



For Europe, A Deeply Polarized U.S. Public is a Bigger Challenge than Trump

By Bruce Stokes

Europeans have a problem with Donald Trump, as well they should. His animus toward Europe is undermining transatlantic strategic and economic relations that have delivered peace and prosperity for seven decades.

But the U.S. president personifies and amplifies a far more dangerous development: a growing partisanship in public opinion on issues affecting the transatlantic alliance and its ability to deal with future challenges. As Republicans become more unilateralist and protectionist, Democrats are becoming more internationalist. These trends pre-date Trump's election and are likely to remain after he leaves office.

As the 2020 U.S. presidential election season gears up, Europeans must realize that the Trump presidency is a symptom of a profound polarization within the electorate about the United States role in the world. Rather than passively lament this development, Europeans need to prepare for a world in which the United States will be a less reliable partner.

Trump is deeply unpopular in Europe. Eight-in-ten Europeans say they lack confidence in his handling of international affairs, according to a 2018 [survey](#) by the Pew Research Center.

Ironically, given the president's repeated criticism of NATO and his complaints about the lack of military burden sharing on the part of Europe, security may be one of the transatlantic issues that Europeans should be least worried about.

Strong majorities of both Democrats and Republicans say they support maintaining the NATO alliance, according to [Gallup](#). And six-in-ten Americans of both political persuasions say they are willing to go to the aid of their NATO allies if they are attacked by Russia, according to [Pew](#).

The worrisome partisan divides among Americans involve their views of how others treat the United States and their stance on particular transatlantic challenges.

Republicans see the United States as a victim: 80 percent of them say other nations take unfair advantage of Uncle Sam, up from 73 percent in 1999. Only 28 percent of Democrats agree, down from 68 percent two decades ago, according to [Pew](#) data.



Transatlantic Take

It is little surprise then that 70 percent of Democrats believe improving relations with allies should be a foreign policy priority, up from 48 percent in 2008, but only 44 percent of Republicans agree, down from 47 percent a decade ago.

Europeans need also understand that Americans care relatively little about some of the issues that pose major challenges for the transatlantic relationship. In the annual [Pew](#) survey asking Americans what they consider to be the most important problems facing the nation, trade and climate change have ranked last and next to last almost every year for two decades.

To complicate matters, while Americans may not care about these issues, they still hold strong—and highly partisan—opinions about them.

On trade, contrary to the outdated image that Republicans are free traders and Democrats are protectionists, 67 percent of Democrats think trade is good for the United States, up from 53 percent in 2009, while only 43 percent of Republicans agree, down from 57 percent, according to a [Pew](#) survey.

With regard to Europe, 70 percent of Democrats say it is a “fair trader”, up 19 percentage points since 1993. Just 42 percent of Republicans concur, down 12 points, according to a [Gallup](#) survey.

In the wake of U.S. tariffs on European steel and aluminum, and in the face of possible duties on European autos, [Pew](#) has found that 73 percent of Republicans believe such increased tariffs will be good for the U.S. economy, but that only 15 percent of Democrats agree.

In 2017, the Trump administration unilaterally pulled the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement. Today, 64 percent of Democrats say dealing with climate change should be a priority; only 22 percent of Republicans share that view.

Republicans’ sense of victimhood, their questioning of multilateralism, and their doubts about trade and climate change all predated Trump’s time in the White House. But, in many cases, this partisan

divide has gotten worse over the last two years. And there is every reason to believe that these sharply differing views on the U.S. role in the world and on issues of importance to Europeans will remain even if the president is not re-elected in 2020.

Faced with this deepening polarization Europeans need to begin to prepare for a world in which the United States is not a dependable ally because there no longer exists in the country a bipartisan consensus on issues of importance to Europe.

Europeans are already spending more on defense. Such long-overdue outlays need to increase. The European Union has signed a free trade agreement with Japan in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Now Europe should consider joining TPP. If the United States is not interested in creating new norms for global commerce, the EU should do so in Europe’s self-interest. And, as the United States falls further behind in its commitment to curb carbon emissions to slow climate change, Europe should consider imposing import duties on carbon-intensive U.S. products. The next generation of Europeans should not suffer because Republicans in the United States do not take the climate threat to the planet seriously.

The partisan divide in U.S. public opinion around issues of importance to Europeans is a far more serious challenge to the future of transatlantic relations than the presidency of Donald Trump. Whether he is re-elected or not, Europeans need to prepare for a world in which the United States still behaves in many Trump-like ways for the foreseeable future.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

About the Author

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