



# Ill Fares the World: What Next?

## 10 observations on the US elections

Foundation for European Progressive Studies

The American Presidential Campaign and the subsequent elections has captivated the world's attention for months. Nevertheless the actual result has been received across the globe with shock and disbelief. Within the hours of the announcement of the result, speculations began to spread regarding what can be expected from the unexpectedly victorious President-elect Donald Trump. Yet in that context an important conversation may be going missing - namely what is it that the international community should learn from what has just happened in the political, social and economic terms?

With that impetus, FEPS is herewith presenting 10 observations "Ill fares the world - What Next?", which provides critical analyses of the trends that can be observed in the US and what they mean in the context of Europe, especially when looking towards the upcoming crucial elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany.

The title of this brief is inspired by the book "Ill Fares the Land" by the British historian, essayist, and university professor Tony Judt.

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## 1. Democracy is not just about voting

Democracy is a system set up to work for everyone, yet it will only work for democrats if they invest in building, strengthening and forging a culture of democracy as a set of principles. As we have been reminded in several recent situations, democracy is not just about voting. The election of Donald Trump served to sanction statements that were at odds with the very principle of civility in democratic political debating rules. According to Donald Trump “Politics is a nasty business!” Immediately after his election was confirmed, it is significant that European leaders called for respect of the values for what western democracies stand for: Freedom, respect of law, dignity of people regardless of race, sex, religion, skin colour and political conviction. Nobody has ever asked an American President such pre-conditions for working together. Donald Trump’s election is a significant cornerstone of the existential crisis of western democracies. Rising inequalities and social exclusion as the consequences of the deep financial and economic crisis are existential realities for a large part of the people of western societies. Neither answers nor solutions have been delivered. We witness an existential crisis of our western democracies and we have to accept that we are facing more and more the threat of authoritarian leadership. **The harm is not connected with the question of bridging beyond political correctness, but rather that discriminatory attitudes have now been given legitimacy by the fact that Donald Trump won the presidential race.** This propensity is endemic not only in Donald Trump’s rhetoric, but also of others like Vladimir Putin, Recep Erdogan, Benjamin Netanyahu, Victor Orbán. We hope to avoid legitimacy being given to the extreme right next year at the election in France.

## 2. There is less connection between politicians and voters

The connection between politicians and voters during campaigns seems to be taking a different course than in the past. Previously, campaigns were based on the logic of creating a connection through engaging politicians and voters in a conversation. This is why you have debates, canvassing and rallies. It was the programme that used to be key to framing messages and also then became about the political-personal stories. **So Hillary Clinton focused on HER-Story. Donald Trump instead put on what commentators described as a show.** Herewith he made politics about entertainment in a reality show style and not about an experience that would enlighten people.

## 3. It is not political experience that is the core credential that counts in the election

Hillary Clinton was by far the more experienced candidate politically – having served by the side of her husband both on the state and the federal level, having pursued the agenda for health and educational reforms in the Clintons’ White House, having served as Senator and ultimately as Secretary of State. Paradoxically, in the times when politics has evolved to become a profession and, nonetheless, her long political career ended up being a liability for her, since she was **frequently described as part of the system that people saw as profoundly incapable of changing itself by itself.** While the system was blamed for having catered to the practices that led to the economic crash and political gridlock and then for not being able to punish those who caused these phenomena effectively, Donald Trump, who could have been seen as the representative of an unfettered version of financial capitalism, managed to portray himself as an outsider of the system and hence as the more desired candidate.

#### 4. The President-elect poses serious concerns for the Republican Party as well

Donald Trump was not the desired candidate for most of the Party. He defied the party's orthodoxy in many respects, and as his nomination at the convention created friction within the Republican establishment, his success on Tuesday also poses a difficulty for the Republican elites. In addition to **Donald Trump's inherently idiosyncratic nature**, this element is **what fuels concerns and comments regarding the unpredictability of what his Presidency is to be like**. His policy platform lacked detail and nuance, both in terms of his economic and foreign policy proposals, exacerbating this unpredictability. Once again it would seem that the analyses focus far too much on the mantra "What will the markets say?" Yet, even if the election of Donald Trump was not the desired outcome for many without (and within) the Republican party, it is the result of a democratic process and in that sense Hillary Clinton was right in saying that the public offered him a mandate that needs to be respected and he deserves therefore a chance to lead.

#### 5. There is an obvious decline of traditional parties and platforms

Despite the Republican candidate achieving to win the Presidential race and in addition to retaining their majority in the Senate and the House of Representatives, importantly it did not gain substantially in terms of increasing its number of votes. **Though Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, she saw a decline** by over 5 million in **nominal votes** cast for the Democratic presidential candidate.

#### 6. The polls were wrong (yet again)

The data-driven models also failed in their predictions, but it also seems that the parties themselves were miscalculating their chances. With the exception of a couple of moments, Hillary Clinton led in the vast majority of national and battleground state polls throughout the year, adding to the shocking nature of Tuesday's result. **This is at least the second time in the last two years, whereby the predictions have proven to be so misleading** – the first of them being of course the last general election in the UK. This poses three questions. The first one is regarding the methods and legitimacy of the polling agencies to make the claims they do, which of course ultimately remain influential on the actual voters' behaviour. In that sense predictions can convince swing voters or motivate inactive citizens, changing the result on the day itself. The second issue is in how citizens wish to express their true opinions these days. This may have been the reason for which the support for Donald Trump was underestimated. His voters, similarly to the voters of populist or extreme groups elsewhere, may find it more difficult to admit publically the way they intend to cast their ballots. That would signify a dangerous trend in politics, whereby people realise that their choices are not the reason for pride – but still pursue them out of anger, disappointment etc. Thirdly and finally, there is an issue with how closely the parties are connected with the electorate. The discrepancy between the expectations and the actual results would either suggest that the link is weak and that they cannot detect the undercurrent dynamics among citizens or that the parties fail to listen and/or comprehend what in fact citizens tell them.

## 7. Alienation of individuals

This is the underestimated characteristic of contemporary societies, which as the US campaign has shown can only be bridged if the question of dignity and social justice is adequately addressed. Donald Trump's election had global repercussions because it does not simply concern the United States and its roots do not only appear solely in the country. These roots concern the current global status quo, with its globalising tendencies and the perception of insecurity, of loss of control and of identity crisis it has created amongst large sections of the population. What is more, the political discourse of the last years has been heavily focused on the issue of inequalities and how they have grown primarily as the result of the malfunctioning global financial capitalist system, and then how they have been accelerated as a result of the crash and the policies adopted afterwards. The argument that this level of inequalities and imbalances is not sustainable became bi-partisan, and has even been picked up by the representatives of the financial sector. While Bernie Sanders in his campaign became a credible spokesperson for the agenda of more equality, what had failed him was the lack of connection between that narrative and the issues of dignity and social justice that people seek for. That is precisely the link that Donald Trump mastered, even if in his rhetoric he took a turn towards populism, divisiveness and xenophobia. In this frame he offered a bleak diagnosis of the present and a convincing (albeit vague) hope for the future to those under pressure, which was a winning recipe for carrying such states as post-industrially devastated North Carolina.

## 8. The dividing lines within the electorates have shifted

It is true that especially the American electoral map has been changing and the proportions of the votes between diverse ethnical groups have been alternating. But while the Democrats have been very focused in their inclusive agenda on collecting the votes previously described (rightfully or not) as minorities (women, African-Americans, Hispanic and Latinos, Asians) as a way of building a 'Traffic Light Coalition', they more crucially lost the votes of White voters, notably the ones without college degrees. There is also a huge discrepancy across the age groups – only one third of young people supported Donald Trump, while among 65+ he counted on more than 50% support. Here the point to be made is that these are just headlines, while the map gets more complicated, if we segment it using ethnic, educational and age criteria; Nearly 10% of young voters opted however for a third candidate – other than Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. **The striking fact is that Millennials<sup>1</sup> would have been the decisive factor in preventing the US from the Presidency of Donald Trump** (assuming that the exit poll results about them were not incorrect), **but they did not turn up to vote in sufficient numbers.** This negative trend is significant, especially when comparing the 2016 numbers to the mobilisation of young people accomplished by President Obama in both previous election cycles. This is the same pattern that seems to have failed the hopes of so many in the UK in the EU referendum in June 2016.

## 9. Hillary Clinton and the bitter disappointment of the women vote

Although the majority of white women, and non-college graduate women more so than the rest of this cohort, did not line up behind the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, **still many decided to support her despite her political preferences.** In this sense, her non-election is a point of bitter disappointment.

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<sup>1</sup> See more on [FEPS Millennial Dialogue research](#) especially on the [US study](#)

Unlike Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton was a serious political candidate to be reckoned with and many expected that her election would be the much-anticipated breakthrough in the US political glass ceiling. That was the motivation for creating platforms such as Republican Women for Hillary. Not only were these hopes disappointed, but also the sexist, condescending comments of Donald Trump prompted disbelief that political emancipation and egalitarianism in politics is a reality. Besides Donald Trump's questionable approach to gender issues, the recent electoral outcome would suggest that the United States is far less open to the idea of a woman president than one would have expected or hoped for. Indeed, in spite of her competence and experience, Hillary Clinton remained highly unpopular and, according to many observers, such unpopularity is to be ascribed to traits of her characters and behaviour that, to some extent, are still considered inappropriate for a woman, such as her independent-mindedness, strength of character and ambitions. Furthermore her being part of the establishment, and having covered power positions might have penalised Hillary Clinton even more because she is a woman.

### 10. Presidential elections always trigger a change

The nature of change at this point remains unclear of course though. In the first reactions after hearing Tuesday's results in the US, Federica Mogherini told Euronews that although they are prominent actors, US Presidents do not dictate the terms of the EU foreign or internal agenda. While that is obvious, there is great uncertainty about the future of the transatlantic relationship – and here included the unpopular projects such as TTIP. It is to be expected that there will be things put on hold, but at the same time there are trends that will not freeze unless the EU and its progressive politicians take an active stand on them. As for Donald Trump's extremist and xenophobic views on migration, it remains to be seen to what extent he will be able to implement them, as the promise to build a wall between the US and Mexico (and have "Mexico pay for it") will be extremely difficult to be met, and other ones are manifestly illegal (such as the proposal to ban Muslims) and would be for sure challenged in courts. This does not change the fact that he is expected to make immigrants' life in the US extremely hard, increasing controls and deportations. For sure his anti-immigrant rhetoric has boosted the increasing number of people who fear the growing diversity of US society. **The election of Donald Trump already now serves an encouragement to the populist, anti-systemic, extremist movements in Europe and that is essential to keep in mind**, while preparing the battleground for the defining elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany next year.