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Erratic ally: The US midterm elections and the consequences of political dysfunction

The alarming state of politics in the United States complicates efforts to maintain a constructive transatlantic relationship. The system has been destabilised by powerful forces and intractable socio-economic problems and a large minority of Americans question the wisdom of international engagement. The United States will remain a crucial partner for Europe, but it also will oscillate between internationalist and nationalist phases. Europe should bolster its ability to act independently during periods when Washington is a less dependable ally.

It could have been much worse. In the final weeks before the US midterm elections, Republicans eagerly anticipated a resounding victory that would give them a large majority in the House of Representatives and firm control of the Senate. Meanwhile, Democrats – convinced that voters would punish them for high inflation and President Biden’s unpopularity – braced themselves to face a hostile and perhaps even nihilistic Congress. Republicans promised to impeach Biden, reduce funding for domestic and foreign policy priorities, and engage in dangerous brinksmanship over the federal debt ceiling.

But the outcome of the election defied the expectations of both parties. Voters were not happy with the Democrats, who lost the House. But they were also dismayed by the Republicans’ lurch towards radicalism and preferred another two years of Democratic control of the Senate. So instead of the easy win that minority parties typically enjoy in midterm elections, election night ended in a draw. The Republican-controlled House will make life difficult for the Biden administration, but will also be riven by internal disagreements. With Democrats in control of the Senate, Biden will find it easier to obtain confirmations for nominees to the judiciary and executive branches.

Europeans will be relieved that the Biden administration does not have to deal with a Congress dominated by an extremist Republican Party (GOP). Nonetheless, the election

results should reinforce a sobering fact for US allies. The United States is saddled with daunting problems but is so rigidly divided – so calcified – that it cannot agree on solutions. This worrisome state of affairs will not improve any time soon. And it could deteriorate further. This should concern anyone who cares about relations with the United States, because the parlous state of US politics is bad for the transatlantic relationship. In particular, Europeans should be worried about the powerful forces pushing the US political system to breaking point, the ways in which socioeconomic problems are exacerbating political dysfunction and the evolution of the nation’s global role – a process partly driven by domestic factors. Though Europe will hope for improvements on each of these fronts in the coming years, it should brace itself for further deterioration.

A dysfunctional political landscape

Two powerful forces are driving the US political system’s dysfunction. First, the radicalisation of the Republican Party has wreaked havoc on the US political system. The party’s degeneration is linked to the resurgence of right-wing populism – a strain of conservative political culture that first coalesced in the early cold war era around figures such as Joseph McCarthy and organisations such as the John Birch Society. It mostly hovered on the fringes of US politics until the early 1990s, when the impact of rapid cultural change and neoliberal economic policies left millions susceptible to demagoguery. In hindsight, Pat Buchanan’s presidential campaigns during the 1990s presaged the party’s eventual ambivalence about libertarian economics and internationalism. He appealed to whites angry at the status quo by wrapping himself in nationalist themes, namely protectionism, nativism, and unilateralism. Though he never won the GOP nomination, Buchanan demonstrated that there was an appetite in the GOP for radical populism.

Hence, Trump did not remake the GOP in 2016. Rather, he recognised that the nationalist playbook developed by Buchanan could mobilise white voters more effectively than the traditional GOP message of low taxes, free trade, and muscular internationalism. Trump’s other seminal contribution was his understanding that traditional and digital media platforms could be manipulated in ways that would boost his visibility and circumvent the influence of the establishment.

Today’s GOP does not do policy, at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, it mobilises voters by emphasising threats to their sense of identity. Prominent themes in conservative rhetoric revolve around the country’s perceived internal and external decline. These include high levels of immigration, the spread of multiculturalism, rising crime rates, the disproportionate sway of the intellectual and economic elite, non-traditional sexual values, and China’s rise. Because the danger is existential in nature, goes their thinking, taking radical action to preserve the version of America they cherish is justified. Hence, Republicans began raising doubts about the legitimacy of the midterm elections before any votes were cast. Numerous House Republicans have also promised to impeach President Biden and

signalled that they will leverage debt ceiling negotiations to extort major policy concessions from the White House.

The GOP is increasingly susceptible to the influence of conspiracy theories and extremist groups. This is dangerous, given the growing sympathy for political violence in the GOP and on the far left. Recent polling has found that 10% of all Americans – and nearly 20% of Republican men – believe violence against the federal government is justifiable ‘right now’.¹ The fact that Donald Trump and other leading GOP politicians have cultivated the support of groups such as QAnon and Proud Boys – both of which played a role in the 6 January insurrection – is making it more likely that future elections will be marred by violence.

What is often referred to as Trump’s Big Lie – that US elections are rigged, and he was the rightful victor in 2020 – has become a central theme of the party’s identity. The GOP has embraced this falsehood because it dovetails with the party’s desire to restrict ballot access for groups that tend to vote for Democrats. GOP strategists are mindful that the party lost the popular vote in seven of the previous eight presidential elections, but still captured the presidency in 2000 and 2016 thanks to the electoral college. Some GOP officials fear that unless they do something drastic, the party’s growing reliance on white voters will become a recipe for electoral irrelevance. That is because, at some point in the middle of the 21st century, white voters will constitute less than half of the country’s population.

In fact, the GOP is remarkably transparent about its rejection of democratic norms. Indeed, it is common to see Republicans use some version of the formulation ‘America is a republic, not a democracy’ in reference to measures intended to restrict access to voting for young people and minorities and to elect officials who endorse falsehoods about election fraud.²

Democrats face a different set of challenges. They can get to the White House, but need to win congressional elections by massive margins to gain a governing majority. The Senate gives disproportionate influence to predominantly white and conservative states: between 2020 and 2022 it was evenly split, but the 50 Democratic senators represented 40 million more voters than their GOP counterparts. Another problem is that Democrats tend to run campaigns appealing to a subset of voters who are more educated and affluent than most of the electorate, with a focus on cultural issues, including abortion and immigration, and seemingly abstract issues such as climate change and the threat of illiberalism. This limits their appeal to working-class voters, especially men, and has allowed the GOP to make inroads with Latinos and African Americans.

The other forces fostering dysfunction in US politics are polarisation and partisanship. Congressional Republicans and Democrats are further apart ideologically than at any point in the past 50 years.³ Negative partisanship – when voters form opinions based primarily

1 Safarpour, A., J. Druckman, D. Lazer, K. L. Trujillo, A. Shere, M. Baum, K. Ognyanova et al. (2022) “The COVID States Project #80: Americans’ views on violence against the government”. OSF Preprints, 31 January, DOI:10.31219/osf.io/753cb, President Biden.

2 Dobski, B. (2020) “America is a republic, not a democracy”. The Heritage Foundation, Washington DC, 19 June.

3 DeSilver, D. (2022) “The polarization in today’s Congress has roots that go back decades”. Pew Research Center, 10 March.

on dislike or distrust of their opponents – is also on the rise. In 2022, a large majority of Republicans viewed Democrats as immoral (72%), lazy (72%) and closed-minded (69%). Democrats saw Republicans in similar terms. These numbers represent a significant increase from 2016 (47%, 45% and 52% respectively).⁴

Such attitudes make it difficult for Americans to govern themselves. For years, they have been voluntarily sorting themselves into Democratic and Republican parts of the country. This so-called big sort into blue and red areas means that a majority of Americans rarely encounter differing opinions, and their worldviews are continuously reinforced.⁵ This reduces sympathy for opposing viewpoints and, given the tendency to view politics as a zero-sum struggle, boosts willingness to resort to extreme tactics to win elections, pass legislation and reshape institutions.

The electorate is bifurcating into rigid blocs – a problem that John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch and Lynn Vavreck refer to as calcification.⁶ Republicans are typically older white voters living in smaller cities and rural areas. Democrats are becoming the party of younger educated whites and minorities that live in large urban areas and on the coasts. Elections tend to be won or lost in the suburbs and Midwest.

The composition of these electoral coalitions highlights long-term problems confronting both parties. Given the country's growing diversity, Republicans need to increase their share of the minority vote. Meanwhile, the tendency of Democrats to cluster in urban areas and in populous coastal states, such as California and New York, means they need to win the popular vote by large margins to capture the presidency and both chambers of Congress – a prerequisite for passing meaningful legislation.

The wages of despair: linking socioeconomic problems to political dysfunction

The dysfunction plaguing the US political system is partly attributable to intractable socioeconomic challenges. The United States is a wealthy country. It boasts the world's largest GDP, as measured in nominal terms, ranks among the top ten countries in terms of GDP per capita, and is in the top 25 as measured by the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index.

Yet these impressive numbers are counterbalanced by pressing socioeconomic problems so acute that they have contributed to the radicalisation of tens of millions of Americans. Income inequality has reached historically high levels in the United States; only Chile, Mexico and Turkey have higher levels. Uniquely among advanced economies, mortality

4 Abramowitz, A.I. and S. W. Webster (2018) "Why Americans dislike parties but behave like rabid partisans". *Political Psychology* 39:S1: 119-135; Pew Research Center (2022) "As partisan hostility grows, signs of frustration with the two-party system", August.

5 Bishop, B. (2008) *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

6 Sides, J., C. Tausanovitch and L. Vavreck (2022) *The Bitter End: The 2020 Presidential Campaign and the Challenge to American Democracy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press).

rates for white Americans have been rising in recent years, after decreasing for most of the previous century. More specifically, in 2018 alone 158,000 Americans died from suicide, drug overdose, or diseases related to alcohol abuse, or what Anne Case and Angus Deaton call 'deaths of despair'. This is nearly triple the number of such deaths in 1995.⁷

Perhaps most damaging of all has been the failure to account for trade competition. Nearly 4 million jobs were shed, mostly in manufacturing, as a direct result of China's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO); millions more disappeared as an indirect result. These losses were concentrated in the US Southeast and Midwest. Though these job losses were devastating for less educated workers in all demographic groups, the political impact has been most apparent in the behaviour of blue-collar whites – millions of whom have turned to nationalist and illiberal politics.⁸

Two additional socioeconomic factors influence voting behaviour in the United States. One is the extent to which the US system struggles to assimilate large numbers of immigrants. In the United States, there are approximately 50 million immigrants – the highest absolute number of immigrants in any country. Of that 50 million, an estimated 10 million are undocumented. The presence of large numbers of immigrants has galvanised right-wing populists. It has increased white support for the GOP and facilitated closer cooperation between Republicans and white nationalists.⁹

The other factor affecting voting behaviour is the perception that crime rates are increasing – a concern that the GOP exploited in their 2022 electoral campaign. There has been a measurable rise in violent crime in large urban areas since 2020.¹⁰ Though the origins of this trend remain unclear, the political impact has been unmistakable. A combination of rising crime rates in big cities and the movement to highlight police violence against African Americans has fuelled a potent narrative – that cities are dangerous because politically-correct politicians want to defund the police.

Coming to terms with gradual decline

For the first time since the early cold war era, a large minority of Americans question the benefits of an internationalist foreign policy. Many voters have concluded that the United States accepted too much responsibility abroad after 1990. They believe that allies must contribute more to international security and that the United States should avoid prolonged

7 Case, A. and A. Deaton (2020) *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press).

8 Petri, P. A. and M. Banga (2020) "The economic consequences of globalisation in the United States". ERIA Discussion Paper Series 311, January; Autor, D. H., D. Dorn and G. H. Hanson (2016) "The China shock: Learning from labor market adjustment to large changes in trade". Working Paper 21906, National Bureau of Economic Research; Autor, D., D. Dorn, G. Hanson and K. Majlesi (2020) "Importing political polarization? The electoral consequences of rising trade exposure". *American Economic Review*, 110 (10): 3139-83.

9 Abrajano, M. and Z. Hajnal (2015) *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

10 Tucker, E. and P. Nickeas (2021) "The US saw significant crime rise across major cities in 2020. And it's not letting up". *CNN*, 3 April.

military entanglements. In addition to acknowledging failed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, these sentiments reflect an awareness of gradually diminishing power. Indeed, US decline is helping to facilitate the emergence of a multipolar landscape in which the United States remains the most influential actor, but is challenged by a multitude of state and non-state actors, foremost among them China. US policymakers will continue to prioritise competition with Beijing and strategic planning for the Indo-Pacific. Washington still cares about European security, but this will receive less attention than during the cold war, the conflict in Ukraine notwithstanding.

Many Americans have also concluded that the globalised economy does not always work for them. Given the extent to which it benefits from international trade, the United States will continue to tolerate a relatively high degree of economic interdependence. However, this toleration will be tempered by domestic politics, especially when it comes to China. Large majorities of Americans believe trade with China weakens US national security and they favour reducing trade between the two countries.¹¹ These sentiments align with Washington's concern about China's technological prowess and will push the world further toward rival trade blocs. There is also scepticism about the value of the rules-based trading system more broadly. Policymakers from both parties have called for US withdrawal from the World Trade Organization.

In the coming years US foreign policy will oscillate, sometimes significantly, based on which party wields power. Democrats tend to favour multilateralism. They view international cooperation as the best way to address challenges and support the promotion of democratic values. Democrats are also more tolerant of immigration. In contrast, Republicans have shifted toward a nationalist worldview. They regard immigration as a threat and trade as a zero-sum competition. They are also more likely to view military power as an effective way to advance the national interest, even if they have little appetite for prolonged interventions.¹²

In the coming years, alliances will be a battleground for the GOP and Democrats. Most Americans still support NATO. However, a significant minority of Republicans are ambivalent about alliances in general and specifically about NATO. In April 2022, 30% of House Republicans voted against a symbolic resolution reaffirming support for NATO. The war in Ukraine is becoming a focal point for unease. In May 2022, 57 House Republicans voted against a \$40 billion aid package for Kiev. A large minority, such as Senator Josh Hawley, think that Europe should be shouldering the cost of arming Ukraine.¹³ And the likely incoming Speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy, has indicated Republicans will be less willing to approve additional funding for Ukraine.

11 Smeltz, D., I. Daalder, K. Friedhoff, C. Kafura and E. Sullivan (2021) "A foreign policy for the middle class—What Americans think". The Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

12 Smeltz, D., I. Daalder, K. Friedhoff, C. Kafura, and E. Sullivan (2022) "Pivot to Europe: US public opinion in a time of war". The Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

13 Hawley, J. (@HawleyMO) (2022) "Spending \$40 billion on Ukraine aid - more than three times what all of Europe has spent combined - is not in America's interests. It neglects priorities at home (the border), allows Europe to freeload, short changes critical interests abroad and comes w/ no meaningful oversight", Twitter, 17 May 12:09 am.

There is growing sympathy in the GOP for authoritarian regimes that espouse white Christian nationalist values. Victor Orbán's Hungary has become a popular destination for conservatives intrigued by the advantages they see in illiberal democracy. Not coincidentally, these politicians and intellectuals are usually hostile to the European project. They see it as a technocratic monstrosity that promotes globalism and atheism. The Conservative Political Action Conference, which is influential with the conservative grassroots, held its 2022 annual meeting in Budapest.

Nationalist and illiberal impulses, combined with ambivalence about Ukraine, have earned Vladimir Putin a modicum of support on the US right. Tucker Carlson, host of the most popular cable news show on US television and a prominent source of white nationalist content, has embraced anti-anti-Putinism and spread disinformation about Ukraine. Joe Kent, a candidate for Washington's third district and part of a younger generation of Republican veterans promoting nationalist foreign policy agendas, called Putin's demands for Ukrainian territorial concessions 'very reasonable'.¹⁴

Though still a minority, there is bipartisan support for ending the war in Ukraine. A group of 30 legislators from the Congressional Progressive Caucus sent President Biden a letter in October 2022 calling for a negotiated ceasefire, though they quickly withdrew the letter amidst widespread criticism. This sentiment on the left is driven by discomfort with the use of military force and concern that, in a tough economic climate, voters will lose patience with aid to Ukraine. Some of these policymakers may join the GOP in seeking to limit funding for Ukraine in the upcoming congressional session.

Implications for Europe

As they ponder the implications of US dysfunction and decline, Europeans should assess three questions. One relates to the staying power of right-wing populism. Is Trump an anomaly or will other Republicans be able to win elections by emphasising nationalist and populist themes? Several high-profile Republicans are betting that they can be Trump 2.0 – that they can appeal to Trump's most ardent supporters with the same rhetoric and policies, but do so in a more disciplined and less corrupt manner. If they can, it will help solidify the hold of right-wing populism on the party. Key figures to watch in this regard are Ron DeSantis, the popular governor of Florida who just won an impressive re-election campaign on the strength of his opposition to so-called woke politics; Senator Hawley of Missouri; and South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem.

Another dynamic that will bear watching is the evolving balance of power in the GOP between true believers, pragmatists, and Republicans willing to defend democratic principles and norms. When Trump rose to power in 2016, the GOP was dominated by pragmatists and included a significant number of principled individuals who were horrified by his illiberalism. At first, most of the pragmatists denounced Trump and, more importantly, the type of politics he embodies. But in just six years, the balance of power has shifted

¹⁴ Leonhardt, D. (2022) 'The G.O.P.'s 'Putin Wing''. *The New York Times*, 7 April.

dramatically. Talented pragmatists such as the Senator-elect from Ohio, J. D. Vance and Representative Elise Stefanik, from New York, embraced right-wing populism when Trump's staying power became apparent. Most who were willing to defy Trump have left the party or been defeated in primary contests, such as former Representative Liz Cheney in Wyoming. There are still a few holdout Republicans in Congress, such as Senator Mitt Romney. He voted to impeach Trump and has been quietly critical of the former president. Yet overall, right-wing populism is ascendant. Many pragmatists would support a less radical version of right-wing politics if the party's mood were to change again, though this seems unlikely. Of course, for Europeans hoping to see a fully democratic and stable United States, such a shift would be welcome.

Finally, the debate between internationalists, on one hand, and nationalists and non-interventionists, on the other, will be closely watched by Europeans. Given the crucial role the US plays in NATO and, more broadly, in upholding the multilateral system, Europeans have a vested interest in a US foreign policy that is firmly internationalist and inclined toward multilateralism. The good news is that a majority of elected officials and voters still favour US leadership, strong alliances, robust international institutions and upholding a rules-based international trading system.

The bad news is that this longstanding internationalist orientation is wobbling. A combination of nationalist Republicans, left-wing Democrats and intellectuals favour unpicking some aspects of the foreign policy consensus. Nationalists are sceptical of alliances, hostile to international institutions, and favour protectionism. Many left-wing or populist Democrats would like to cut military spending or raise trade barriers. And an influential group of foreign policy intellectuals favour a doctrine sometimes referred to as restraint. Such a strategy would entail reducing US international involvement and military spending and shifting some or even most of the security burden in Europe and Asia to allies. Some versions of restraint align with the goals of European strategic autonomy, but others would entail a more antagonistic division of labour.

Europeans have little influence over the direction of US politics. So, while it would behove them to follow US elections closely, at the end of the day their focus should be on putting their own affairs in order. When it comes to doing their part to contribute to a constructive and durable transatlantic relationship, this would mean continuing to cooperate with Washington whenever possible and in spite of frequent frustrations. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, the United States makes enormous contributions to European security and prosperity and Europe would do well to seek compromises where possible. Most notably, Europe can and should contribute more to bolster NATO's military capabilities, and political and economic resilience, as well as reach a consensus on how it can best contribute to security in the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, given the growing unpredictability of the United States as a partner, Europeans should redouble their efforts to develop independent capabilities. This includes in the political realm – in the form of institutions that facilitate collaboration between EU member states and like-minded countries – as well as in defence. It also means bolstering interoperability between national militaries and reaching healthy defence spending levels,

even in the face of pressure for budget cuts. Europe must strengthen its ability to protect and promote its interests and values if the United States turns back to the populist right – a scenario that could play out as soon as 2024.