



**America Votes 2024:
The Transatlantic Impact**
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By Burce Stokes | February 20, 2024

Americans will vote—and shape the future of transatlantic relations.

From George Washington’s warning about “entangling foreign alliances” to Donald Trump’s desire to turn NATO into a transactional protection racket, Americans’ interest in foreign affairs and transatlantic relations has been self-interested, especially during election years. Woodrow Wilson campaigned in 1916 on “he kept us out of war”. Franklin Roosevelt promised in 1940 that “your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.”

Both American leaders nevertheless came to the defense of Europe, and today two-thirds of Europeans continue to see the United States as a reliable partner.

But with the Ukraine war entering its third year, an Israel-Hamas conflict threatening to engulf the Middle East, and China an economic challenge, echoes of previous foreign policy debates are already being heard as the 2024 US election season begins. These rumblings have implications for transatlantic relations.

Leave US Alone?

Foreign policy has long been a low priority for Americans. A 2023 poll found that a majority thought that less attention should be paid to problems overseas and more attention to problems at home. And 2024 surveys consistently show that the economy, inflation, and immigration are Americans’ top concerns this election year.

But about 4 in 10 US adults name foreign policy as one of the five issues on which they want the government to do more work in 2024. The extent of this interest has doubled in the last year, reflecting the inescapable international challenges that threaten American interests, including issues that affect transatlantic relations.

Trump has said he would encourage Russians to do “whatever the hell they want” to any NATO member country that doesn’t meet defense spending guidelines. US President Joe Biden’s retort that such remarks are “un-American” suggests NATO will come up in the election campaign.

Trump’s negative views of NATO do not reflect those of most Americans: 6 in 10 hold a favorable opinion of the alliance. Moreover, a 2019 poll found that Americans back coming to the aid of a NATO partner attacked by Russia. Yet NATO sentiment is highly partisan: 51% of conservative Republicans, likely Trump voters, disapprove of NATO, while 81% of liberal Democrats, likely Biden voters, approve.

The war in Ukraine will figure in voters’ concerns, with nearly 6 in 10 Americans disapproving of Biden’s handling of the issue. Meanwhile, Trump has falsely claimed that the United States has given Ukraine eight times as much aid as Europe while bragging that he could end the conflict in 24 hours.

Trump's narrative feeds Republican opposition to Ukraine aid. Nearly half of party adherents now say that Washington is giving Kyiv too much support, up from about 10% when Russia launched its full-scale invasion. Only 1 in 6 Democrats complain about too much aid. But even that opposition has tripled in the last two years. Such increasingly negative sentiment underscores how difficult it will be for the US Congress to pass the proposed \$60 billion aid package in an election year, let alone obtain needed assistance next year, whoever is president. Americans, however, do agree on one thing. Three-quarters of Republicans and two-thirds of Democrats back a cease-fire.

Meanwhile in the Middle East

While not an immediate transatlantic issue, the Israel-Hamas war could become a major 2024 campaign issue if that conflict drags on. Ongoing turmoil could also sour transatlantic relations given Americans' relatively greater predisposition toward backing Israel.

The Israel-Hamas war, like the one in Ukraine, is deeply divisive. By nearly 4 to 1 Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe that Israel is going too far in its military operation. Three-quarters of Democrats, but only a bare majority of Republicans, believe Israel should call a cease-fire. But Americans agree that Biden is also mishandling this war. Fully 6 in 10 disapprove, including 85% of conservative Republicans and 58% of liberal Democrats.

What role this conflict will play in presidential year politics depends on how soon it ends. But if the conflict spreads, driving up refugee flows and oil prices, the impact on the global economy and transatlantic relations will undoubtedly be negative.

And Over in Asia

China is the third major international issue on voters' minds in the 2024 election. Trump's economic threats against China and Biden's approach to that country will factor into voters' assessments of who is tough enough to deal with Beijing.

A majority of Americans think current (Biden administration) trade policies have been bad for national security, the economy, and jobs, despite Biden's maintaining Trump-era tariffs and imposing new technology export controls that have impacted European companies.

For his part, Trump has threatened to impose a flat 60% tariff on all Chinese imports. Such action may resonate with voters. A recent study found that people living in the Midwest, around the Great Lakes, and in the South, areas affected by Trump's first-term tariffs, were more likely to have voted to reelect him in 2020.

Overwhelming US tariffs would destabilize the world economy and push Chinese exports into Europe, threatening jobs there. Coupling such action with new American duties on European exports—Trump has suggested a 20% tariff on all US imports, complaining that the EU tariff average is 50% higher than the United States'—would only worsen the economic crisis.

It is still eight months until the US presidential election. Ukraine, the Middle East, China, and transatlantic affairs in general are unlikely to determine voters' choices. But these issues are a lens through which voters measure a candidate's character and judgement, and whether he shares their optimism about America's role in the world or their pessimism, their willingness to work with others or their belief in going it alone.

The choice voters ultimately make will say much about the temperament of the American people. And that will have profound implications for the future of transatlantic relations.

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About the Author

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