

Transatlantic Relations and Upcoming EU and U.S. Elections

Spencer P. Boyer, Lucie Menna-Guettaa



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Bellwether Transatlantic Moment

Both the United States and Europe are at pivotal political and cultural moments, which will shape the course of transatlantic relations for years to come. European populations are both divided and unpredictable in their sentiments about the future of Europe and their relationship with the United States. In some ways, chaos seems to be the dominant theme; voters want change, but the form of that change varies widely. The U.S., on the other hand, is perhaps more divided than at any point since the Vietnam War and Watergate era, with political party lines continuing to harden. The stakes for the EU-US partnership—and broader transatlantic cooperation—could barely be higher at a moment when grave transatlantic challenges desperately need transatlantic solutions.

Last month, the European Union held parliamentary elections that featured candidates and parties with starkly different views on the future of the EU and transatlantic relations more widely. One inward looking vision embraces a weaker Brussels and seeks stronger national identities; another hopes for “more Europe” at a time when many Europeans are EU skeptics, have a deep distrust of American leadership in the world, and an uncertain Brexit outcome looms over the continent. In many ways, voter choices in the EU elections are a bellwether for sentiments throughout Europe on issues such as immigration, trade, relations with Russia, and the EU’s role in national affairs.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the United States is in a crisis moment. President Donald J. Trump—under stress from House of Representative investigations stemming from findings in Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s report—continues to double down on an ‘American First’ brand of nationalism, which labels allies near and far as competitors. The EU, which Trump referred to as a ‘foe’ last year, has not been spared. He continues to trumpet the benefits of unilateral action and tariffs and to question the importance of transatlantic solidarity. The upcoming 2020 presidential elections are heightening the tension between those who believe in Trump’s vision for America and those who believe our alliances and democratic institutions are under assault from the White House.

How these opposing philosophies play out in Europe and the United States over the short

and medium run will be a barometer of transatlantic opportunities and challenges over the next couple of years. One path will encourage ethnic nationalism, weaken the EU's capacity, decrease support for Euro-Atlantic institutions, and continue our drift toward transatlantic disengagement. The other will look for opportunities to make Brussels more responsive to national needs, strengthen the transatlantic bonds that have fueled the liberal international order for 70 years, and further inclusion, tolerance and respect for diversity. The direction each will take is an unfolding mystery, with many bad possible endings.

Populism, Nationalism, and the European Parliamentary Elections

European right-wing populism and ethnic nationalism threaten longstanding EU efforts towards closer integration, and thus pose a challenge to the future of coherent transatlantic cooperation. A divided, less cohesive Europe is a weaker Europe with diminished capacity to partner with the United States on global challenges—from Syria to Iran, to North Korea, to climate change, to international terrorism. EU parliamentary elections, which were held from May 23-26—shone a light on how the 28 countries of the EU prioritize these considerations, and the direction Europe is heading over the coming months and years.

European political parties embracing anti-migrant and anti-EU sentiments, which seek to diminish Brussels in favor of stronger state identities, are growing. Since the last European Parliamentary elections five years ago, nationalist movements have gained in popularity in states across the continent. The demonstrated strength of National Rally (formerly the Front National) and Alternative für Deutschland in national elections surprised many. An increase in non-mainstream voter support has led to far-right power-sharing in Austria and the nationalist League creating a populist coalition in Italy. Spain, which many believed was unwelcome ground for such politics, elected multiple far-right politicians to parliament for the first time since democracy returned to the country almost 45 years ago. National parties are up by double digits in recent national elections in countries ranging from Sweden to Estonia to the Netherlands to Greece to the Czech Republic.

The impact of this wave is being felt at the EU level, with some of these parties attempting to organize into a pan-European power grouping. Predictions for the elections showed the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (S&D)—the two main Europarties from the center-right and center-left, respectively—unlikely to form an automatic majority. The latest polling had the EPP capturing 169 seats and the S&D getting 149, out of 751 available. Those two parties in partnership with the liberal Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and French President Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche (LREM), should be able to capture a majority of the seats.

Right- and left-wing populist parties are poised to take advantage of a significant number of seats, even though projections still have them falling short of wresting control from mainstream groups. Matteo Salvini's European Alliance of People and Nations (ex-ENF), for example, looked particularly well-placed with 71 projected seats. Thus, nationalists are unlikely to have the final say regarding the makeup of a new EU executive, but their

presence and influence will certainly be stronger.

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While the far-right hopes for the elections to be a referendum on Brussels's failure to deal with migration, and progressive parties see the elections as a referendum on the future of the EU, neither view is fully complete. While the elections certainly are a reflection of political party priorities and strategies, European voters are currently more disorganized in thought and are not necessarily making choices based on a populist-nationalist versus committed Europeanist philosophy.

Europeans want to change, yes, but this is manifesting itself in many ways —depending on the country. While Poland is similar to the United States in terms of deeply polarized voters who have firm views of leadership and the opposition, citizens in many other countries are unable to make a decision about whom to support. They desire a new direction but are unclear about what that alternative direction looks like. Italy is being governed by a coalition of two different populist parties with different bases and reasons for which they were formed. In provincial elections in March, the Dutch supported an anti-migration, right-wing party. Earlier this year, voters in Slovakia beat back populism in the presidential election in favor of a young, liberal candidate.

Voters appear to most value agents of change —from wherever they might come— with polling showing that 70 percent of Europeans certain to vote had not yet made up their minds before the elections. The elections also are not about a single issue. Many voters are more worried about emigration than immigration. Engaged voters supporting both pro-European and anti-European parties note several diverse issues as the single biggest threat to Europe, ranging from migration to Russia to Islamic radicals to nationalism to the economy.

Trump, 'America First' and Ethnic Nationalism

Across the Atlantic, there are also a range of concerns, but more of a laser focus on how the U.S. president —who dominates both national and international news and stokes tribalism— impacts them, and hardening views of Trump and the two major parties. While Trump's approval rating among Republicans hovers around 90%, it is closer to single digits among Democrats. Republicans largely view the U.S. as a victim, of which other nations take advantage. Democrats strongly disagree with this worldview. And through most of the first two years of Trump's presidency, there have been competing narratives regarding transatlantic relations —one in which things are not that bad because they could be worse

and where things are still functioning at a working level; the other where we are in full disengagement mode from Europe and the world.

The more positive view started with significant pessimism about how a transatlantic agenda would fit within a presidency disdainful of Euro-Atlantic institutions and was rooted in the idea that career professionals throughout the U.S. government would keep the relationship from veering too off course. Trump's team pushed him to ease up on gratuitous attacks on European leaders, like German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and to finally endorse NATO's Article 5. Supporters of this positive view also note that Europe has increased defense spending due to Trump's prodding. Although this positive momentum began before Trump was inaugurated, one could make the argument that Trump's obsession with allies spending 2 percent of GDP on defense has helped create momentum.

The problem with the 'it's not that bad' model is that it ignores the president's world view and how transatlantic relations fit within them. From words and deeds, we know that Trump sees the world as a transactional, zero-sum playing field. There are no win-win scenarios in this world view. Only winners and losers—including in interactions with our closest allies. This worldview, combined with an ethnic nationalist-based appeal to white, working-class voters who feel left behind in a globalized, dynamic, and diversifying world, has created a deeply divided, tribal moment in U.S. history many thought we had moved beyond. While some view this as ironic coming on the heels of the election and re-election of the first African American president, one could also view this period as a backlash against a world-changing too quickly, easily stoked by a personality like Trump.

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His worldview is moving the U.S. and Europe on a path toward strategic disengagement. Of course, this downward spiral is not all America's fault. Europe is grappling with its own challenges, including the collapse of the political center throughout the EU, Brexit, and illiberalism. The combination of the president's posture towards perceived internal and external foes—including the mainstream media, liberal elites, a supposed 'deep state' among dedicate civil servants in law enforcement and the Intelligence Community, and the Democratic U.S. House of Representatives— and Europe's internal challenges creates a dangerous dynamic.

Trump is the first modern American president to question the value of the liberal international order, which the U.S. led in creating. His 2017 National Security Strategy captures much of this shift in American thinking about the transatlantic relationship. The strategy emphasizes competition, with an old-fashioned view of national sovereignty. Three of the core stabilizing officials in the U.S.-Europe relationship—National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Wess Mitchell—are all gone from the administration.

Others will likely follow.

There are certainly policy differences that stem from Trump's America first, nationalist mindset. The U.S. and Europe have diverged on Syria, Iran, China, and climate change, among other issues. This shift in posture and philosophy, however, should not be viewed as just another commonplace set of disagreements, echoing policy disagreements of the past. This is not a moment like Vietnam, the second Iraq War, or the Edward Snowden surveillance revelations. This is a deeper rupture. Leaders like Chancellor Angela Merkel have acknowledged this by stating that Europeans must now take their fate into their own hands because they cannot rely on America.

What's Next

Even if the European Parliament makeup is not radically different as a result of the May elections, they could still have a major impact. First, the results could have a psychological impact on Europe, giving a snapshot of where things are heading, for good or ill. Second, the parliamentary elections could also impact national elections and will certainly affect who is chosen for EU leadership positions, including the President of the EU Commission. And third, the prospect of a unified far right in the Parliament could create havoc for the traditional parties. While there are still enough differences in perspective to make unity difficult, the fact that some alt-right actors in the U.S. were so active in trying to shape the EU elections in favor of the far-right shows a worrying transatlantic convergence. In the end, these factors will influence European attitudes towards the U.S. over the next couple of years.

On the U.S. side, the 2020 presidential election will shape numerous U.S. policy choices that affect Europe in profound ways. Perhaps more important, though, is how it will impact Europe's view of the United States. In 2016, few took President Trump seriously or believed he would follow through on many of his policy prescriptions, on issues like building a wall on the U.S. southern border, banning travel from certain Muslim majority countries, or pulling out of the Paris Climate Accord. Now that he has attempted to fulfill most if not all of his campaign promises, there can be no feigned surprises. Re-election of Trump would send a powerful signal that the ideological shift is long-term. Pew polling shows that 8 in 10 Europeans lack confidence in his handling of international affairs. A second term for Trump could push the relationship into an unrecoverable place.



Spencer P. Boyer

Spencer P. Boyer is the director of the Washington office of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law. He is also a senior fellow at the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy & Global Engagement at the University of Pennsylvania and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. During the Obama administration, he served as National Intelligence Officer for Europe at the National Intelligence Council and was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs.

**Lucie Menna-Guettaa**

Lucie Menna-Guettaa is a student at the Sciences Po in Strasbourg (France) and has just completed a year-long exchange at Georgetown University, where she has focused on the study of transatlantic relations. She is currently doing research in European affairs by means of a dual master's program at the Sciences Po university in Paris and the London School of Economics.