

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title.

# Continuity versus ?

## U.S. Foreign Policy after the Election

**JASON BRUDER**  
October 2016

- The American public is frustrated and angry, which has propelled the rise of Donald Trump. There is a palpable sense of economic and physical insecurity and a belief that the system is rigged against average people.
- Counterintuitively, Hillary Clinton's experience and establishment credentials have been a liability in an election where the public wants to give elites a black eye. The political left has mixed emotions about her husband's government in the 1990's and they're unsure about her commitment to their agenda.
- Trump's positions on the issues are vague and changeable, but he has suggested that he would break with decades-old orthodoxy in U.S. policy towards Europe, whereas Clinton would likely preserve the traditional approach and reinvest in existing relationships including with Germany.
- How both candidates do in several battleground states, how the House and Senate elections break, and how the »third« party candidates do on November 8th are critical elements to watch.

A potent mix of fear and rage has driven the seemingly endless 2016 U.S. election towards an unsatisfying conclusion for a nation that is increasingly weary of politics. Unlikely change agents Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have tapped into enormous public frustration with politics as usual, but it seems likely that the ultimate victor will be Hillary Clinton – a leader of the political establishment. It is worth reviewing the process that led to this outcome, what to watch for, and the implications for Transatlantic relations, as Europe and European issues have had a higher profile in this election than in any American election since the Cold War. Moreover, the discontent exhibited by American voters bears comparison with recent developments in European democracies.

Trump and Clinton poll as the two most unpopular presidential candidates in the past thirty years, with unfavorable ratings of 63 percent and 56 percent.<sup>1</sup> This reflects their relentless scrutiny by new media, as well as their own unique weaknesses as candidates. It doesn't help that American voters are reportedly more polarized than ever before. In June, the Pew Research Center found that majorities in both parties express not just unfavorable, but very unfavorable views of the other party.<sup>2</sup>

Two months before the election, 20 percent of the electorate was considering voting for third parties, or hadn't made up their mind – reflecting a deep ambivalence about both major party candidates. The commonly heard refrain of the man or woman in the street from the left or the right is »I'll support the lesser of two evils.«

Since 2010, American voters have grown more critical of the political establishment and have been drifting away from the political center to the fringe – a trend that bears similarities to the rise of Alternative for Deutschland, UKIP, or the French National Front. The structural dominance of two major parties in the U.S. means that this usually plays out in challenges during the party primaries rather than in large numbers of people leaving more traditional parties to support fringe parties in the general election, as it might in a European multi-party system.

The angst exhibited by American voters is rooted in two factors. The first is a pervasive sense of economic insecurity generated by the elimination of jobs by technology, increasingly intense global competition, and the limitations of the neoliberal economic model of the 1990's. There is a growing consensus that the consolidation of wealth in a few hands is leading to the concentration of political power and a system increasingly rigged in favor of wealthy interests against the public at large. This has arguably been the case for thirty years, but the devastating impact of the 2008 financial crisis catalyzed public anger. The second factor is physical security in the wake of terrorism, as embodied in the December 2015 and June 2016 attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando. Success in bringing the country back from the brink of economic collapse since 2008, or in defending the country have not dispelled the apprehension felt by many Americans.

## 1. The Insurgents

Today's Democratic Party has won more votes nationally than the Republican Party in five out of the past six presidential elections. U.S. demographic trends favor the left, with the increasing involvement of women and growth in the number of non-white and younger voters continuing to empower the Democrats.<sup>3</sup> Yet their potential strength in presidential contests has not translated into congressional or local elections, for reasons explained below.

After their defeat in 2012, the Republicans commissioned an »autopsy« report whose conclusions advocated a radical re-alignment of the party's approach: reaching out to women, ethnic minorities, and younger voters.<sup>4</sup> Yet diversifying its voter base wasn't the Republican party's only problem. For some time, the party had defined its approach to government by rigidly adhering to lines laid down by Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election – tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation of the economy, aggressive military funding, and traditional values – that didn't align well with contemporary voter concerns. Deep in the American heartland, there was an appetite for something different at the outset of the 2016 campaign.

1. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/poll-clinton-unpopularity-high-par-trump/story?id=41752050>

2. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/22/key-facts-partisanship/>

3. <http://www.people-press.org/2015/04/07/a-deep-dive-into-party-affiliation/>

4. The report can be found at: <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/politics/republican-national-committees-growth-and-opportunity-project-report/380/>

Enter Donald Trump, whose divisive rhetoric has done nothing to attract the target constituencies identified in the 2012 autopsy, but whose cross-ideological appeal breaks with the tight ideological packaging that has characterized Republican candidates in recent elections and appeals to many Republican and independent voters. Trump's policy positions are often erratic, enabling people to see what they want in his platitudes in a way that Republican candidates since Reagan simply haven't been able to. Supporters can find comments by Trump that are emphatically pro-choice or anti-abortion, in favor of taxing the wealthiest Americans and against it, critical of military adventurism and critical of the Obama Administration for not being brutal enough in combatting terrorism.

Trump's caustic sense of humor and genius for branding has tapped into the national angst about economic insecurity and channeled that resentment towards illegal immigration. The comparison here with the situation in Europe is obvious, with the chief difference being that Europe is facing an immigration crisis with some immediacy while the U.S. has accumulated 11 million illegal immigrants over a generation. The terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino, and Nice provided opportunities for Trump to reiterate arguments that illegals threaten the physical safety of lawful citizens, and he used these occasions to suggest a ban on Muslim travelers to the U.S. – an argument that resonated with many Americans amidst pervasive fear despite the fact that some of the attackers were American and European citizens. He has repeatedly drawn on Europe and images of refugees or terrorists to reinforce his ongoing attempts to exacerbate Americans sense of insecurity. He promises dramatic action, and if his promises may seem unrealistic but his listeners are willing to suspend belief.

The Democrats also had an insurgent, Bernie Sanders is a self-declared Social Democrat, representing a very small and progressive state where he is extremely popular and where people are more open to the concept of social democracy than elsewhere in the country. Sanders tapped into the frustrations of politically activated voters on the left of the Democratic Party, who believed passionately in Obama's election and want to see more social justice answers to the problem of income inequality. If Trump's answer to the national angst was to stop illegal immigration, Sanders' answer was to stop Wall Street.

Insiders weren't surprised by Sanders defeat in the Democratic primary, but were amazed at how well he did despite almost every party leader being committed to his opponent. The consensus in Washington is that his candidacy moved Hillary Clinton to the left. Some believe Sanders did Clinton a great service, as the Democratic Party has lost much of its credibility with organized labor and working people since the 1990s. Sanders supporters believe that the Democratic Party can renew itself at the state and local level where it is weak if it rebuilds its relationship with the working class to fight for social justice, much as many in the German SPD seem to believe.

Since becoming the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton has surprised many by advocating much of the same progressive agenda that helped Sanders gain traction during the primaries, including rejection of the Trans Pacific Partnership Free Trade Agreement. The left wing's memories of her husband Bill Clinton's legacy (1993–2001) are complicated, much in the same way that the German left see's Gerhard Schroeder – too friendly to big business and too eager to give in on social justice questions. Hillary Clinton's own links to Wall Street and the allegations surrounding the Clinton Global Foundation's operations are a source of anxiety to many, and there is a sense that she may be too connected to elite interests to take them on. For decades, she has been vilified as an ambitious, radical leftist by conservatives, while progressives now worry that she is neither radical nor ambitious enough. She is reaching out to moderate Republicans, but it is unclear whether this strategy will prove any more successful for her than it did for Obama.

Hillary Clinton demonstrated her genius as a politician by building support for and de-railing opposition to her candidacy within the party behind the scenes, neutering opposition long before the election began. She wasn't inevitable – she made sure she was. However, she also possesses liabilities as a candidate. She has been in the public eye for a long time and represents a bygone era. Moreover, her handling of the e-mail scandal and the issues surrounding the family's foundation have created an indelible sense that she is totally disconnected from the concerns of everyday Americans and that she has played fast and loose with the truth. The fact that she is the first female candidate has probably led to the opposition of some misogynists, though this is very hard to measure in polls. Her greatest advantage has been that Trump's statements have made him the issue, over

and over again. If Hillary Clinton had a more traditional opponent in this anti-establishment climate, she would probably be in a much more difficult position.

Through the long primary election season, Washington-based *nomenklatura* of both parties seemed shocked that the voters didn't fall into line behind the candidates they had anointed. Their reaction seemed to confirm the suspicions of Trump and Sanders voters that the system was rigged against the will of the people in favor of the scions of the Bush and Clinton political dynasties. This sense bodes ill for the future.

## 2. Implications – what sort of foreign policy?

If Hillary Clinton wins the election, there will be great continuity between the policies of her Administration and those of her predecessor in most areas, but not in foreign policy. Obama has exercised more strategic patience and military restraint than his immediate predecessors, despite inheriting two wars. As a result, he has been consistently criticized by a hawkish Washington foreign policy establishment. Hillary Clinton possesses a much more traditional attitude towards the use of American power abroad. Given the serious allegations that Russian hackers attempted to intervene in the election against her and the record of her advisors, it is difficult to imagine that she would invest political capital in rapprochement with Russia under the current circumstances. The possibility of interference in the election made the »threat« of Russia a reality for many in Washington. Nevertheless, there may be attempts to reach mutually beneficial accommodations with Russia such as Secretary Kerry's efforts on Syria.

At the same time, a Clinton Administration would likely pay more attention to Europe in general than that of her predecessor. Some of the names being mentioned in Washington as potential Secretaries of State – such as Bill Burns (former Ambassador to Russia), Nick Burns (former Ambassador to Greece), and Admiral James Stavridis (former NATO Supreme Allied Commander) – all have longstanding connections to Europe, while Wendy Sherman (former Undersecretary of State) acquired a great deal of European experience during the successful Iran nuclear negotiations. Former Under Secretary of Defense Michelle Flournoy, who is everyone's favorite

to be Secretary of Defense in a Clinton Administration, has long been involved with NATO issues. Any of these potential cabinet members would likely maintain efforts to bolster and reassure NATO's eastern members. Current Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Victoria Nuland is a career diplomat, but was Clinton's State Department spokesperson and is rumored to be well liked by Clinton and may also have a key role in a Clinton Administration.

As President, Clinton would seek ways to support the strength and integrity of the European Union and would continue the general tendency of recent years to work closely with Germany. She surprised everyone by coming out against the free trade agreement in the Pacific, and her attitude towards TTIP seems unclear. It is easy to see Clinton forming a solid relationship with Merkel and her cabinet having excellent relations with their German counterparts. Given the relentless investigations of her personal life and email accounts, it begs the question whether she might not be more receptive to transatlantic discussions on privacy issues.

Mr. Trump's victory is not impossible in a volatile election in which he has consistently flouted expectations. His first forays into foreign policy – condemning the Bush intervention in Iraq and calling for a foreign policy based more on national interest than promoting idealism – were very interesting and promised a substantive debate. In U.S. foreign policy circles, there is a divide that cuts across parties between two poles of thought – the »internationalists« and the »realists.« The »internationalists« come in many varieties and are associated with everything from the neo-conservatism of the George W. Bush Administration to the liberal humanitarian interventionism of Bill Clinton's presidency. The realists are in the minority, best exemplified by Richard Nixon's Administration's opening to China and détente with the Soviet Union. So it wasn't coincidental that Trump gave his foreign policy speech at the Center for the National Interest, which was founded by former President Nixon and is seen as a fortress of the realist approach. However, revelations about his campaign aides' business relationships with allies of Vladimir Putin and his unbelievable invitation for Russia to intervene in the election by hacking his opponent discredited this nascent attempt to present an alternative approach.

The evolution of Trump's foreign policy approach has engendered bipartisan consensus in that both Republicans

and Democrats of the foreign policy establishment are horrified. Trump has repeatedly dragged Europe into the debate over immigration or terrorism using the Paris and Brussels attacks to bolster his arguments for tough immigration policies. He publicly luxuriated in the anti-EU Brexit result and even adopted the title »Mr. Brexit« for himself, presumably because of his avowed nationalism and willingness to shatter the existing order. His comments suggesting that the U.S. might not come to the assistance of NATO allies whose military spending didn't meet NATO targets horrified the experts.

Foreign policy expertise is in short supply on the Trump campaign. His staff with foreign policy experience are few and seem to be more drawn from the world of business consultancies. In Washington, Republican national security experts are quick to say that their views are closer to Clinton's than to Trump's, and the conspicuous absence of many senior Republicans from his campaign is evidence of their discomfort with his candidacy.

### 3. Outlook

Democrats appear likely to win the Senate, but it's very close and they should have done much better. Taking the Senate is critical to Clinton's agenda particularly on foreign policy. The current balance in the Senate is 54 Republicans to 44 Democrats (and two independents allied with the latter). Because 1/3 of the Senate is up for election every two years the present 34 senatorial positions on the ballot in 2016 were last up for election in 2010, a very good year for Republicans so they now defend more seats. If Trump continues to lag in the polls Republican Congressional campaigns may abandon him by urging reluctant Clinton voters to check her power by electing them to challenge her, this would perpetuate the current deadlock in government, but it's quite possible.

If Clinton wins a landslide and the Democrats retake the Senate, it is still unlikely that the Republicans will lose control over the lower chamber. Seats in the House of Representatives are determined by the state legislatures following each decennial census and are infamously carved in absurd ways to favor the party in power in a process known as »Gerrymandering«. The current balance in the House is 247 Republicans to 186 Democrats, although all constituencies are up for election every two years only around 50 seats are thought to be

in play. The Democrats would have to win 30 of these to eat into that majority. The fact that this chamber is likely to remain under the Republicans with Speaker Paul Ryan still in charge made Donald Trump's willingness to criticize Ryan all the more remarkable.

With the American electorate desperate for change, this election has been ripe for a political outsider. If the outsider ultimately loses to the insider, it will largely be because his statements on foreign and domestic issues were so intemperate that they convinced many Americans that his presidency might be dangerous. If Trump is defeated, it is unlikely he will just go away. There are already rumors that he may start a new right-wing media conglomerate to compete with Rupert Murdoch's Fox. The extent to which Trump will continue to rouse right-wing voters and the extent to which he has permanently altered Republican Party orthodoxy remains to be seen.

The victorious candidate will have to decide whether to take on the enormous task of addressing the deep angst within the population about the future. Both candidates have made addressing economic insecurity central themes in their campaigns. It is a challenge that will not go away on its own, and success or failure in addressing it will likely determine whether the next election is even more volatile and vituperative.

Both European and American leaders will need new approaches and political will to cope with discontented electorates in a period of transformation and economic distress. Although the challenges confronting European and American leaders differ in the details, their overriding task is the same – to adjust democratic government to meet the needs of their publics and in so doing maintain the credibility of their institutions.



### About the author

**Jason Bruder** was formerly the Europe Advisor for the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He was a career diplomat and recently served under Secretary Kerry at the State Department. He has also been an Adjunct Professor on foreign policy at Georgetown University.

### Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Western Europe/North America  
Hiroshimastraße 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany

Responsible:  
Michèle Auga, Head, Western Europe/North America

Tel.: ++49-30-269-35-7736 | Fax: ++49-30-269-35-9249  
<http://www.fes.de/international/wil>  
[www.facebook.com/FESWesteuropa.Nordamerika](http://www.facebook.com/FESWesteuropa.Nordamerika)

Orders/Contact:  
[FES-WENA@fes.de](mailto:FES-WENA@fes.de)

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

### FES Office Washington, D.C.

The Washington Office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation promotes transatlantic dialogue in the spirit of the basic values of Social Democracy. Our programs link German and European policy debates with discourses in the United States and Canada. We also facilitate »dialogue« between transatlantic partners and representatives from other regions such as the Middle East, Afghanistan, Russia, and Turkey to develop ideas and solutions for common challenges. The FES is the only German political foundation with a Liaison Officer in Ottawa, which enables us to work more effectively and consistently on programs in Canada.

Another important element of our work is building and maintaining transatlantic networks between policymakers and representatives from think tanks, universities, civil society organizations, and trade unions. Focal points of our work are conflict transformation and democracy assistance, disarmament and non-proliferation, minorities and integration, energy and climate policy, and economic and labor relations.

Friedrich Ebert Foundation  
1023 15th Street, NW | Suite 801  
Washington, DC 20005

Tel.: +1-202-408-5444  
Fax: +1-202-408-5537  
Email: [fesdc@fesdc.org](mailto:fesdc@fesdc.org)  
<http://www.fesdc.org>

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works.