

Event Report

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

The Lady and the Trump: the US Presidential Election 2016 and Its Impact on Europe¹

On 8 November the American voters will decide who will be their next president. If Europeans could do that for them, they would elect Hillary Clinton. With less than four weeks to go, it looks increasingly as if Americans will do what a majority of Europeans would if they were in their shoes. But what if Trump will end up in the White House after an election campaign which has gone beyond all limits of decency? How has the presidential race impacted Europe and US-European relations regardless of the election outcome? Has it undermined transatlantic trust? Has it bolstered populism and blurred boundaries of decency in political discourse also in Europe? And, whatever the election result will be: what sort of transatlantic cooperation can we expect regarding the major issues of our time: terrorism, migration, climate change, trade (TTIP) and international security (NATO)? During the Obama administrations the US has shifted its global priorities away from Europe and cut back on its leading role on foreign affairs. With a (post Brexit) European Union in crisis mood, U.S. leadership was and will be sorely missed. Trump's isolationism and his openly displayed disdain for the European Union would seriously undermine, if not destroy transatlantic relations. Hillary Clinton, in her time as U.S. Secretary of State, showed interest in European concerns and NATO, built bridges with the Arab world and promoted TTIP as an 'economic NATO' (a position she seems to not longer fully uphold). Once the dust has settled, what sort of administration will emerge in Washington and what does it mean for Europe?

Even for those closely following the election campaign and the US media during the last few months of the election campaign, it was hard to tell whom the American people would support on Election Day. After the majority of the votes and the so called Swing states had been counted, it was clear that the Republican business man Donald Trump had been able to convince more than 50% of the electoral delegates. His opponent of the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton, got more popular votes than Trump but as the the voting system of the United States requires that a candidate needs to win the votes of the state majorities to subsequently get the electoral delegates' vote, this was not enough for her to become president.

Primaries

How could this unexpected result come about and how will it affect the world? First of all, vibrant democracies like the US are not predictable. Second, one has to assess the situation in the two parties in the campaigning period. Looking at the Democrats, it has to be said that there simply has not been a pre-election with equal nominees. In order to have equal nominees for the presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders should not have presented himself as candidate. Sanders as a convinced socialist succeeded in mobilising especially young voters, but it is this self-positioning as a socialist which makes him ineligible in the States. This implies that the pre-election was predetermined to the advantage of Hillary Clinton and voters do not like to bring out their voice in an election which is already predetermined. Furthermore there has been a big communication break down between establishment and voters. The already wide gap between the two sides kept growing during the election campaign, mainly because the voices of 'normal' people did not get heard. This too had an impact on the election outcome. Regarding the Republican Party one could say that if there

¹ The event took place on 10 November 2016. Guest speakers were **David M. Herszenhorn**, Chief Brussels Correspondent *POLITICO*; **Bart Kerremans**, Professor of International Relations and American Government at LINES, KU Leuven and **Marietje Schaake**, Member of the European Parliament (ALDE) and Vice-President of the delegation for relations with the US. The moderator was **Klaus Linsenmeier**, Director Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union.

had not been such a wide range of possible candidates Donald Trump might not have had the chance to prevail the way he did.

The failure of journalism

Another significant point for wrongly forecasting the outcome was the failure of journalism during the election campaign. Reporters were not spending enough time with voters and didn't understand the concerns and issues of the people, especially in the areas and states in the interior of the US. There was a huge gap of interest between journalists in New York or Washington and the opinions and experience of people in this part of the country. The media failed to capture all the varieties of positions and prevailing views in the individual states. A typical example is the result of Pennsylvania which became important during the final vote counting. Pennsylvania is a state between New York City and the capital, Washington D.C. For journalists of the big national media it would have been a rather small effort to go there and to get an impression of the views of people in this mid-western state.

Not realising that voters in the rural areas weren't interested in the subjects the media in the big cities published about the election prevented a correct prediction of the outcome of the vote count. In the big cities, the journalist elite were more or less addressing the elite among the population which led to a distortion in the perception of the public opinion and widened the gap between the elite and the people. People especially in the rural areas of the US aren't necessarily thinking or worrying about the issues that have an importance in places like New York or Washington. An example to underline this journalistic lack of perception is what happened in the state of Wisconsin. People there were interested in gun rights which have a more direct impact on their lives than other topics like trade deals. This is one reason why many inhabitants of this state voted for Trump and his tolerance towards gun possession. Astonishingly none of the big newspapers were mentioning that issue. Hence, the media in general and the individual journalists have to reflect on their work and rethink their focus of reporting and analysis.

Polarisation of American society

In light of the election campaign and result, it is vital to overcome and prevent further polarisation of American society. This is a task for the media, which contributed to reinforce the polarisation of opinions within the country. The problem of polarisation in America is actually much more serious than it might look on the surface. A negative reaction to the establishment does not only just show as a reaction on politics or politicians it also implies a negative attitude towards the media, academics and experts of all sorts. The feeling of frustration which exists among part of the public goes much deeper than frustration about the political class. It is a feeling of general estrangement from society, estrangement from a group that is considered to hold the most powerful positions, but also the group that determines what is politically correct or incorrect. This has led to a situation where people show no tolerance for a different approach or opinion than their own. Finally, polarisation is typical for election campaigns; that does not necessarily lead to conclusions about the resulting leadership. In his first speech after the election Trump seemed to be looking for common ground which would definitely be important in order to prevent (fear of) further polarisation in American society. Europeans have been facing populist movements for a long time with the Brexit campaign as the most striking recent example. They should be careful in their judgments as so far nobody has found a remedy to stop populism in Europe either. One should be careful with making statements like 'the elite have failed' or 'progressive politics have failed'. Up to now we have all failed.

Unpredictable future

It is difficult to discuss the future of the United States and its relationship with the European Union as almost everything is uncertain. Due to Trump's rather vague, controversial and

diverse statements concerning foreign policy, trade policy, technology or the US membership of NATO it will be interesting to see what he will do and which plans he will realise. The wall between Mexico and the States of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas will certainly be one election promise he will have to fulfil, since there was almost no issue he argued and campaigned for as intensely. On the other hand Trump has to re-establish a sense of unity within his party as well as within American society at large. Not all members of the Republican Party supported Donald Trump; some even articulated their disapproval publicly. This raises further questions about how the Republicans will react with respect to Trump's political agenda. Of course, due to his (unexpected) victory, the new president can count on a solid amount of political capital to start with. Still, the reaction of the Republicans is not predictable in the short term. More interesting will be the long term collaboration and support for Trump in the Republican Party. The strongest support seems to be for Trump's tax cut programme, so Trump might therefore focus on this issue right from the beginning. To sum it all up, not knowing what Trump will do is one uncertainty, not knowing how everybody else will react, is reason for even more uncertainty.

The transatlantic alliance

So far, Trump has shown that he is approaching the international political stage from a business perspective. There is for example his 'transactional approach' concerning the United States' NATO membership: in order to create a stronger bargaining position for himself, he has threatened other NATO partners with withdrawal as he questions that the European partners are contributing enough. And already some countries seem to be investing more in their own defence. Trump is not necessarily undermining the security guarantee itself, but the risk of his approach is high. Certain political leaders may see the uncertainty of the security guarantees as an opportunity to act aggressively in the EU's neighbourhood.

In Europe, there was and is a remarkable interest in US politics. Nevertheless, Europeans should not get distracted and focus on the challenges for the European Union. Europe did not need a wakeup call from the US to realise that it is high time to invest in reshaping transatlantic relations in a sustainable way.

If Brexit and Trump had happened one or two decades ago, the impact on security and stability on the European Union would have been immense. Today we can put the effect of these events more into perspective. Yet, it is important that the European Union stands up for the values of an open society, especially if Europe wants to move towards a position of significance on the global stage again.

When it comes to political leaders what the European Union needs right now are leaders with principles rather than pragmatists. Many European leaders are reluctant to challenge nationalists, populists or protectionists; little was heard from Jean-Claude Juncker, Martin Schulz or Donald Tusk during the US election campaign.

A significant challenge for the future of the European Union is to avoid more fragmentation. A fragmented Europe and disagreements on many issues means a weak and non-viable European Union. There is a need for responsible leadership, political participation as well as engagement for the values Europeans share.

Europe should not have needed the election of Donald Trump to feel the need to take a closer look on its own current political situation, to reflect on what our interests are and what it takes when it comes to solving issues concerning security, migration, refugees, climate crisis, energy or other urgent topics.