

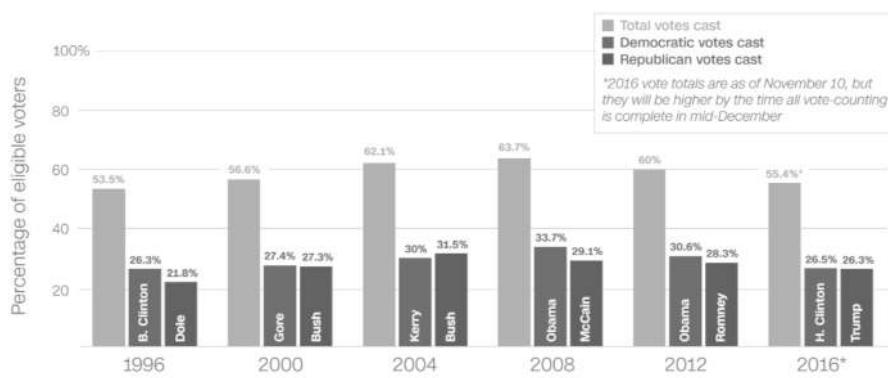
Jack Janes

The U.S. Elections 2016: Choices and Consequences for the U.S. and for Transatlantic Relations

When Donald Trump was elected on November 8, 2016, it was clearly a surprise—not only to millions of Americans, but for the entire world. The analysis of this unexpected election result has continued to create more questions than have been answered. Indeed, the criticism of the pollsters as well as the political pundits who had for the most part predicted a clear victory for Hillary Clinton has been unabated. How could so many have been so wrong?

While we have had many close presidential elections in the past, what is significant about this race to the White House is the degree to which the election turned on closely fought battles in a few states. The overall turnout was high for American standards: around 139 million Americans, or 60.2 percent of the voting-eligible population, voted in the November election. That compares with 58.6 percent of eligible voters who turned out in 2012, but it's below the 62.2 percent who turned out to help elect Obama for the first time in 2008.

Candidate support among all eligible voters



Sources: CNN.com, preliminary election results as of November 10, 2016; US Census, American Community Survey, 2015; US Census, "The Diversifying Electorate – Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012," May 2013; CNN research, 2008 and 2012 presidential election results; Federal Election Commission, 1996-2004 presidential election results.

President Trump won just shy of 63 million votes—enough to secure a majority of the Electoral College, even though he fell almost 3 million votes shy of his Democratic op-

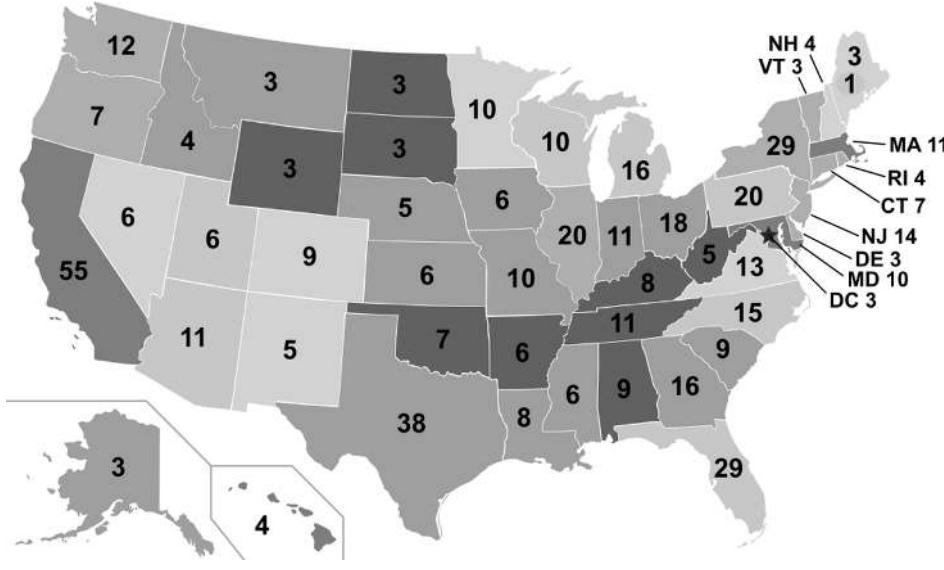
ponent, Hillary Clinton. The Electoral College victory was one of the closest margins in the history of the United States.

What is also important to consider is the extreme polarization of voter turnout, which oddly resulted in different degrees of voting rates.

States with the lowest levels of voter turnout were all solidly in one party's column: Just 43 percent of voters showed up in safely Democratic Hawaii. Less than 53 percent of voters cast ballots in reliably Republican Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia.

The Democratic and Republican parties focused their primary attention on a small handful of states. More than half of the campaign stops Clinton and Trump made between July 19 and November 7—57 percent—were in just four states: Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, all of which had significant Electoral College votes to win.

In addition, the campaigns spent 71 percent of their money in those four states. In the end, all four went for Trump on Election Day.



Source: CNN.com

As was widely noted before the election, Clinton and Trump had markedly low levels of national popularity. With the long-term trend in party affiliation in mind, far more Americans were registered as independent voters than as Democrats or Republicans. And with larger numbers of people who had not voted regularly in earlier years, all the polls and projections turned out to be far more unreliable than in the past. Yet the fact remains that millions of eligible voters sat this election out unable to find either candidate worthy of their vote.

Analyzing the two candidates—their positive and negative characteristics—is only one side of the story.

What Americans are voting for

Understanding this unique election campaign means understanding the transformations occurring in the U.S. as a society in terms of its social, ethnic, and racial composition.

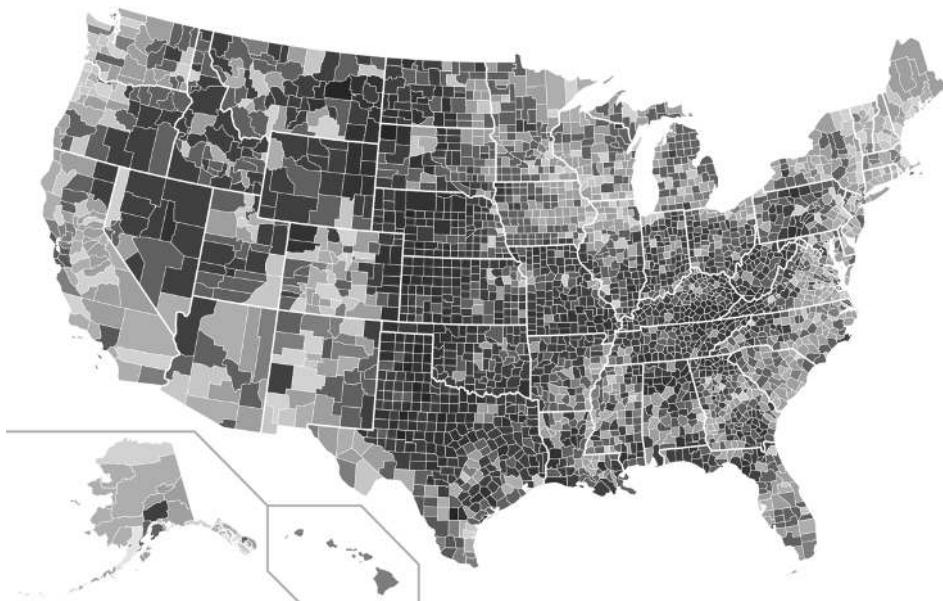
It means grasping the ways through which Americans are trying to explain what they see in the form of threats as well as opportunities. It means understanding what Americans are voting for and against. It means understanding which narratives offered by candidates to explain both the past and the present captured both support and rejection. And it involves grasping how diverse, differentiated, and divided the nation has become along ethnic, racial, cultural, and political lines of cleavages, many of which have been present in American society for decades even centuries but have become activated in new ways today.

Understanding this election campaign means understanding the changing environment of these elections—the tools with which both politicians and voters attempt to communicate their beliefs and messages and attack those which challenge them. That set of tools has changed dramatically in recent years with more competitive capacity in exponentially more social networks in the media world and enhanced by a seemingly bottomless stream of money.

Social media has enabled political organizations to reach voters with speed and accuracy. It has also intensified the segregation of voters by providing channels of communication exclusively tailored to specific preferences. Voters have become entrenched in their feelings of opposition and support, living and talking with those who agree with them. This is not a new phenomenon but began two decades ago. It is called the “Big Sort” by Bill Bishop, who foresaw the problem over a decade ago:

“America is splitting into ‘balkanized’ communities whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible. Republicans who never meet Democrats tend to assume that Democrats believe more extreme things than they really do, and vice versa. This contributes to the nasty tone of many political campaigns; [...] a growing intolerance for political differences that has made national consensus impossible; and politics so polarized that Congress is stymied and elections are no longer just contests over policies, but bitter choices between ways of life.”

This was an analysis that appeared a decade ago but is now even more relevant following the election of Donald Trump.



Source: CNN.com

That environment is also marked by a weakening of those institutions which have been sources of both the narratives as well as identity for millions of Americans. The willingness of people to feel trust in these established institutions—be they the institutions of government, labor unions, religious groups, political parties, corporations, and especially the media—how all of those have been weakened by a series of shocks and crises which has shaken confidence and trust in leadership across the board, in the political process, the economic system, and in their respective futures. Ironically the distrust of other sources of identity generates a desire to restore trust. And one way to rediscover it is in the persons who appear to be outside that cluster of traditional institutions, who proclaim that he or she can cut through problems and solve them. That was the message that Trump was able to deliver to sufficient numbers of voters who believed him more than Hillary Clinton.

We have been in such an environment before: in the 1930s in the midst of a depression and looming war clouds; again in the 1960s during a crisis of confidence amid assassinations, an unpopular war, and domestic upheaval over civil rights; in the 1970s following that war's humiliating defeat, the Watergate scandal, and the perception of a weak government in Washington; in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks and the wars which followed, also accompanied by domestic and international turmoil. And then finally the deep recession of 2009 from which we are still recovering today.

While the United States has never enjoyed more dimensions of power and influence than today, there is a widespread sense among Americans that the country does not reflect confidence as much as anxiety, polarized dialogue about its present and future,

and increasing dangers from abroad. We are arguing vehemently about where we are, where we have come from, and where we are headed.

Over the full range of American history there have been periods of stability and consensus followed by instability and discord when issues come to the fore that divide the country in new ways; consensus and coalitions fall apart and new ones emerge. Certainly, the mid-nineteenth century and a bloody civil war was the worst period of such transformations, costing the lives of more Americans than in any other war in the country's history.

But what we are facing today is something similar, if not with such dramatic and deadly consequences. At least not yet.

The core trends of the global, information-age economy will shape a debate between those who feel absorbed into a new world of competition and opportunity and those who feel they have been left behind, unable to compete and fearful of their futures.

In the U.S. that will result in a clash between those who welcome economic openness, high social and economic aspirations, and trust in institutions, and those who sense economic insecurity, decaying social structures, and a widespread sense of betrayal, disappointment, and distrust.

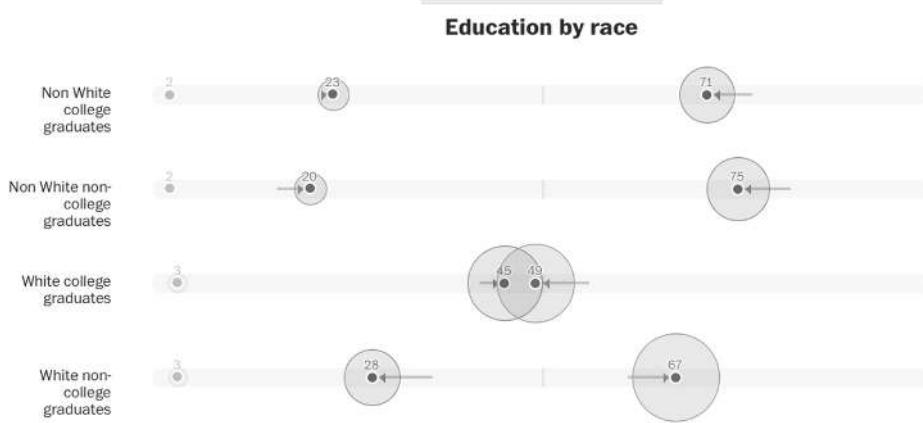
Over a longer period of time, the national political dialogue has broken down between those who favor openness versus closed walls, dynamism versus imagined stability, or the desire of some to transform the country and others to restore or sustain what they think it used to be. All one needs to do is to recall the words of Donald Trump's inauguration speech to hear the echoes of those who prefer the latter course.

Neither political party seems to have a grip on these changes. They reflect divisions among themselves as well as between them. In the words of New York Times columnist David Brooks, the Republican Party is now an uneasy coalition of "globalization-loving business executives and globalization-hating white workers." Parts of the Republican Party represent the party of the dispossessed, the angry, and the alienated—not the party of the earlier cosmopolitan business community. The poster child for this clash is of course Donald Trump who, ironically, emerged from that same business community but who attacked it during his campaign and then nevertheless recruited his cabinet in large measure from that same community.

The Democratic Party reflects a mix of the urban professionals—the bi-coastal professional class who identify with and indeed make up the elite in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington—but then it also includes less-affluent members of minorities who traditionally voted Democratic but now feel under rewarded for doing so. Hillary Clinton underperformed in efforts to match the historic levels of support that Obama achieved in the Afro American community, coming in five points below him against Trump. With Hispanics, Obama garnered 71 percent support in 2012. Clinton claimed 65 percent.

Yet the crucial gap determining the election victory was the gap in education. In the 2016 election, a wide gap in presidential preferences emerged between those with and without a college degree. College graduates backed Clinton by a 9-point margin (52%–43%), while those without a college degree backed Trump 52% to 44%. This is

by far the widest gap in support among college graduates and non-college graduates in exit polls dating back to 1980. For example, in 2012, there was hardly any difference between the two groups: College graduates backed Obama over Romney by 50% to 48%, and those without a college degree also supported Obama 51% to 47%. Among whites, Trump won an overwhelming share of those without a college degree; and among white college graduates—a group that many identified as key for a potential Clinton victory—Trump outperformed Clinton by a narrow 4-point margin.



Source: New York Times

In this election year the trust people feel toward their communities, their national institutions, their leaders, and in their futures is a volatile subject.

Trump and Clinton both embodied the challenge of forging enough votes in this divisive and polarized environment across such differing groups, and those cleavages still exist well after the November election.

One needs to keep in mind that the presidential election is not a national election so much as a set of fifty elections in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. The Electoral College always determines the final winner of the presidential election after each state is finished counting its total of 538 votes and awards its votes to the candidates. Yet the changing dynamics described earlier upended the expectations that Clinton would have enough momentum in those states Obama won twice to gain victory.

As we know, the 2016 election result echoed the results of the Bush-Gore battle in 2000 where the popular vote result did not match the Electoral College result. While the decision of the Supreme Court in 2000 stopped the vote count in Florida, giving the state and then the presidential race to George W. Bush, Trump managed to win key states to arrive at his Electoral College win without such intervention. Nevertheless, the fact that Clinton received over three million more actual votes than Trump has sustained the tensions surrounding Trump's legitimate victory in the Electoral College, fueled by the continuing polarization of the political forces in Washington.

Declining trust in government and politicians

The two party conventions held in July in Cleveland and Philadelphia clearly captured that polarization in the U.S. At that time, the millions of undecided American voters and many millions watching from around the world might have concluded that they had just watched two very different movies about the United States. One depicted a country in freefall, while the other presented a picture of a promising future for all. Both were theater productions, scripted—one much more effectively than the other—and predictable. Trump was crowned head of the Republican Party and Hillary Clinton Queen of the Democrats. Yet there was more noise than clear signals surrounding both campaigns, with discord from those who were not happy with either coronation. With Bernie Sanders supporters registering their objections to Hillary in Philadelphia and Never-Trump supporters trying to block the candidate's nomination in Cleveland, there was actually more noise in the exchange of attacks between the two campaigns than efforts put into defining what remains at stake in the coming four years.

And the din of personal attacks, insults, and defamation of character has continued to overshadow the central issues at stake for the country.

In fact, it has only grown louder since the election. That has a lot to do with Donald Trump's aggressive style and his hyperbolic rhetoric. But there is another factor at work.

Donald Trump was able to win the election by effectively defeating not only the Democrats, but also the established political forces in the Republican Party. He hijacked the leadership role despite much Republican resistance. He did that with the help of his electoral base which gave him his slim victory. And Trump is now using that base to shape his relationship with the Republican majorities in both the House and the Senate, particularly in pushing through his agenda. All the members of the House face reelection in 2018 and a third of the Senate as well. For each of those Republican candidates Trump can offer or withhold his support depending on their loyalty to him. Meanwhile the Democrats are in the minority in both chambers and need to reset their strategy to regain their majorities in addition to the White House.

There are many explanations as to how we got into this mess, but there is no doubt that the fierce political combat which has continued over the months after the election is not only destructive for the domestic environment in the United States, but also is preventing a very urgent discussion of the course of American foreign policy. It distracts from debating the right signals we need to send to our allies and our enemies about U.S. priorities and America's ability to implement them on the global stage. The comments made by Trump both before and after the election about NATO, Europe, Brexit, and most of all his continuing ambiguous attitude toward Russia has unsettled many in the transatlantic community. Some of his cabinet appointments have been met with relief but that does not lessen concerns about the president's relationships with authoritarian figures in China or Turkey and his threats directed at allies.

Months after the presidential election in 2016, the U.S. remains caught up in an ugly contest of polarized politics. In the process, we are embarrassing ourselves and risking

our ability to regain our balance and our ability to govern ourselves. The institutional gridlock in Washington has been intensifying for decades, while both the political parties as well as their respective constituencies have become increasingly polarized. Those two developments reinforce each other.

The United States as a society has been sorting itself into different tribes at different levels, confining themselves in different echo chambers which block out what they don't want to hear. Real facts are sometimes shunned in favor of fantasies with an unending supply of ammunition in social media and cable television feeding that demand. In the political process the system has taken on the look of a parliamentary character in the Congress. That trend did not end on November 8 and it is apparently even getting worse. A recent demonstration of that is the inability of the Senate to secure a consensus on nominating judges to the Supreme Court.

It only continues an evolution that has been unfolding for many years. And this is going to be a significant problem in the effort to forge a coherent foreign policy.

Despite the incomparable resources available to the United States in its foreign policy and military portfolios, how to utilize these resources seems to be an increasingly uncertain debate. That is partially due to the political acrimony about recent memories of disasters and failures, like the painful experience in Afghanistan and Iraq or the tragedy on September 11, 2001. Increasing terrorist threats and attacks within and beyond U.S. borders and confrontations with authoritarian governments on the global stage also wears on the public psyche. The feelings of vulnerability in large swaths of American society—through either the prism of perceived external threats or the awakening to domestic social and economic hardships—generate immense resentment and backlash among people who feel helpless to respond to these challenges. It is a volatile mix that can fuel political opportunists on all parts of the political spectrum.

Amplifying this trend is a declining level of confidence in the legitimacy of institutions, governments, industries, the media, and others that have been cornerstones of confidence in the past, as well as those who represent them. Public trust in government and politicians has been diminishing for many years, as polls reflect. The reaction is to reach toward populist responses, offering the simplest explanations for complex challenges. When those explanations don't work, anger and frustration abound. Some desire to simply burn the house down, starting in Washington, DC. And the vicious circle repeats itself as the conflict results in gridlock.

This is not a uniquely American phenomenon. We see it on both sides of the Atlantic. The Trump movement in the United States bears a striking resemblance to many populist leaders throughout Europe on both ends of the political spectrum. From UKIP's support for Brexit in the UK, to Marie La Pen's National Front in France, to Alternative for Germany, to those who do not vote at all, populist elements all over Europe initiated the blowback against what represents the mistrust of "the elite."

The same anger is also directed at the European Union, which has resulted in an upsurge of nationalist sentiments in many countries. And it should be noted that such trends are a welcome development and are being directly supported by Interests in Moscow, which has an interest in the fraying of the EU apart from trying to hack into

our political process as they have demonstrated in the U.S., France, and, soon, Germany.

Germany is of particular significance in this context as Chancellor Merkel faces re-election challenges in September 2017. While the immigration issue is bound to play a central role in the campaigns of all political parties, there is no doubt that right-wing forces will have sufficient support to send the newly emergent Alternative for Germany party to the Bundestag, where critical noises toward Merkel's strained relations with the German public will be significantly amplified. During her twelve years in office, Merkel has for the most part enjoyed steady popular support. However, the immigration crisis, tensions with Turkey and Russia, terrorist threats, Brexit, and the continuing euro crisis have combined forces to rattle the minds of the German public. There is no guarantee that, even if Merkel will be elected for a fourth term, future events will not undermine her positions. Furthermore, Merkel's role as the sole cornerstone leader of the European Union for sustaining its momentum could be at risk. The question is if the German voters will fully appreciate the significance of their choice a year from now.

Liberal democracies are based on the formula of effective government, a stable legal system, and accountability to its stakeholders: citizens. These formulas are capable of decaying, as Francis Fukuyama points out, when institutions and processes are no longer serving the purposes they were designed to fulfill and when the signals of legitimacy are no longer heard over the noises of populist anger. The current populist insurgence is the incubator for centrifugal forces which can pull societies apart and open the door to other models of government other than liberal democracies. We see this occurring in many parts of the world but in particular in China, Russia, and Turkey.

Before and now after the U.S. election, we are seeing signals emerging from dysfunctional governance and the spiral of polarizing anger. Trump's initial policy decisions have generated enormous clashes over immigration policies, health care reform, and some foreign policy issues. In Europe, the battle with the political blowback from right-wing groups in France, Holland, and Germany will not diminish even if those movements are defeated in elections.

The difficult question is how do we reconcile the poisonous mix of hostility toward the political establishment and governing a noisy democracy. This will be a challenge on both sides of the Atlantic in the coming years. Challenges, dangers, and needs that confront the rest of the world are not effectively dealt with only in elections. But they are not going to be dealt with any better after the elections if dysfunctional governance and the spiral of polarizing anger continue. And I fear that is exactly what will happen.

Implications for transatlantic relations

Let me turn briefly to what I believe are the implications for transatlantic relations.

The U.S. public is currently caught up in a fierce debate about how much American policy and its resources should be engaged in global conflicts; how much the U.S. can

be the world's policeman; how much the U.S. really benefits from alliances like NATO or trade negotiations like TTIP; and preventing attacks on the homeland, protecting individual privacy or the environment, and strengthening the national economy and its infrastructure.

But this is not going to be a pristine intellectual debate by any means. It is going to be hard-fought and probably very ugly in parts. Much of it may shock or discourage non-Americans and diminish their expectations of the United States.

There is not a lot Germans or other Europeans can do to influence this debate. Yet how some Europeans answer these same questions about why various forms of partnership with the U.S. are not only in their interests, but also in the interests of the U.S. in meeting American concerns will be important. Many of these challenges that Europeans and Americans share cannot be solved only in national frameworks. But unfortunately, on both sides of the Atlantic there are increasing arguments that only a return to national sovereignty will offer a way out of these dilemmas. The debates in Europe are appearing just as ugly in their own backyards as the debate in the U.S.

Over the next four years, the U.S. will face the challenge of re-forging a consensus around U.S. foreign policy priorities in light of both national needs and global realities. That same challenge faces every European leader today. The more that effort in finding solutions can be shared across the Atlantic—as it has been largely accomplished in the past several decades—the better chances for success. That will be in no small measure facilitated by a healthy, honest, and hopeful willingness to engage with each other. But that prospect is far less possible if the centrifugal forces on both sides of the Atlantic continue to gain traction.

Summary

The election of Donald Trump to the White House in 2016 was a symptom of the transformations in American society. That transformation will impact the debate over the role and responsibilities of the U.S. in the coming years. The challenges America faces is the forging of a consensus on both its domestic choices as well as its willingness to sustain its leadership on the global stage. They are both interrelated and as unpredictable as is the president himself. The implications for transatlantic relations are serious as these challenges are simultaneously unfolding in Europe. The consequences for both Europe and the U.S. should revitalize the recognition that the web of interests and objectives shared between the two continents are uniquely important. But the centrifugal domestic forces at work, in addition to the continuing threats and instability beyond the transatlantic community, are dangerous obstacles to that recognition.

The more efforts aimed at finding shared solutions are pursued—as it has been largely accomplished in the past several decades—the better chances for success. That will be in no small measure facilitated by a healthy, honest, and hopeful willingness to engage with each other. But that prospect is far less possible if the centrifugal forces on both sides of the Atlantic continue to gain traction.

Zusammenfassung

Die Wahl Donald Trumps zum US-Präsidenten 2016 ist Ausdruck eines tiefgreifenden Wandels der amerikanischen Gesellschaft, der nicht nur den innenpolitischen Diskurs der nächsten Jahre prägen wird, sondern auch die Diskussion über die Rolle der Vereinigten Staaten in der Weltpolitik. Die USA stehen vor der großen Herausforderung, den verlorengegangenen gesellschaftlichen Konsens wiederzuerlangen – sowohl über die gesellschaftspolitischen Weichenstellungen im eigenen Lande, als auch darüber, ob und wie sie ihre Führungsrolle in der Weltpolitik in Zukunft wahrnehmen wollen. Beide Fragen sind auf das Engste miteinander verknüpft. Wie diese Fragen beantwortet werden ist gegenwärtig – wie das Regierungshandeln des Präsidenten ganz generell – kaum vorhersehbar. Dabei sind die möglichen Implikationen für die transatlantischen Beziehungen gravierend. Das Erstarken zentrifugaler Kräfte in Europa macht die Sache nicht einfacher. Dabei wäre es im dringenden beiderseitigen Interesse, sich auf die über Jahrzehnte gewachsenen und die transatlantischen Beziehungen prägenden Gemeinsamkeiten zu besinnen. Für die großen Herausforderungen, vor denen sowohl Europa als auch die USA stehen, kann es nur gemeinsame Lösungen geben.

Jack Janes, Die Wahl Donald Trumps zum US-Präsidenten – Konsequenzen für die Vereinigten Staaten und die transatlantischen Beziehungen