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Studies Program

Institute for
European, Russian,
and Eurasian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The 2024 Elections in Europe and the United States Implications for Democracy and Foreign Policy

A summary of a panel discussion

On Friday, November 15th, the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies and the Illiberalism Studies Program at the George Washington University hosted a panel discussion on the implications of the recent US elections for democracy and foreign policy in relation to Europe. The event boasted an experienced panel with two distinguished journalists, William Drozdiak from the Wilson Center's Global Europe Program and Idrees Kahloon, the Washington bureau chief for The Economist, as well as political scientist Kimberly Morgan from the George Washington University. The event was chaired by Hillary Silver, Professor of Sociology, International Affairs, and Public Policy and Public Administration, and moderated by the Illiberalism Studies Program director, Marlene Laruelle.

Donald Trump's victory in the November election means that Republicans will control the Presidency and Congress for at least the next two years. The American election mirrored a global trend—this year, numerous elections on both sides of the Atlantic saw a resurgence of support for the right and far right. Some have dismissed these electoral successes as cases of a “global anti-incumbent backlash” built on a popular dissatisfaction with the post-COVID-19 economy. Does this shift represent a fundamental change with long-term implications for liberal democratic institutions? Or is it merely a predictable reaction to high inflation and other traditional issues? What led us to this moment, wherein many countries around the world have rejected more “traditionally liberal parties” in favor of illiberal and anti-establishment governments?

Trade, Immigration, and Globalization

Trump's first term generally adhered to a conventionally Republican platform in practice—it was very attentive to the needs of Wall Street and the business sector. However, a second Trump administration could differ drastically from the previous one. One significant difference is that Trump is coming into office without the prospect of running for office again four years from now. We could expect a power vacuum of sorts as he nears the end of his second term. Trump has already suggested through his cabinet appointments that he is taking an even more partisan approach, increasingly appealing to the right flank of his party. A key indicator of what drives this incoming administration will be how Trump approaches the issue of tariffs. Trump has talked a lot about tariffs, but considering how attentive Trump has been to the needs of Wall Street, this may be an area of forced compromise. On the one hand, Trump has espoused populist rhetoric around tariffs, a trade war with China, has promised lower prices and domestic inflation and

increases in federal revenue. On the other hand, if Trump does indeed follow through with his proposed policies, he risks angering the business sector and farmers, many of which are already pushing back against the tariffs, for instance.

The issue of immigration has traditionally been pivotal for both European and American elections but has become especially prominent in recent electoral campaigns. On both sides of the Atlantic, there have been significant rises in asylum applications. In the EU, asylum levels have reached their highest levels since the 2015 migration crisis, and the projected net immigration of other foreign nationals in the US exceeds 7-8 million people, which puts stress on the asylum-seeking process. In addition to heightened levels of asylum seekers, there are additional nuances this time around. Many places, such as the Netherlands, and New York City, are dealing simultaneously with a housing crisis that has only been made more difficult by the influx of asylum seekers. Voters feel these changes and react electorally by pushing back against what they see as the interconnected decisions that brought these problems about. In practice, we can expect Trump to essentially maintain the Biden administration's strategy, which is in essence an attempt to shut down the southern border. But, as we've seen in Europe and in the US, this tough rhetoric is difficult to translate into law and into outcomes.

We can expect Trump to play hard-ball with Latin American countries, pressuring them to enact migration enforcement on the front end of the problem, but that too is no different from Biden. As far as Trump's large-scale deportation rhetoric, the actual numbers won't be as high as he has said, but there will be prominent cases that will be picked up by media, driving the issue into the public eye and stoking polarization. In Europe, despite the negative press surrounding immigration and the growing sense that the status quo has failed on the issue, there has been progress that the public hasn't recognized. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, herself an immigration hard-liner, has enacted legislation that increased the number of foreign laborers allowed entry to Italy. Or take the Germans, who have done a decent job integrating asylum seekers by, for example, providing language facilities and training.

On the topic of globalization and trade, multilateral trade deals are out of favor for parties across the political spectrum. But with the anti-globalist rhetoric of many right-wing parties, we shouldn't expect them to rebound anytime soon. This rhetoric impacts attempts to mitigate climate change as well, which itself affects immigration, trade, and populism just as much as other issues. During this event, William Drozdiak reminisced about his extensive conversations with French President Emmanuel Macron, which occurred at the beginning of his first mandate some 6 years ago. During these conversations, Macron was already pointing to the extensive and detrimental effects of climate change and the ways in which climate deterioration increases immigration. In Europe, these feedback loops may induce Green parties to reevaluate their position on nuclear energy so that they may enact effective climate policy. In the US, we can expect Trump to pull out of the Paris Climate Accords again, though monies funding the green energy transition will not evaporate altogether. Yes, there will be more fracking and drilling, and the current energy transition won't necessarily speed up, but it shouldn't or most likely will not slow down.

The Ukraine Question

From what we can ascertain from Trump's nominations for cabinet positions, the message is clear that he plans to reduce—or potentially outright end—support for Ukraine, and that Europeans will have to step up. Europe has [already been preparing](#) for a Trump presidency, but Macron's recent comments were accurate in that Europeans will now have to take more responsibility for their continent. Democrats and Republicans alike have made this clear. Europe has been talking

about increasing its own self-reliance for a while, but has hesitated out of fear that this would anger the US. It turns out that might have been misplaced fear.

Meloni has surprised Europe by being more pro-Ukraine than her rhetoric before taking office might have suggested. Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been left stranded as the only ones pushing against funding and support for Ukraine. However, even Orbán's rhetoric is stronger than his actions. At the end of the day, Orbán has tried aggressively to play to both sides: he wants to maintain a consistent trade relationship with Russia and China, but certainly does not want to leave the EU or launch a hard pivot 'Eastward.' Rather, he appears content with using his relationships as a foil and a point of leverage.

How Deep is the Shift?

While there are definitely similarities between the right-wing parties that have recently found success across the world, differences are visible too. Anti-wokeism, for instance, hasn't really been a major talking point across Europe, unlike in the United States where the Republican Party has embraced the issue. Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland emulated this somewhat, as the issue of abortion and LGBTQ+ rights have particular salience there, but in general right-wing parties are trading on familism and a vague appeal to an idealized past. Often, however, the issues fueling the rise of the right are parochial and bound to each unique context.

We can certainly observe a structural shift occurring, but the influence of the particular circumstances of these elections shouldn't be overlooked. There is a lot of discontent in society and both the economy and immigration are big divides. Political loyalty is diminishing and party affiliation is more fluid than it has been. At its root, the era of liberal hegemony is over; we are witnessing a structural, generational change, where the values once held by all parties are eroding and the masses desire a systemically different culture. The reality is that even if illiberal leaders cannot deliver economically, they can deliver symbolically, and people vote for this. Ultimately what Meloni has discovered (and what Trump discovered in his first term) is that wielding power is a heavy lift, the political process can sometimes be a barrier, and that policy is hard. This often results in stalemates, where the only thing possibilities are inaction or legislating short-term 'Band-Aids.'

Key takeaways:

- Donald Trump's first term was more conventionally Republican, but this administration is shaping up to be quite different. What happens with tariffs will be a good indicator of what is ultimately driving this administration, i.e., whether Trump caves in to Wall Street or farmers or attempts to enact his tough-on-China rhetoric.
- Reformative rhetoric is difficult to transform into political action. Whether it pertains to laws on seeking asylum, shutting down multilateral trade deals, or enacting tariffs, the status quo political process often makes these reforms easier said than done.
- Where illiberal leaders fail to deliver on their promises economically, they can deliver symbolically.
- Climate change has been, and will continue to be, a very significant driver of immigration, exacerbating the current asylum seeking process around the world.
- A second Trump presidency means growing divisions between Europe and the US on a multitude of issues, including Israel and Ukraine. Europe will have to rapidly step up in the fight for Ukraine and for its own security.

- Due to the systemic change in the values held by the populus, these elections do represent a structural shift with long-term implications for the liberal international order.

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