote in 2022.² He has also been awarded the most bipartisan Congressman in Florida and this has led to his success in passing legislation and being an effective policymaker.³

The Congressman is well renowned for his support towards veterans. This can be attested to both his support in ensuring veterans are well cared for by introducing multiple bills which support veterans, and the percentage of constituents in his district that are veterans. His district has 73,000 veterans which contributes to 10.6 percent of the total constituents.⁴ This

¹ United States Census Bureau, '118th Congress of the United States; Florida - Congressional District 12', *United States Census Bureau* (2023)

<https://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/cong_dist/cd118/cd_based/ST12/CD118_FL12.pdf> [Accessed 7 June 2023]

² BallotPedia, 'Florida's 12th Congressional District', *BallotPedia* (2023)

<https://ballotpedia.org/Florida%27s_12th_Congressional_District>

³ United States House of Representatives, 'Bilirakis once again named Florida's most bipartisan Congressman', *Bilirakis.House.Gov*, (17 May 2021) <<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/bilirakis-once-again-named-floridas-most-bipartisan-congressman>> [Accessed 20 June 2023]

⁴ United States Census, *118th Congress Florida's 12th District*

is above Florida's average of 7.8 percent veterans⁵ and therefore indicates that Bilirakis is required to have an ongoing focus on veterans. Furthermore, the average age of constituents is 48.3 years old, with 65+ being the largest age bracket at 26.4 percent of his district.⁶ This in turn means that a large portion of the constituents are seniors, and policy regarding the problems seniors face is also important for Bilirakis. Items such as cybersecurity and ensuring that seniors are not taken advantage of are examples of concern for Bilirakis. Transparency is also a concern, as Bilirakis has advocated that US federal policy is not doing enough to ensure big technology firms are transparent enough.⁷ The Congressman also legislates on a variety of other areas of concern that affect his constituents as they emerge. This has garnered continued support from his constituents and allowed him to grow his platform for domestic and foreign policy.

My First Day in the Congressman's Office

The beginning of my internship coincided with the beginning of the 118th Congress, and starting my internship in a Republican office I was weary with what to expect. Regardless of my prejudices about the American right-wing and the Republican party, I was grateful to be interning in an office with a Congressman who was so committed to his district. I was also extremely lucky to intern in an office with such a senior member of Congress, as without his seniority, his role in Congress would not be as important. On a busy day Bilirakis would have met with multiple important figures, attended any Energy and Commerce meetings and managed time to debate and vote for Bills in the House of Representatives.

With Bilirakis' very accomplished career in Congress, the start of the 118th Congress marked a memorable occasion for him as his office had just relocated to a room with a view of the Capitol. Staff members repeatedly expressed just how special an office with a view of the Capitol was. This was unbeknownst to me at the time, but the more senior members of Congress have a range of highly prestigious offices to choose from, with the prestige of the office representing the higher status of the member. It was immediately evident that this Congressman was important; he had a busy schedule and plenty of people to meet with.

⁵ C. Gilligan, 'Who are American's Veterans?', *US News* (11 Nov 2022) <<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2022-11-11/who-are-americas-veterans#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20is%20home%20to,according%20to%202021%20Census%20data>> [Accessed 7 June 2023]

⁶ United States Census, *118th Congress Florida's 12th District*

⁷ United States House of Representatives, 'BILIRAKIS, LESKO AND OTHER HOUSE REPUBLICAN LEADERS INTRODUCE LEGISLATION TO HOLD BIG TECH ACCOUNTABLE FOR POLITICAL BIAS', *Bilirakis.House.Gov*, (22 June 2022) <<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/bilirakis-lesko-and-other-house-republican-leaders-introduce-legislation-hold>> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

However, for most of my first day voting for the Speaker of the House occurred, which had taken a great deal longer than expected due to a gridlock vote causing repeated negotiations within the Republican party. This resulted in me receiving repeated phone calls from constituents; as the intern, I was in charge of manning the office phone. Many constituents voiced their frustrations towards their own party, and this displayed to me early on just how divided the Republican party is. Whilst this occurred, I slowly introduced myself to the staff members within the office.

Bilirakis' office and the staff members which accompanied it are exceedingly experienced. The legislative director, legislative correspondent and legislative assistant possessed multiple years of work experience within Congress and had spent multiple years working within Bilirakis' office. This was unlike other offices in Congress which are well known for their high staff turnover due to the high intensity environment. This meant Bilirakis was especially confident in his policy team and developed close ties with his staff in order to ensure an effective policy approach was developed. This resulted in a team that is reliable in its information and projected the Congressman's agenda accurately.

After a day-long discussion with the Congressman's son, Michael, I finally had the chance to meet the Congressman himself. Michael immediately pointed me out to Bilirakis and relayed that I was also Greek. This put a smile on Bilirakis, and after exchanging pleasantries, I grasped that he was a positive person who was ecstatic about spending time in Congress. The Congressman was passionate about his Greek background and had made this quite evident with memorabilia in his office reflecting this. Based on prior research, I was well-aware of the Congressman's policy approach in this area. His previous foreign policy efforts regarding the Mediterranean pipeline and his support for Greek-US defence relations displayed confidence in his background.⁸

*"Greece has consistently proven itself to be a reliable ally in the Eastern Mediterranean. This critical legislation bolsters Greece's efforts to modernize its armed forces, while strengthening our strategic partnership among our Hellenic partners. It also enables continued security cooperation to help facilitate enduring stability throughout the region"*⁹

⁸ United States House of Representatives, 'EastMed Pipeline Reverse to Blinken', *Bilirakis.House.Gov* (21 Jan 2022) <https://bilirakis.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/bilirakis.house.gov/files/wysiwyg_uploaded/EastMed%20pipeline%20reverse%20Blinken%20final%201.21.22.pdf> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

⁹ United States House of Representatives, 'Reps. Bilirakis, Deutch introduce US-Greece Defence and Interparliamentary Partnership Act', *Bilirakis.House.Gov* (25 Jun 2021),

Whilst Hellenic affairs remains an ongoing policy area for the Congressman, his focus during the two months I was there featured multiple key events and issues. One of those included veteran's affairs – Bilirakis is well known for his frequent advocacy of veterans. The *Major Richard Star Act* which "allows a veteran with a combat-related disability and fewer than 20 years of creditable service to receive retirement pay"¹⁰. This was a key focus for the office while I was an intern. It was reintroduced at the onset of the 118th Congress and received outstanding support from both sides of the aisle, with 314 cosponsors.¹¹ My first important task was collecting contact details of co-sponsors for the staff member with the veteran's affairs portfolio, with the legislative assistant sending out co-sponsor requests.

However, I soon discovered during my first week that the office was not solely focused on veteran's affairs or Hellenic policy anymore. Upon speaking with all of Bilirakis' staff members, I discovered the Congressman had a new policy agenda he was pursuing. Rather, they were focused on his development and promotion with the Energy and Commerce committee. This initially surprised me, as prior to this I was well-informed that Bilirakis focused mainly on veteran's affairs. However, I soon discovered that Bilirakis dropped his role in the veteran's affairs committee. Instead he devoted a larger portion of the office's time to the Energy and Commerce committee and assigned his two leading staff members to this policy area. Prior to me commencing my internship within the office, Congressman Bilirakis was promoted to a senior role within the Energy and Commerce Committee, and this had almost immediately resulted in a change in his policy agenda.

Bilirakis' Committee Roles

As previously highlighted, the Congressman has made a continuous effort to support and improve the quality of life for veterans. Bilirakis served on the Committee for Veteran's Affairs from 2011 to 2020,¹² with his decade-long tenure promoting him to a senior member of the committee. Although his growing responsibility in the Energy and Commerce committee meant that Bilirakis had to discontinue his role within Veteran's Affairs. This also occurred after his

<<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-bilirakis-deutch-introduce-us-greece-defense-and-interparliamentary>> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

¹⁰ United States Congress, 'H.R. 1282 - Major Richard Star Act', *Congress.Gov*, (3 Jan 2023)

<<https://www.congress.gov/bills/118/congress/house-bills/1282?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22Bilirakis%22%5D%7D&s=3&r=7>> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² BallotPedia, 'Gus Bilirakis; Committee Assignments', *BallotPedia* (2023)

<https://ballotpedia.org/Gus_Bilirakis> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

bid to become Chair of Veteran's Affairs had failed twice.¹³ This has, though, paid off, as the Congressman was elected to the role of Chairman of the Innovation, Data and Commerce subcommittee in the new Congress. This sparked an exciting time for the new Congress, as previously the 117th Congress was held by Democrats and therefore his senior role as the ranking member was less prominent.

The stature of Energy and Commerce within Congress as the longest standing committee has resulted in it accumulating a large jurisdiction of policy. "This subcommittee has jurisdiction over interstate and foreign commerce; consumer protection; data security and privacy; motor vehicle safety; regulation of commercial practices; consumer product safety and liability; and regulation of travel, tourism, and time."¹⁴ This has placed Bilirakis as a key figure within the 118th Congress. Bilirakis is also a senior member of the Health subcommittee, and the Communication and Technology Subcommittee. This has resulted in Bilirakis having a large portion of time dedicated to sitting within the Energy and Commerce committee.

Energy and Commerce Committee

During the short two months of my internship, it was apparent that Bilirakis' policy agenda covered a variety of topics and issues surrounding Energy and Commerce. His approach in managing and organising his office meant that he could focus largely on Energy and Commerce issues and promote what he felt mattered most. After attending multiple congressional hearings and watching Bilirakis it was evident that the Energy and Commerce committee was his passion. He spoke with confidence and brought attention to the issues that he was most passionate about.

At the beginning of 2023, Bilirakis made it evident he intended to do more to protect American industries against China. This initially took me by surprise - a Congressman who focused a large portion of time on Mediterranean foreign policy issues was now focusing on Chinese foreign policy. Bilirakis frequently discussed China where he could. For example, this occurred during a committee hearing on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and their jurisdiction on satellite policy. Bilirakis asked multiple questions regarding what processes the

¹³ C. Richard, et al. 'The Almanac of American Politics 2022', *Columbia Books Incorporated*, (2021)

¹⁴ United States House of Representatives, 'Bilirakis to Chair Subcommittee Tasked with Protecting Privacy, Consumers and Children while Advancing Innovation and Global Competitiveness', *Bilirakis.House.Gov* (26 Jan 2023) <<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/bilirakis-chair-subcommittee-tasked-protecting-privacy-consumers-and-children>> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

government had to determine whether or not a satellite were of Chinese origin.¹⁵ This committee hearing was not strictly discussing China, but Bilirakis decided this would be his focus by placing an emphasis on limiting China's access to American satellites. In multiple committee hearings, he made it continually evident that China is an existing threat that needs to be dealt with:

"Today's hearing focuses on the greatest threat to our country right now – China. So, it is fitting that to begin the 118th Congress we focus on this threat and discuss how to recapture and maintain our global leadership."

The CCP will stop at nothing to undermine our global leadership and weaken our economy. They have bought up our farmlands, stolen our intellectual property, and embedded themselves deep within many of our supply chains. Now they are turning their attention towards establishing the global standards for emerging technologies.

*The CCP has invested heavily in Artificial Intelligence and other emerging technologies. Paired with this investment, China is creating favorable environments for their private sector companies and entrepreneurs to deploy and test these technologies."*¹⁶

Whilst the Republican party had largely made it evident China was an actor to be concerned about, it was unexpected to see Congressman Bilirakis advocate against the nation in such a strong manner. Prior to this, he rarely advocated against China. The only evidence of him doing this was in 2021, when he expressed concerns about China being in the United Nations Security Council and stated that "United States' foreign policy has turned a blind eye to China's bad behaviour."¹⁷ A couple of years ago it was unexpected that he would turn to China in such a capacity. He had more of a focus on European foreign policy surrounding Greece and on promoting Greek independence away from Russia.

¹⁵ Energy and Commerce, 'Communications and Technology Legislative Hearing; "Liftoff: Unleashing Innovations in Satellite Communications Technologies.', *Energy and Commerce* (9 Feb 2023), <<https://energycommerce.house.gov/events/communications-and-technology-legislative-hearing-liftoff-unleashing-innovation-in-satellite-communications-technologies>> [Accessed 22 June 2023]

¹⁶ Energy and Commerce, 'Subcommittee Chair Bilirakis Opening Remarks on Competing with China', *Energy and Commerce*, (1 Feb 2023) <<https://energycommerce.house.gov/posts/subcommittee-chair-bilirakis-opening-remarks-on-competing-with-china-1>> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

¹⁷ United States House of Representatives, 'Bilirakis leads effort to remove China from UN Security Council', *Bilirakis.House.Gov*, (15 Mar 2021) <<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/bilirakis-leads-effort-remove-china-un-security-council>> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

This sparked my curiosity and desire to understand why Bilirakis decided to pivot and focus on such a large foreign affairs initiative, that being China. As someone who also has a keen interest in China, and particularly China's threat to cybersecurity, I wanted to learn more about the Congressman's new foreign policy agenda. Bilirakis' sudden change in policy portfolios provided me with a unique insight into how Congresspeople develop their portfolios and cement their stature in Congress. My experience of witnessing this first-hand during my internship has provided me with a unique perspective from which to write this paper and explore foreign policy within the US Congress.

How Congressman Bilirakis has cemented himself within US Congress

Bilirakis' seat within the House of Representatives has enabled him to develop a foreign policy role which aligned with his previous district and supported his agenda. This section will explore how the US Government has established a system which favours freedom within the House and enables those in the House the power to develop foreign policy roles as it relates to their district or personal ambitions.

The House's Role in Foreign Policy

The United States' unique democratic system allows those elected to Congress the ability to succeed in foreign policy agenda, and for Bilirakis his seat in the House of Representatives has enabled him to pursue a role in US foreign policy. This is drastically different to Australia which assigns a Member of Parliament as the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who supports the Prime Minister in their foreign affairs ambitions.¹⁸ Whilst Congress requires the combined support of the President and vice versa to truly succeed in foreign policy, members of Congress are given the freedom to advocate and implement foreign affairs policy. Hermann identifies that most problems arise when legislators begin to focus on local goals; "often as they begin to take action on such goals and objectives, they encounter problems in their domestic and international environments that challenge what they want to do."¹⁹ Hermann builds upon this by outlining that problems trigger decisions, and as problems arise on the foreign policy front, if a policymaker feels they can and need to influence the situation, they will try.²⁰ This applies to US Congress as well, with Bilirakis' previous foreign support for Greece and the east Mediterranean pipeline displaying his need to influence an area of foreign policy he thought was necessary. However, with 435 members of the House, all with a similar

¹⁸ T. Plibersek, 'Australian foreign policy: the Labor approach.' *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 70/5 (2016), 462 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1199657>> [Accessed 29 June 2023]

¹⁹ M. G. Hermann, 'How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Framework', *International Studies Review*, 3/2 (2001), 53 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.00234>>

²⁰ Ibid. p. 53

interest to influence foreign situations, implementing meaningful foreign affairs legislation can be frustrating²¹ if a member is not in a position of power.

In addition, the House also has the power to originate appropriation bills, and this can result in members funding areas of foreign aid or foreign policy they deem appropriate. This includes the powers to “regulate commerce with foreign nations”²² and “make rules for the government and regulations of land and naval forces.”²³ It provides a unique amount of power for Congress people to become involved in foreign affairs policy through appropriations Bills and the power to direct and regulate the US army. It enables almost any Congressperson the ability to draft, introduce and vote for these bills in order to support their foreign policy agenda. This has also created issues when enacting effective legislation and gaining support, as individual initiatives and committee leaders have struggled to whip for votes. This has resulted in “an emphasis on narrow issues and short-term objectives”²⁴. However, “the same factors that frustrate congressional attempts to lead on foreign affairs encourage legislators to use indirect means to influence policy”²⁵. Those with enough influence will employ tactics to create significant change. The House of Representatives has enabled Bilirakis the ability to develop a foreign policy role for Greece and the Mediterranean region through developing relations in the Hellenic caucus, co-sponsoring and introducing Bills, and encouraging the Executive branch of the US Government to support this region. However, this also highlights the difficulties posed for members of Congress in introducing legislation and therefore the struggle to attain a prominent and effective foreign policy role within the House.

Committee Assignments

Bilirakis and his committee assignments are important in understanding his role in US foreign policy. Being on committees within Congress is imperative to a Congressperson's policy success. As highlighted previously, Bilirakis has succeeded in becoming Chairman of the Innovation, Data and Commerce subcommittee in Energy and Commerce. He has also established himself as a senior member of the Health subcommittee and Communications and Technology subcommittee. Since Bilirakis succeeded his father Michael Bilirakis (not to be

²¹ J. Lindsay, “Congress and Foreign Policy: Why the Hill Matters.” *Political Science Quarterly*, 107/4 (1992), 607–628 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2152287>.>

²² J. Masters, ‘U.S. Foreign Policy Powers; Congress and the President’, *Council on Foreign Relations*, (2 Mar 2017) <<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-foreign-policy-powers-congress-and-president#chapter-title-0-3>> [Accessed 12 June 2023]

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ R. Zoellick, ‘Congress and the making of US foreign policy’, *Survival*, 41/4 (1999), 27, DOI: 10.1080/713660133

²⁵ Lindsay, *Congress and Foreign Policy: Why the Hill Matters*.

confused with his son of the same name) in Congress, from the beginning of his term he was actively involved in committees. Bilirakis started within the Homeland Security Committee and Veteran Affairs Committee in 2007.²⁶ He was also appointed to Foreign Affairs Committee within the same year as well. In congratulating Bilirakis for his appointment, Senator Roy Blunt (R-MO) highlighted his hard working nature: "Gus's appointment to the Foreign Affairs Committee—his third Committee assignment—reflects this strong work ethic and his dedication to his constituents and our nation."²⁷ Over time, Bilirakis' committee assignments changed, as he discontinued his work within Foreign Affairs and Homeland Security committees in 2013. However, he pursued the Energy and Commerce committee and remained in Veteran's Affairs until 2020.²⁸

Being part of a committee is vital for ensuring bills of interest are marked up and voted on. When bills are introduced to the House, they are referred to a committee that specialises in the subject matter of the bill. Committees will then evaluate the bills and have the ability to mark up the bill for voting in the chamber or can block the bill from proceeding.²⁹ They also function by collecting information through hearings and reporting on legislation, and overseeing executive branch activities.³⁰ Committee assignments are usually based on the background of a Representative's district. For example, "most members of the agriculture and interior committees come from states with disproportionate interests in farming and land management."³¹ Being involved in a committee in your desired jurisdiction allows for greater influence on the bills that are referred to it, and can help in the success of enacting bills. It can be difficult to secure a position on a committee which has jurisdiction similar to district interests. For Bilirakis, his tenure on multiple committees immediately after being elected to the House has served him and his interests well. It is therefore vital to be in a committee in order to have legislative success and display your influence in Congress.

²⁶ United States House of Representatives, 'COMMITTEE AND SUBCOMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS', *Bilirakis.House.Gov*, (1 Feb. 2007) <<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/committee-and-subcommittee-assignments>> [Accessed 6 July 2023]

²⁷ United States House of Representatives, 'HOUSE REPUBLICANS APPOINT BILIRAKIS TO FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE', *Bilirakis.House.Gov*, (10 May 2007) <<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/house-republicans-appoint-bilirakis-foreign-affairs-committee>> [Accessed 6 July 2023]

²⁸ BallotPedia, 'Gus Bilirakis; Committee Assignments', *BallotPedia* (2023) <https://ballotpedia.org/Gus_Bilirakis> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

²⁹ C. R. Berry, & A. Fowler, 'Congressional committees, legislative influence, and the hegemony of chairs.' *Journal of Public Economics*, 158 (2018), 1–11. <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2017.12.002>>

³⁰ C. C. Campbell, & R. H. Davidson, 'US congressional committees: Changing legislative workshops'. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 4/1 (1998), 126–127, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13572339808420542>>

³¹ C. DeGregorio, 'Staff Utilization in the U.S. Congress: Committee Chairs and Senior Aides.' *Polity*, 28/2 (1995), 261–275, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3235203>>

Bipartisanship

Bilirakis has also utilised a bipartisanship approach to fulfilling his foreign policy agenda, as demonstrated by his achievements within the Energy and Commerce Committee. The Energy and Commerce Committee offers a unique outlook for Republicans and Democrats. This committee is largely focused on bipartisanship and Bilirakis has taken full advantage of his ability to go across party lines to develop policy and succeed in his ambitions. Although in more recent years partisanship has never been stronger, with Congress struggling due to the degree of hostility that Democrats and Republicans hold against each other.³² Bilirakis' policy approach is paramount to including and working with Democrats. *The American Data Privacy and Protection Act of 2022* (ADPPA) was primal to this and is a great example of just how important it is to incorporate the four corners of Congress. Four corners are the House and Senate committee chairs and its ranking members.³³ Introduced by Chairman of Energy and Commerce Democrat Frank Pallone in the 117th Congress, the ADPPA had bipartisan support. Ranking member of Energy and Commerce, Cathy McMorris Rogers, and Bilirakis both co-sponsored the bill.³⁴ It addressed head on, important data privacy concerns, and for Bilirakis it supported his concerns that big technology was no longer accountable and transparent. It also supported his concerns for overruling complex and confusing state government legislation: "This national standard provides clear rules of the road and give Americans the same data protections wherever they go. Privacy does not end at state lines and Americans deserve better than a patchwork of different and conflicting state laws."³⁵

The importance of ensuring the four corners of Congress agreed to the act and utilising a bipartisanship approach was vital to ensuring its success. In this instance, three of the four corners had met and agreed to promote the bill. It was also hailed as a bicameral success—meaning both chambers agreed to support the bill—after Republican Senator Roger Wicker

³² Pew Research Centre, 'As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System', *Pew Research Centre* (2022) <<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/>> [Accessed 17 June 2023]

³³ J. Jacobson, & C. Murray, 'Four Corners', *Thompson Coburn LLP*, (9 Nov 2021) <<https://www.thompsoncoburn.com/insights/blogs/wonkology/post/2021-11-09/four-corners>> [Accessed 16 June 2023]

³⁴ United States Congress, 'H.R. 8152 - American Data Privacy and Protection Act', *Congress.Gov*, (21 Jun 2021) <<https://www.congress.gov/bills/117th-congress/house-bill/8152/cosponsors>> [Accessed 16 June 2023]

³⁵ United States House of Representatives, 'Republicans Commemorate National Data Privacy Day and Urge President Biden to work with Congress to Enact a National Privacy Standard', *Bilirakis.House.Gov*, (28 Jan 2022) <<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/republicans-commemorate-national-data-privacy-day-and-urge-president-biden>> [Accessed 16 June 2023]

greatly supported the bill.³⁶ However, the fourth corner, Democrat Senator Maria Cantwell, chair of the Senate Commerce committee, opposed the bill. As chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, her support was necessary for the bill to go anywhere.³⁷ However, Bilirakis still hailed the bill as a bicameral and bipartisan success, stating that he was “proud to be here with his colleagues on both sides of the aisle.”³⁸ Cantwell’s opposition ultimately led to the bill being unsuccessful in the Senate and therefore it never came to fruition. However, it highlights more importantly the Energy and Commerce’s bipartisanship ability to pass bills in the lower house. For Bilirakis, this will ultimately aid his anti-China prerogative.

Previous Foreign Policy

Exploring Bilirakis’ previous foreign policy agenda will be vital to understanding how he is developing his new foreign policy role in advocating against China. Bilirakis’ foreign policy has been the culmination of multiple years of experience developing his role as an elected representative. Developing himself as a key policy maker in East Mediterranean affairs, especially in relation to his Greek background, has allowed him to intertwine his anti-Russian influence into policy and aid in securing Greek independence. Furthermore, the House of Representatives’ complex ability to develop foreign policy has simultaneously allowed the development of such a foreign policy profile. Investigating his previous foreign policy approach can outline the Congressman’s motivations, and highlight possible motivations for a differing foreign policy approach in the 118th Congress.

Support for Greece

For Bilirakis, his previous foreign policy agenda largely focused on the Mediterranean and the European region. He has advocated for large amounts of foreign aid expenditure on countries within this region, especially Greece. Bilirakis’ Greek background has contributed significantly to him being a great advocate for Greece. The town of Tarpon Springs, which was previously in the Congressman’s district, has a high Greek population³⁹ and this has also aided in his development of Greek foreign affairs policy. His support for the Greek nation is evident by him cosponsoring several bills; *the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019* and the *U.S.-Greece Defence and Interparliamentary Partnership Act of 2021* are

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ S. Morrison, ‘The end of Roe could finally convince Americans to care more about privacy’, *Vox.com*, (21 Jul 2022)
<<https://www.vox.com/recode/23271323/roe-dobbs-abortion-data-privacy>> [Accessed 17 June 2023]

³⁸ Energy and Commerce Democrats, ‘Protecting America’s Consumers: Bipartisan Legislation to Strengthen Data Privacy and Security’, *Youtube.com*, (14 Jun 2022)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpgCD-hiAbl&ab_channel=Energy%26CommerceDemocrats> [Accessed 17 June 2023]

³⁹ C. Richard, et al. ‘The Almanac of American Politics 2022’, *Columbia Books Incorporated*, (2021)

examples of this support. These acts provided defence assistance to Greece, in the form of foreign aid and training for Greece's military. It was also designed to enable Greece to "transition away from Russian produced military equipment"⁴⁰. His support for Greece was also evident with him being one of the founders of the Hellenic Caucus.⁴¹ Bilirakis not only supported Greece because it was part of his background, but he also understood that Greece served as a strategic military asset for the United States, with the eastern Mediterranean area pivotal to both European and Middle Eastern resources and conflicts.⁴² However, within the 118th Congress, his efforts for Greek policy have stagnated and the ability to pass meaningful legislation dwindled. Therefore, it is difficult to completely estimate his impact on the region or on the United States' relationship with Greece.

Anti-Russia Agenda

It is also evident that whilst Bilirakis advocated heavily to support Greece, his position on Russia before the Ukraine invasion remained similar to that of his position on China currently. He opposed Russia and enacted/cosponsored policy that would limit America's dependence on Russia and decrease allied nations' dependencies on Russia as well. This is also evident with Bilirakis cosponsoring a large majority of Bills that explicitly prohibit Russia. This Included the Democrat-led bill; *Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020* which cited on multiple occasions that any funding to Russia is prohibited.⁴³ Previous acts in the 116th Congress also aimed at reducing Russia's influence in the Mediterranean area include the *Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019* that stated the US would cease any aid to Turkey if it accepted Russian military equipment. It also aimed to "malign Russian influence in the region"⁴⁴. Whilst Bilirakis' policy focus in essence was to provide US military equipment to Greece and provide energy independence in doing so, it emphasised reducing

⁴⁰ United States Congress, 'H.R. 4129 - U.S.-Greece Defense and Interparliamentary Partnership Act of 2021', *Congress.Gov*, (24 June 2021) <<https://www.congress.gov/bills/117/congress/house-bills/4129?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22U.S.-Greece+Defense+and+Interparliamentary+Partnership+Act+of+2021%22%5D%7D&s=6&r=3>> [Accessed 11 June 2023]

⁴¹ United States House of Representatives, 'New Co-Chairs Bilirakis and Cicilline kick-off bipartisan Congressional Hellenic-Israel Alliance for the 118th Congress', *Bilirakis.House.Gov*, (9 Feb 2023) <<https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/new-co-chairs-bilirakis-and-cicilline-kick-bipartisan-congressional-hellenic>> [Accessed 15 June 2023]

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ United States Congress, 'H.R.1865 - Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020', *Congress.Gov*, (20 Dec 2019) <<https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/house-bills/1865?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22China%22%2C%22Russia%22%2C%22China%22%2C%22Russia%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=4>> [Accessed 18 June 2023]

⁴⁴ United States Congress, 'H.R.2913 - Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019', *Congress.Gov*, (26 Jun 2019) <<https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/house-bills/2913?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22Russia%22%2C%22Russia%22%5D%7D&s=6&r=9>> [Accessed 18 June 2023]

dependence on Russia. This anti-Russia agenda stems from “the image of Russia as a defeated and potentially revisionist power that seeks to challenge America’s primacy.”⁴⁵ Furthermore “it was essential to keep Russia in a state of military and economic weakness... ..to preserve American security and promote its values across the world.”⁴⁶ It was this sentiment that meant Bilirakis focused on ensuring the east Mediterranean region does not rely on Russia, for a fear that Russia would defy American hegemony.

East Mediterranean Pipeline

In order to develop meaningful foreign policy, the ability to develop a relationship with the executive branch (The US President) and the legislative branch (US Congress) is required.⁴⁷ This situation of ensuring that the Executive branch and Congress aligns is important and has been a key issue for Bilirakis regarding his previous foreign policy attempts. The East Mediterranean Pipeline was key to Bilirakis' policy and supported Greece in decreasing its dependence on Russian gas. He claimed that this pipeline was a national security concern and would allow allies to increase energy independence and economic prosperity.⁴⁸ When this plan was first initiated through the Trump administration it received approval. Bilirakis and Trump's shared affiliation with the Republican party, paired with Bilirakis' great approval of Trump for President,⁴⁹ meant the policy for the pipeline was a success. However, years later the Executive was under a Democrat led administration and they felt differently towards the pipeline project. The Biden administration stated that environmental concerns in relation to the pipeline were too great and withdrew support towards non-green projects. Ultimately, this included the Mediterranean pipeline and Biden made the decision to reverse support for the pipeline in January of 2022.⁵⁰ The White House specifically cited the diminished viability of the project and the increased tensions it would create as its justification.⁵¹ This resulted in severe backlash from Bilirakis as he expressed his concern and disappointment in the Biden

⁴⁵ A. Tsygankov, 'Russophobia Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy', *New York: Palgrave Macmillan US*, 1st ed, (2009). <<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230620957>>, p. 20

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Zoellick, *Congress and US Foreign Policy*

⁴⁸ United States House of Representatives, 'EastMed Pipeline Reverse Letter to Blinken', *Bilirakis.House.Gov*, (21 Jan 2022)

<https://bilirakis.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/bilirakis.house.gov/files/wysiwyg_uploaded/EastMed%20pipeline%20reverse%20Blinken%20final%201.21.22.pdf> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

⁴⁹ J. Allen & M. Caputo, 'Inside Trump's secretive endorsement operation', *NBC News* (15 Jan 2022) <<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/inside-trump-s-secretive-endorsement-operation-n1287383>> [Accessed 17 June 2023]

⁵⁰ United States House of Representatives, 'EastMed Pipeline Reverse Letter to Blinken'

⁵¹ N. Stamouli, 'EastMed: A pipeline project that ran afoul of geopolitics and green policies'. *Politico*, (18 Jan 2022) <<https://www.politico.eu/article/eastmed-a-pipeline-project-that-ran-afoul-of-geopolitics-and-green-policies/>> [Accessed 7 June 2023]

administration. He highlighted the contradictory nature of the decision as the administration was still supporting other gas projects in the region.⁵² This cemented just how important it is to have a Presidential administration that aligns with the agenda of Congress, and how his previous attempts to provide support for the east Mediterranean pipeline had subsided.

Why the change to China?

With the Congressman's previous foreign policy agenda focused heavily on the east Mediterranean region, it is important to explore why the Congressman has differed in his outlook on foreign affairs policy. To understand why Bilirakis has directed himself towards China I will now discuss what factors may have affected this change. It could be that his current agenda relates to his anti-Russian policy approach, his recent appointment as Chairman of the Innovation, Data and Commerce Subcommittee, the recent redistricting and new makeup of his district, or because he believes China serves as an astounding threat to his constituents. Investigating these factors in depth will broaden our understanding of how a Congressman's agenda in foreign policy can differ.

Anti-Russia, Anti-China and Great Power Politics

Bilirakis' interest with policies which promoted countries within the east Mediterranean region, particularly his desire for Greece to disengage from Russia, prompts similarities when considering Bilirakis' new anti-China policy. His anti-Russia approach focused mainly on distancing the US and its allies from Russia. This is otherwise known as great power politics, which is the act of a great power reducing the power of actors it sees as threats in order to protect its own hegemony.⁵³ Mearsheimer explored great power politics and analysed that the "ultimate aim is to gain a position of dominant power over others, because having dominant power is the best means to ensure one's own."⁵⁴ This act of ensuring a dominant position of power is frequent with Bilirakis' anti-Russian policy position, and can easily be translated to the same fear that US hegemony is threatened by China. This is due to the fear that if the US does engage with China and its companies or technology, then China will turn its economic prowess into "military might"⁵⁵.

Bilirakis' policy approach to China is not unpredictable with Mearsheimer stating that "China and the United States are destined to be adversaries as China's power grows."⁵⁶ Bilirakis is

⁵² United States House of Representatives, *EastMed Pipeline Reverse*

⁵³ J. J. Mearsheimer, 'The Tragedy of Great Power Politics', (New York, 2001)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

heavily taking part in the reduction of and strong hesitation towards China operating within the US. It highlights that Bilirakis himself is an actor of the US's involvement in great power politics, and therefore in doing so has deemed China a threat to US hegemony in the world order. Similar to Bilirakis' previous aim of reducing Russia's military influence in the east Mediterranean region, this recent policy agenda could also be Bilirakis attempting to reduce China's threat to US hegemony by preventing China from surveilling America's data.

District

Bilirakis' congressional district in Florida may also be a factor in the Congressman's change in policy. Recent data infringements from Chinese company Huawei have caused concern for residents and changes to district lines are examples of how the Congressman's district may impact his policy agenda.

Prior District Concerns - Rip and Replace

Between 2017 and 2020 it became increasingly evident that Huawei, a Chinese based technology corporation, was a concern for United States data privacy. There emerged an increasing concern over the risk of Huawei being able to access American data and the vulnerabilities such a risk created. Huawei was attractive to businesses especially for rural implementation due to the cost advantage of implementing Huawei 5G equipment in comparison to Nokia or Ericsson 5G equipment. However, as the threat of Huawei technology emerged, by 2020 it was determined that any pre-existing Huawei equipment had to be replaced. This was known as the *Rip and Replace Act* in which "Congress provided \$1.9 billion to remove Huawei equipment from U.S. networks."⁵⁷ Rip and Replace was a major objective for the US government and has since left the government struggling to recuperate the costs of the program.

The fiasco created concerns among legislators over data collection and resulted in the poor rollout of 5G in rural or less dense areas. It is "estimated that about 25% of US rural providers use some Huawei equipment, and restricting the use of USF funds could affect network buildout and services in rural areas."⁵⁸ This resulted in Rip and Replace programs affecting rural districts, such as those in Florida, the most. This therefore was a concern for Bilirakis' policy team as the rollout of technology had to be redone. It also set in place the mindset the Congressman has today about China, as he has stated "we cannot relive the Huawei

⁵⁷ Congressional Research Service, 'U.S. Restrictions on Huawei Technologies: National Security, Foreign Policy, and Economic Interests', *CRS Reports*, (5 Jan 2022)

<<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47012>> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

⁵⁸ Ibid. p.23

debacle”⁵⁹. The Congressional Research Service report stated that the event caused Congress to consider multiple factors into the future. The report cited that the US needed to increase its competitiveness to ensure it could maintain secure networks and ensure Chinese equipment was not a sound option⁶⁰. “Members have introduced legislation to provide U.S. government funding to the telecommunications industry for R&D on advanced technologies and 5G applications, to assure U.S. leadership and competitiveness in the global telecommunications industry.”⁶¹ If the US was at the forefront in the introduction of 5G technology, then this would have reduced the risk of a Chinese data breach. It also would have prevented the costly and timely effort of rolling out an already timely and expensive 5G network in Florida’s 12th district. Therefore, the district’s prior experience of Chinese interference could be a contributing factor for Bilirakis’ recent criticisms against China.

Redistricting

With the 2020 Census occurring, this meant that redistricting occurred in Florida’s congressional districts. This resulted in Florida’s 12th congressional district having a drastic change. Figure 1 and Figure 2 below display the 118th congressional district and the 117th congressional district. This redistricting has resulted in the loss of Tarpon Springs which “boasts the highest share of Greek Americans of any place in the United States”⁶². This has been key to Bilirakis who doesn’t shy away from his Greek heritage. This created disappointment among the Congressman and his team as his interest in Hellenic affairs originated from this influential background in Tarpon Springs. However, this hasn’t drastically affected the main demographic of his district which remains similar to previous years.

However, another interesting aspect of this redistricting was the drastic increase in area size he is representing. Whilst the population remains relatively the same, the density is drastically different. The 117th congressional district had 862 people per square mile⁶³, whilst the 118th has 471 persons per square mile.⁶⁴ This has resulted in a district that covers roughly double

⁵⁹ Energy and Commerce, ‘Communications and Technology Legislative Hearing; “Liftoff: Unleashing Innovations in Satellite Communications Technologies.’, *Energy and Commerce* (9 Feb 2023), <<https://energycommerce.house.gov/events/communications-and-technology-legislative-hearing-liftoff-unleashing-innovation-in-satellite-communications-technologies>> [Accessed 22 June 2023]

⁶⁰ CRS, *Restrictions on Huawei*, p. 38

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 38

⁶² Richard, et al. *The Almanac of American Politics 2022*

⁶³ United States Census Bureau, ‘117th Congress of the United States; Florida - Congressional District 12’, *United States Census Bureau* (2021) <https://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/cong_dist/cd117/cd_based/ST12/CD117_FL12.pdf> [Accessed 7 June 2023]

⁶⁴ United States Census Bureau, ‘118th Congress of the United States; Florida - Congressional District 12’, *United States Census Bureau* (2023)

the area and is classified as a more rural district. This has resulted in Bilirakis increasing his stronghold in the district with the highest percentage of votes⁶⁵ which can also be attributed to his Republican party affiliation and the percentage of seniors that vote. However, the increase in land size has also created a different array of concerns - the difficulty in rolling out new technology infrastructure, the cost of ensuring his district is up to date, and ensuring seniors are not disadvantaged are now important issues to Bilirakis. Concerns around Chinese infiltration are also among the Congressman's top concerns due to previous errors which allowed Chinese equipment to be installed. His district is now a rural area in which the cost of Rip and Replace hit the hardest. This has now resulted in the Congressman advocating heavily against making similar mistakes as those which allowed Chinese telecoms equipment to be implemented in America's technology grid.

<https://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/cong_dist/cd118/cd_based/ST12/CD118_FL12.pdf> [Accessed 7 June 2023]

⁶⁵ BallotPedia, 'Florida's 12th Congressional District', *BallotPedia* (2023)

<https://ballotpedia.org/Florida%27s_12th_Congressional_District> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

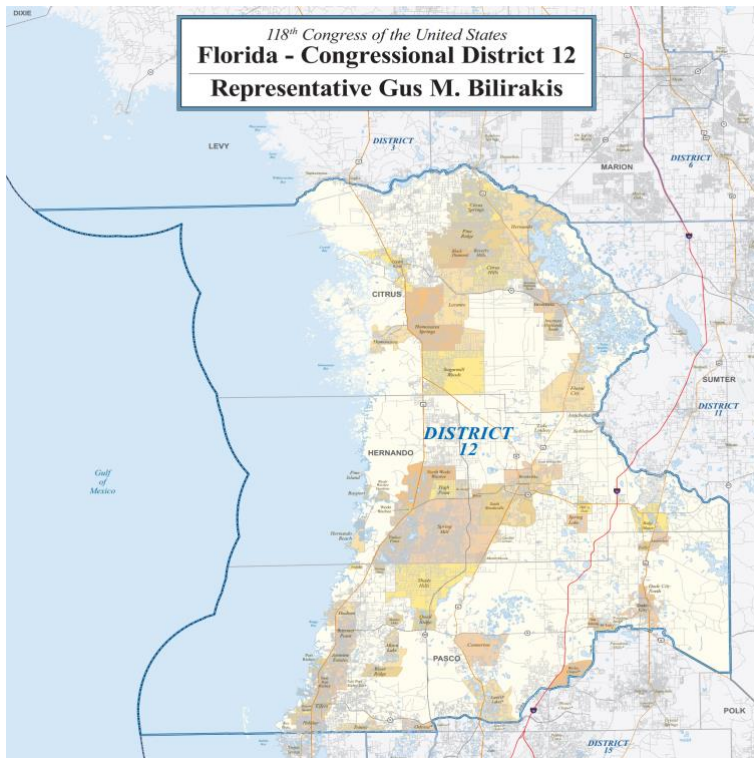


Figure 1 - Florida's 12th Congressional District in 118th Congress⁶⁶

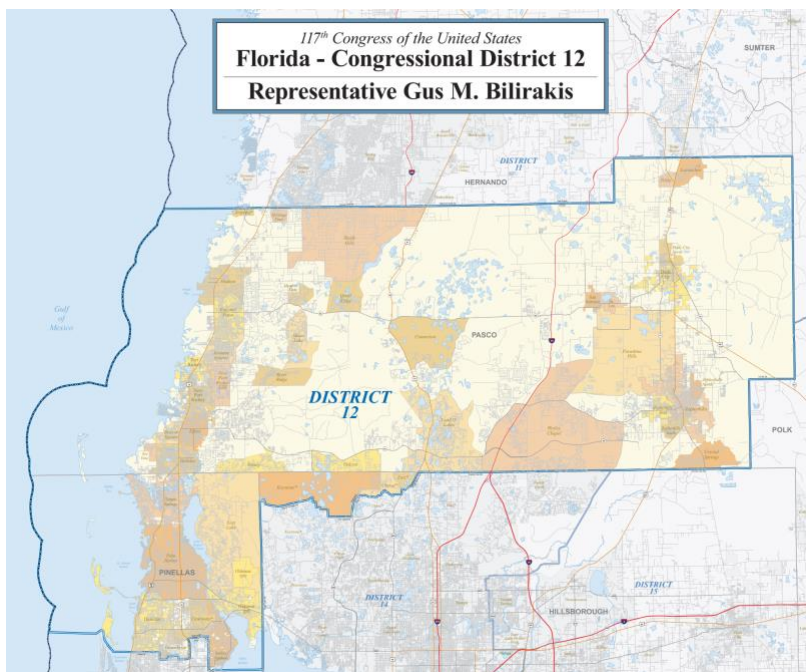


Figure 2 - Florida's 12th Congressional District in 117th Congress⁶⁷

⁶⁶ United States Census Bureau, '118th Congress of the United States; Florida - Congressional District 12', *United States Census Bureau* (2023) https://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/cong_dist/cd118/cd_based/ST12/CD118_FL12.pdf [Accessed 7 June 2023]

⁶⁷ United States Census Bureau, '117th Congress of the United States; Florida - Congressional District 12', *United States Census Bureau* (2021) https://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/cong_dist/cd117/cd_based/ST12/CD117_FL12.pdf [Accessed 7 June 2023]

New Committee Role

A part of Bilirakis' success in the House of Representatives is his chairman role within the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee: Innovation, Data and Commerce. This committee's focus ranges from data security, motor vehicle safety, regulation over the Federal Trade Commission, product liability and the regulation of travel/tourism.⁶⁸ This wide range of issues can create difficulty when pursuing legislation. However, Bilirakis' role of chairman is highly influential and provides him the ability to control a great deal of power over the subcommittee.⁶⁹ Bilirakis has the ability to control which bills are marked up in committees as well as focus and conduct congressional hearings which advocate for research into specific legislative focuses.⁷⁰ Committee chairs also have the power "to issue subpoenas, demand documents, call hearings, and compel witnesses to testify."⁷¹ This was evident throughout my internship in Congress and meant Bilirakis held considerable authority. He was particularly proud about his actions within congressional hearings. This was evident during a committee hearing on TikTok with CEO Shou Chew, where there was over 5 hours of grilling the CEO on the intricacies of how TikTok operates in the US.⁷² This highlights the committee's power to coerce powerful figures to appear before the committee, and in particular provides Bilirakis with the power to progress legislation over the jurisdiction of his committee. Therefore it displays that Bilirakis' new committee role and its jurisdiction has meant that Bilirakis' has become more involved in policy surrounding China.

China as a Threat to Americans' Data Security

The outstanding notion that China is a threat to Americans' data is already highly outlined. Congressman Bilirakis has highlighted just this as a key reason towards his policy and agenda in the 118th Congress. He has noticed that China is a major threat to Americans' data

⁶⁸ Energy and Commerce, 'Subcommittee on Innovation, Data, and Commerce', *Energy and Commerce* (2023) <<https://energycommerce.house.gov/committees/subcommittee/innovation>> [Accessed 07 July 2023]

⁶⁹ G.W. Cox and M.D. McCubbins, 'Agenda Power in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1877 to 1986.', *Stanford University Press*, (2007) p. 2

⁷⁰ A. S. Baugh, & S. Adler, 'Congressional Investigations in the 118th Congress', *Inside Political Law*, (14 Dec 2022) <<https://www.insidepoliticallaw.com/2022/12/14/congressional-investigations-in-the-118th-congress/>> [Accessed 17 June 2023]

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² C. Thorbecke, 'TikTok CEO in the hot seat: 5 takeaways from his first appearance before Congress', *CNN*, (23 Mar 2023) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/23/tech/tiktok-ceo-hearing/index.html>> [Accessed 17 June 2023]

security.⁷³ This is due to Chinese apps being particularly data hungry, with the 2020 Congressional Service Reports stating that “Chinese apps in particular have a reputation for grabbing more data than required to provide their services.”⁷⁴ India has since banned the app, along with 50 other Chinese apps, and the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, had also planned to ban the app in 2020, stating “It connects right back to China.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, this is not just related to TikTok but stems from Chinese privacy and data laws which allow the Chinese government to access computer networks and require “Chinese companies to cooperate with government intelligence operations if so requested.”⁷⁶

Whilst the US government is not sure of the exact extent that data is used by the Chinese government, the GOP reaffirms concerns that data of the general population can be collected and used by the Chinese government. Resulting in increased scepticism from the general public. A Pew Research study found that 88% of Americans don’t trust Chinese companies to follow their data privacy policies, with roughly 50% supporting the banning of TikTok in the US.⁷⁷ Bilirakis has also acknowledged this, stating “China will stop at nothing to undermine our country – and it begins with collecting information about and the American people and our constituents.”⁷⁸ With China’s ability to collect information on Americans through requesting company data, and the growing concerns among the general public and Congress people, it is no surprise that Bilirakis has an interest within this area. This is particularly pertinent to Bilirakis as he is the chairman of a committee having jurisdiction over policies that can affect such an area. Whilst this can also be attributed to Republicans generally having a more drastic stance on Chinese data privacy concerns⁷⁹, it represents an ever-growing need for a uniform policy.

Bilirakis’ change in policy approach has been the culmination of many contributing factors. The overall concern from Americans of China being a threat has drastically increased. This meant that in the 118th Congress with Republicans regained power in the House of

⁷³ Energy and Commerce, ‘Subcommittee Chair Bilirakis Opening Remarks on Legislation to Protect our Data and Counter China’, *Energy and Commerce* (7 Feb 2023), <<https://energycommerce.house.gov/posts/subcommittee-chair-bilirakis-opening-remarks-on-legislation-to-protect-our-data-and-counter-china>> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

⁷⁴ Congressional Research Service, ‘TikTok: Technology Overview and Issues’, *CRS Reports*, (4 Dec 2020), p.8 <<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46543>> [Accessed 17 June 2023]

⁷⁵ CRS, *TikTok*, p. 9

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 6

⁷⁷ L. Silver, & L. Clancy, ‘By more than two-to-one, Americans support U.S. government banning TikTok’, *Pew Research Centre*, (31 March 2023) <<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/31/by-a-more-than-two-to-one-margin-americans-support-us-government-banning-tiktok/>> [Accessed 16 June 2023]

⁷⁸ Energy and Commerce, *Subcommittee Chair Bilirakis Opening Remarks on China*

⁷⁹ Silver & Clancy, *By more than two to One, Americans support U.S. Government Banning TikTok*

Representatives and regained committee control which changed the focus of Energy and Commerce. His chairman stature on a subcommittee in Energy and Commerce and his role at the table has culminated in a different foreign policy approach in line with his committee's jurisdiction, as well as his district's concerns.

Reflection

Bilirakis' change in foreign policy direction does surprise me, and I'm sure many others. I believe as someone who was so prominent in his role towards the Mediterranean region and committed to Veteran's Affairs, it is a surprise for him to pivot his focus to China. Bilirakis previously rarely mentioned his concerns about China and rarely legislated over China. His decision to turn to China as a policy focus appears to be due to a combination of various factors, as has been previously highlighted. However, I believe rather his turn to China was due to Bilirakis wanting to become more prominent within his new role, but more importantly to better represent the needs of his district.

With Americans growing weary of China, especially Chinese companies which operate in the US, Bilirakis' pivot to the US makes sense as he would try to align his policy with the desires of the American public. It also makes sense for Bilirakis to align his policy with that of Republican leaders who typically hold a very strong stance against China. Especially his idol former President Donald Trump who instigated the trade war with China. To be a legislator who holds such an important position and have a lacklustre policy against China, Bilirakis might be seen as a Congressperson who believes China is not a threat. Therefore, legislating with an anti-China approach would allow Bilirakis to gain more relevance in Congress whilst tackling a problem which is directly concerning Americans.

However, his move to turn away from veteran's affairs appears to be out of frustration rather than a lack of legislative interest for the area. After multiple attempts to become Chairman of the Veteran's Affairs committee failed and he was replaced by two less senior members,⁸⁰ it was evident to Bilirakis that he should turn elsewhere. I believe that Bilirakis was underappreciated in the Veteran's Affairs committee because he lacked an aggressive conservatism. Bilirakis will be much more valued in the Energy and Commerce Committee, where his efforts to work across party lines are more appreciated. I would agree with Bilirakis' decision to turn away from the Veteran's Affairs committee to focus on Energy and Commerce, as it has appeared to have paid off with a more successful role within a more prominent committee.

⁸⁰ Richard, et al. *The Almanac of American Politics 2022*

Whether it was an attempt to appease his new committee role or gain more relevance in modern day American politics, I believe that his decision to pursue anti-Chinese policy catered to his district concerns most of all. I believe Bilirakis' multiple terms of inaction on Chinese policy would have frustrated his constituents, especially those concerned about their privacy. During my internship, constituents would frequently call and voice their concerns over China, and it was clear to me this was a strong concern for them. With the general public's concerns also growing, it was inevitable that Bilirakis would pursue China eventually.

During my time interning within Bilirakis' office, I observed the Congressman's dedication to serving the needs of his constituents which has garnered him respect from his district. I noticed that all staff members within every office are trained to answer and aid constituent concerns, including myself. In answering the phone calls that came to the office, I had to record constituents' contact details and their concerns, and log them into IQ, a program that files and categorises concerns. This enabled the Congressman to be aware of the current and timely concerns of his constituents. Then constituents would receive a written reply from the office and on behalf of the Congressman catering to their concerns. Bilirakis would also continually hold town hall meetings during district weeks, and I learnt he even went to the effort of holding tele-conference style meetings during COVID-19. His constant dedication to serve the needs of constituents and his commitment to communicating with the district are indications of how Bilirakis is a true representative of Florida's 12th Congressional district. It would be apparent then that this turn to China has a direct correlation to the concerns of his constituents.

The impact this recent change in policy agenda had on my internship experience was very positive. Chinese foreign affairs have always been of significant interest to me, and discovering Bilirakis' focus on Chinese policy was unexpected and exciting. Whilst I knew certain Republicans had taken a keen interest in Chinese foreign affairs, I was delighted to find out that Bilirakis too had done this. I developed a keen interest to investigate and understand his newfound focus. Due to Bilirakis' change in policy, I was lucky enough to attend multiple Energy and Commerce hearings during my internship. I found these hearings to be very interesting and exciting to witness. That paired with the discussions I had with key staff members in the office, I believe that I have developed a broader understanding of why Americans, particularly Republicans, are so fearful of Chinese influence and interference.

Whilst this fear of Chinese interference in American data security is understandable, I find it is difficult to replicate such a fearful objective over China within Australia. I believe that the US currently being in the position of world leader, and with the US being Australia's greatest ally,

Australians have a sense of security over the threat of China. Whilst China is a growing concern among many Australians, it doesn't resonate to the same degree. For Bilirakis and his team, it is comparable to the Cold War and the space race with the Soviet Union. Investigating this does cause me to feel more concerned towards China and its influence in Australia, however, due to the drastic differences in government and foreign policy approach, the problem of China becoming a national security threat is downplayed. However, Australia also heavily follows in the footsteps of the United States. As a strategic ally, Australia tends to follow US policy and adopt their serious concerns as ours, so I do believe it is only a matter of time before we start legislating against China to the same degree as the US.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has discussed in depth how a member of Congress decides to pursue policy. It has analysed the possible factors that may influence a Congressperson's decision-making process, by using Congressman Gus Bilirakis' decision to investigate and legislate a differing foreign policy matter as a subject to base analysis on. The paper has utilised first-hand experience and conducted research into how and why Bilirakis is expanding his foreign policy role to include a defensive stance on China's operations within the United States.

This paper discussed the intricacies of the Washington system of Government, and outlined how the House of Representatives allows for such foreign policy freedom. It also explored how the operations of committees in US Congress and Bilirakis' frequent use of bipartisanship have cemented his position in Congress. Then by investigating Bilirakis' previous foreign policy objectives in the eastern Mediterranean region, it highlighted his anti-Russia agenda and his determination to protect American hegemony, whilst displaying his ongoing support for Greece and the extended east Mediterranean region.

Finally, the paper explored what persuaded Bilirakis to change his foreign policy approach. It was determined that Bilirakis' previous anti-Russia policy translated to a very similar anti-China policy and presented qualities of great power politics. In addition, his district's prior negative experience with Chinese technology businesses and the redistricting of Florida's 12th district have directly impacted his constituents and thus Bilirakis' policy focus. Furthermore, his new Committee role as Chairman of a Subcommittee in Energy and Commerce provided him with more authority to legislate over matters which directly involve Chinese infringement on American's data security. China's recent threats to Americans' data security and his Committee's jurisdiction in this area of policy has resulted in Bilirakis' pivot towards legislating against Chinese technology companies.

As a result, his continued effort to investigate and discourage Chinese interference in the US has been one which Bilirakis personally sees as invaluable. By doing so he is not only supporting his position in the Energy and Commerce Committee, but he is representing the concerns of his constituents. Witnessing this pivot, I was particularly impressed by his constant desire to represent his district and hear the concerns of his constituents. His staff continually supported his efforts and policy approach. They have provided him with the ability and credibility to be one of the most effective legislators which has been made evident throughout this paper. I believe Congressman Bilirakis has the ability and determination to be successful in his efforts to counter China and reduce China's influence within the United States.

I am grateful to have interned for Congressman Bilirakis and his office. His team were both supportive and encouraging to have me intern for them. I will forever cherish the opportunity to witness the US Congress first hand, one of the most important democracies in the world, for a short two months.

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