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A Trump encore: The United States and the transatlantic bond

America has chosen. Following one of the most tumultuous campaigns in memory and two assassination attempts directed at him, former President Donald J. Trump was successful in his third presidential bid. He is now re-elected to his country's highest – and arguably, the world's most powerful – office and will soon reoccupy the White House. In a nation as narrowly divided as the US, the results are likely to herald an era of remarkable political density and intensity, with the decisive right-ward turn that Trump represents having severe repercussions, spanning the whole domestic political agenda. And for a country that has traditionally seen its foreign policy role as indispensable to global affairs and outcomes, the election result will certainly drive significant shifts to what the US does beyond its borders. Europe's deep-seated fears that a second Trump administration could prove more alarming than the first will soon face the test of reality. The forecast presages turbulence ahead, and given how fundamental the transatlantic bond has been to Europe's progress in the past few decades, the EU's future trajectory is also – while not exclusively – still closely tied to whether and how it manages to weather the fast-approaching storm.

What just happened?

Trump won again.

His victory may be narrower than the first grand pronouncements allowed, but it was emphatic nonetheless.

His support grew almost across the board, his Electoral College total margin was much more commanding than in 2016 and he won the popular vote for the first time. This mirrored a devastating loss for Democrats, who are now all but ejected into political wilderness. Riding country-wide momentum, Republicans may have done worse than Trump in key states, but they did manage to flip the Senate and retain control of the House of Representatives, effectively giving Trump and the party claim over an incredibly broad mandate and unified power to pursue it.

An avalanche of books, commentaries, social media threads and podcasts explaining why all this happened is about to hit us. Hard data will be infused with political opinion, and many analysts will inescapably recast the Harris campaign as one marred by a lack of spark or foresight, while affording the Trump campaign a higher degree of professionalism and shrewdness than is perhaps warranted by the facts. This is how the history of most presidential campaigns is written.

Did Biden deal Kamala Harris an unwinnable hand by holding on for too long? Would having a primary or even a messy contested convention have allowed Harris – or any other Democratic candidate selected – to connect with voters better? Was the Harris campaign too focused on appealing to centrist Republicans instead of energising her base? Was it the Biden administration’s stance on foreign policy issues like Ukraine or Israel and Gaza? Was it all because of the directly partisan conservative media ecosystem that Trump was so keen on leaning into? Or was it the Democratic party’s progressive shift on social issues that distanced critical Hispanic and Black male voters?

There can be no single ‘it’ behind the outcome of an election as complex and impactful as this. Yet, three sets of factors worth analysing mattered in this election. They may not paint an exhaustive picture, but offer vital insights that can help us understand the results.

Firstly, the political tides.

Trump’s victory is based on the largest coalition he has ever assembled before. From swing states to deep blue areas, from suburbs to college towns and from Latino to Black voters, the incredible range¹ of geographies and demographics that swung towards him suggests a political environment that superseded any strategic or tactical choice either of the two campaigns made. And while presidential elections are not decided by the popular vote, the fact that the Democrats’ wipeout was paired with a Trump popular vote win – the first for any Republican candidate since 2004 – is another strong indicator of where the mood of the country was moving.

John Burn-Murdoch from the *Financial Times*² made the very interesting point that “The incumbents in every single one of the 10 major countries that [...] held national elections in 2024 were given a kicking by voters. This is the first time this has ever happened in almost 120 years of records”.

If this was a year of a post-pandemic, post-inflation wave of anti-incumbency across the world, 5 November showed that the US was not immune to this trend. Stubborn inflation and a lingering cost-of-living crisis that still stung, President Biden’s low approval ratings still stuck in the upper 30s,³ and the share of Americans saying the country was heading in the right direction still pinned to less than a third⁴ – a position from which no

1 Meko, T., A. Steckelberg, L. Shapiro et al. (2024) «How Trump built his victory, vote by vote». *The Washington Post*, 8 November.

2 Burn-Murdoch, J. (2024) “Democrats join 2024’s graveyard of incumbents”. *Financial Times*, 7 November 2024.

3 “How (un)popular is Joe Biden”. *abcNews* polls.

4 “Cross-tabs: Late October 2024 Times/Siena Poll of the likely electorate”. *The New York Times*, 25 October 2024.

party retained control of the White House in the past decades – collectively proved to be structural currents that were too strong for the Harris campaign to swim against.

In this hostile, if not insurmountable, climate for incumbents, the vice president's woes were compounded by the simple fact that she was precisely that: a sitting vice president. This made it very difficult for her to succeed in separating her new promises on the stump from the record of a still unpopular administration in just over 100 days of campaigning.

Secondly, even if the electoral climate was favourable to Trump, he never missed a chance to create the weather. This played out in a number of significant ways, from his relentless focus on migration and the border, which clearly resonated with the public, to successfully harnessing the anger and frustration huge swaths of the electorate felt about the status quo and the institutions underpinning it.

But it was the economy where the political instincts of the Trump campaign proved the most fruitful. In many significant ways, the 2024 one was an election where it was perhaps less about “the economy, stupid” – paraphrasing Jim Carville's famous quip from back in 1992, which emphasised the huge importance of economic issues to voters – and rather more about ‘the perception of the economy, stupid’.

Indeed, the macroeconomic story heading into the election had been largely strong: unemployment had not been this low for this long since the 1960s; credit spreads were at historical lows; inflation was close to the lowest levels of the past few years; GDP growth was above trend; there were historic highs for the stock market; and so on.

But there was still too much pain felt by too many Americans. And Trump was both quick and adept at understanding the upside of amplifying these economic hardships and fears. His, he claimed on repeat, was “the greatest economy in the history of our country”, contrasting it with a Biden-Harris-overseen economy that was “horrible”, “destroyed”, marked by “the worst inflation crisis in 40 years”. Looking ahead, his message was equally straightforward: “Kamala Broke It. Trump Will Fix It”.

In this, he did not differ from past presidential races, where contrasting economic visions and competing verdicts about the state of the economy had served as central campaign battle lines. But, in an almost visceral way, Trump understood that in this year's climate, there was tremendous value in drilling down a message of damning condemnation for the present and prosperity promise for the future. And he did so, bombastically yet consistently, regardless of whether hard economic indicators were telling a different story.

As we also saw in key European countries like Austria, France and Germany, during June's European Parliament elections, to many US voters, any reservations they had about Trump's leadership or agenda, seemed to matter less than the simple, yet convincing, things he had to say about how he could be their economic champion, again. This afforded him an advantage where it mattered most for voters – their economic prospects. And it also gave his campaign the opening they needed to effectively turn the vote into a referendum on a still unpopular administration, rather than the candidate's own conduct or democratic credentials.

Finally, Trump's win showed in crystal-clear terms how far more comfortable and efficient he is in tapping into the deep polarisation that characterises modern America. And this mattered mightily in the campaign.

Take the striking gender gap everyone expected to see in this cycle, for example. Instead of attempting to offer a unifying message, as the Harris campaign tried at times, Trump's instincts were not just to lean into this but to organise much of his campaign around it. Time and again over the past few months, Trump embraced a hypermasculine image, engaged heavily in 'macho talk', and deployed a range of themes that align with views about unapologetic male confidence and traditional male authority. His first campaign appearance following his criminal conviction was an Ultimate Fighting Championship event. The Republican National Convention that renominated him this summer featured songs like James Brown's *It's a Man's Man's Man's World*⁵ and figures like Hulk Hogan ripping off his shirt.⁶ His campaign spent little time booking him for mainstream media interviews; instead, Trump recorded a series of shows with bro-type hosts, like his three-hour podcast with Joe Rogan, which gathered more than 45 million views on YouTube.⁷ On election day, Stephen Miller, one of Trump's closest advisors, transparently posted on X (formerly Twitter): "If you know any men who haven't voted, get them to the polls".⁸ And men did go to the polls overwhelmingly supporting Trump, especially younger, disillusioned, 'low-information' male voters, who proved powerfully receptive to this message.

Gender was only one of the areas that the former president's penchant for both exploiting and entrenching divides applied on the campaign trail – religion, immigration and civil rights were all part of the repertoire. Yet, instead of denting or narrowing his overall appeal, this approach galvanised many parts of his winning coalition.

Ultimately, Trump's charisma and impulse to use his personal brand of politics – brazen, divisive and abrasive – in a bitterly divided nation was a defining piece of this election. It played a big role in sustaining his appeal and allowed him to rehabilitate his political prospects. As a commentator aptly put it, "This is like Nixon successfully running a second campaign after Watergate".⁹ Trump ran the race as a twice-impeached, four-times indicted, convicted felon, and millions of Americans voted to rehire him.

What does this mean?

In the past, Trump's 'unpredictability' and 'bluntness' meant that his comments were all too often reported as off-the-cuff, one-off remarks that should be taken with a grain of salt. For too long, the thinking routinely went that many of the things the former president said or promised – in rallies, speeches or ALL-CAPS posts on social media – should rather be disregarded as rhetorical fireworks or empty bluster. The record of the first Trump presidency strongly contradicts this reading. His pledges during his 2016 campaign, packaged within

5 "Trump arrives at convention". *abcNews*, 17 July 2024.

6 "Hulk Hogan hypes up Donald Trump and tears shirt off at Republican national convention". *The Guardian*, 19 July 2024.

7 Singh, K. (2024) "Podcaster Joe Rogan endorses Donald Trump for president". *Reuters*. 5 November.

8 Tweet, Stephen Miller (@StephenM), 5 November 2024.

9 Sullivan, A. (2024) "Sam Harris on the Trump threat, Harris, Wokeness". *The Weekly Dish*, 25 October.

his 'America First' agenda, served as a very accurate blueprint of the policies and priorities he pursued while in the White House.

Trump's 2024 campaign was equally candid. Unlike in 2016, though, the former president now has a clearer plan of governing and the accumulated experience on how to execute it. Despite protests, many of the specifics of Trump's presidential bid this year,¹⁰ and most of his personnel choices¹¹ at the time of writing, largely align with the content of Project 2025 – an 887-page document unveiled by the pro-MAGA Heritage Foundation, which offers multiple ideas that could shape a second Trump administration, from immigration to education policy and from economics to civil rights.

Moreover, there will likely be very few adults in the room to keep Trump in check in his White House encore. Indeed, the more entrenched, establishment-like figures that surrounded him during his first term are not only gone now, but are expected to be substituted mostly by loyal supplicants, or true believers, eager to double down on turning stated goals into actual policy. The few exceptions to this rule, like Chief of Staff Susie Wiles or Secretary of State nominee Senator Marco Rubio, will also be forced to operate in an environment that is far more duty-bound to the next president rather than their own ideas or ideology.

On the domestic front, this likely implies a singular focus on pursuing a sweeping expansion of presidential power to his advantage and deployment of the full government machinery to align with his political objectives.

Trump has repeatedly said the quiet part out loud in this regard. Over the past few months, he escalated threats to use the US Department of Justice to investigate or harass his political enemies and critics, weakening checks and balances that were put in place following the Watergate scandal in the 1970s.¹² He offered similar threats about settling personal scores, targeting voices he felt have crossed or criticised him, including in the courts, the press and Congress. He suggested that Special Counsel Jack Smith, who is currently investigating the former president's conduct, should be immediately fired.¹³ He described the 6 January riot as a "day of love". He enthusiastically argued for further tax cuts to richer Americans¹⁴ and bragged about his role in ending *Roe v Wade*,¹⁵ which eliminated federal abortion rights. He stated that he would apply ideological tests to determine which public schools receive federal funding¹⁶ and suggested he might penalise

10 "What is Project 2025 and why Trump distance himself from it during the campaign?" *The New York Times*, 6 November 2024.

11 Khanum, M. (2024) "Trump puts Project 2025 contributor in charge of deportations: 'Nobody better at policing and controlling our borders'". *The Latin Times*, 11 November.

12 Rohde, D. and K. Dilanian (2024) "Would Justice Department and FBI officials carry out Trump's prosecutions of his rivals?" *NBC News*, 31 October.

13 Merica, D. and E. Tucker (2024) "Trump says if he takes office, he'll fire special counsel Jack Smith 'within 2 seconds'". *AP*, 6 November.

14 Rosenbaum, E. (2024) "What to expect when President Trump tries to make tax cut promises reality, even with GOP sweep in Congress". *CNBC*, 11 November.

15 Rinaldi, O. and S. Mizelle (2024) "Trump brags about role in overturning *Roe v. Wade* but urges GOP caution on abortion". *CBS News*, 11 January.

16 Grumbach, G. (2024) "Trump won the presidency. Here's what he's said he'll do". *NBC News*, 6 November.

blue states by withholding disaster relief.¹⁷ He ominously spoke of the ‘need’ to turn the military on the ‘enemy within’.¹⁸ He described immigrants as “poisoning the blood of our country”,¹⁹ promising to move quickly to round up and deport millions of people residing in the US, even without legal permission.²⁰ The list goes on and on.

And on foreign policy, a domain traditionally reserved and afforded broad authority for presidents, Trump’s agenda, unshakeable beliefs and desired modus operandi have also been laid starkly bare. A Trump-led US will likely combine all critical elements behind his America First agenda: transactionalism; a deeply held contempt for multilateralism in favour of brinkmanship and bilateral deals; a zero-sum worldview of international politics; disdain for the international, liberal, rules-based order; at minimum, a pivot to countering China above other adversaries; disregard for values and human rights; and few good words about America’s democratic allies, yet ample admiration towards adversarial autocrats, such as Vladimir Putin, and the power paradigm they represent.

Also making a likely comeback will be Trump’s limited appreciation of the established networks of alliances and partnerships that served as foundations of American leadership and vital US national interests in the preceding decades. The former and new president has reserved some of his clearest language about vital US allies, such as Japan and South Korea – traditionally seen as force multipliers – which he has called “freeloaders”, and has even implied willingness to defend Taiwan in case China attacks.²¹ And as he did during his first administration, when he openly lambasted NATO and even questioned the United States’ commitment under Article 5 of NATO’s founding treaty,²² Trump’s approach could also serve to undermine the Atlantic Alliance – a bedrock for American leadership and European security both during and since the end of the Cold War.

Where does this leave Europe?

Unsurprisingly, applying such a policy mix will fundamentally rattle many of the certainties of the transatlantic bond. Europeans were clearly blindsided by the 2016 US election result, but tried their best to trace synergies and ways of cooperation during the former president’s years in the White House, before gritting their teeth waiting for the next election.

Prior to 5 November 2024, the question in most of the EU, therefore, was not whether but where a Trump presidency would cause the most pain for the bloc. The past months

17 Milman, O. (2024) “‘Vengeful’ Trump withheld disaster aid and will do so again, ex-officials warn”. *The Guardian*, 13 October.

18 Stracqualursi, V. (2024) “Trump suggests using military against ‘enemy from within’ on Election Day”. *CNN*, 14 October.

19 Gibson, G. (2023) “Trump says immigrants are ‘poisoning the blood of our country.’ Biden campaign likens comments to Hitler”. *NBC News*, 17 December.

20 Flores, R., J. Vargas Jones, A. Killough et al. (2024) “Donald Trump has promised a closed border and mass deportations. Those affected are taking action now”. *CNN*, 11 November.

21 Dress, B. (2024) “Taiwan braces for US election as China tension rise”. *The Hill*, 11 February.

22 Gray, A. and S. Siebold (2024) “What did Trump say about NATO funding and what is Article 5?” *Reuters*, 13 February.

saw senior officials in Brussels and EU capitals race to draw up assessments to prepare for the possibly dramatic shifts Trump's return to the White House could bring.²³

Of the biggest short-term worries, there are four that stand out.

In the economic field, Brussels is first and foremost concerned about Trump's threat of launching a barrage of blanket tariffs on all incoming goods, a move that could reduce EU exports to the US and could, therefore, pose severe risks for the European economy.²⁴ This, of course, could spark a trade war with the EU, which, put simply, would leave neither side of the Atlantic unscathed. Amidst a moment of tremendous economic insecurity for societies in both the EU and the US and intensifying competition at the global level, the logic behind such spectacular infighting between transatlantic partners may look questionable, but it could soon prove a painful reality.

Secondly, Europe's apprehensive outlook is also based on the question of whether Washington would continue providing, or sever, critical support for Ukraine.

With Russia placing its economy on a war footing, North Korean troops already on the ground and Kyiv struggling to maintain its defensive lines, a sudden cut-off of US aid for the country – an idea Trump has toyed with repeatedly – would have huge repercussions for the battlefield and beyond. Europe simply lacks the aggregate wherewithal and, therefore, cannot conceivably plug the massive gap the US would leave in such a scenario. This would not only put Ukraine's back against the wall, but would also thrust European security into crisis: a defeated or severely weakened Ukraine could mean far greater exposure of the EU's and NATO's eastern flank to Russian aggression.

Worse yet would be the former president's repeated musings about negotiating a super quick 'peace deal', which could imply a willingness to pressure Kyiv into accepting Moscow's terms to end the war or conceding key Russian demands. Under this scenario too, Vladimir Putin would be granted the victory that has so far eluded him on the battlefield, while Ukraine's integrity and Europe's security will both be existentially undermined or at least threatened.

Thirdly, Europe's fears are compounded by Trump's aforementioned aversion to NATO and his past public musings about leaving the Alliance. This may technically no longer be possible, after Congress enacted a law last year explicitly barring the president from withdrawing the United States from NATO without congressional approval. But Trump does not need to officially leave NATO to undermine it. He can easily do so by cutting funding, reducing the number of troops dedicated to NATO or questioning further the mutual defence clause – or at a very basic level by failing to nominate an ambassador or skipping NATO summits altogether. This would be nothing short of an electroshock for the security order Europe is still so dependent on and the US is so vital in – a shock that would arguably be extremely difficult, expensive and complex for Europeans to reverse and recover from.

23 Brady, K., A. Faiola and E. Francis (2024) "How Europe is preparing for a possible second Trump presidency". *The Washington Post*, 2 November.

24 Cingari, P. (2024) "Why Trump's plans for tariffs could be bad for Europe's economy". *Euronews*, 4 November.

Finally, while not an immediate security or economic concern, a less expressed but equally important fourth headache for the EU concerns the European project itself. This is linked to the simple fact that most of the bloc was haunted by the prospect of Trump's return, but not all of it.

Hungary's Viktor Orbán is the clearest example of a still tiny minority of European leaders who rejoiced at his win, seeing natural linkages to him and his MAGA movement. Other potential sympathisers may now also be emboldened to be more vocal about their support. And given the intra-bloc fissures this may create, conditions might also appear for jockeying among leaders as to who can better sway or flatter Trump, or at least play the transactional, bilateral game he prefers. Similarly, the former president's victory will also be seen by many far-right and populist parties across Europe – such as Austria's Freedom Party, Alternative for Germany or Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France – as a vindication of the fundamentals of the political creed they share with Trump, a reassurance that they now have an ally in the White House and encouragement for more resolute action.

It is not difficult to see how such a galvanised populist and far-right front, along with the centrifugal Eurosceptic agendas it often espouses, would bode further ills for a Union now facing fewer certainties and more crises than, perhaps, ever before.

What now?

A second Trump presidency is upon us.

The degree to which American presidential power and the span of US domestic politics will likely be reshaped in the next four years will only be matched by how much the country's global orientation and behaviour also changes. If past is prologue, the combined impact of all factors mentioned above also underscores that the bumpiness of the road ahead not least for EU-US ties may prove unprecedented.

For Trump's White House ambitions, his third time running was a charm. For the United States, the EU and the world, the next four years will reveal whether, and to what extent, that 'c' at the start of the word 'charm' was truly needed.

The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.