



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

European Dialogue

A DIVIDED WEST IN NEED OF REINVENTION:

How to deal with Trumpism after Trump?

Laure Mandeville

Imprint

Publisher

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom
European Dialogue Programme Brussels
Avenue de Cortenbergh 71
B - 1000 Brussels

Phone: +32 2 28209-35

Fax: +32 2 28209-31

 /freiheit.org

 /fnf.europe

 /fnf.europe

Authors

Laure Mandeville, senior reporter at Le Figaro

Editing

European Dialogue Program
Jeanette Süß

Contact

Phone: +49 (0)30 2201 2634

Fax: +49 (0)30 6908 8102

Email: service@freiheit.org

As of

December 2020

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There will be no return to normalcy for America and for the transatlantic alliance in the threatening and rapidly changing post-Covid world, except for the welcome change of style and willingness to cooperate that the calm and experienced Joe Biden will bring to the table. But there is a real opportunity and an urgent need to reassess the significance, failures and successes of the Trumpist rebellion that gives no sign of abating, instead of demonizing it; in short, there is an imperative to start thinking “out of the box” to strengthen our weakened democracies and face the Chinese challenge together.

For four years, we have heard about a curse called Trump. Or so thought most of the Western commentators. We have heard all about his character, “unfit for the presidency”, according to his numerous adversaries. About his explosive style and his daily tweets, his willingness to question so many norms of the American political system and go against the assumptions of the experts. We have heard about his asymmetrical, unpredictable, nearly guerilla-type behavior, at least rhetorically, on the international stage, and the blunt reaffirmation of America’s national interest exemplified by the slogan “America First”. And for four years the central idea of Trump’s adversaries and of his European allies was simple: once “the Donald” leaves, American politics will go back to normal and the total disruption of the Trumpian era will also be succeeded by a return to a period of normalcy in international affairs.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Because the world has changed, with Trump and in spite of Trump, there will be no return to “normal”, no real space for political or diplomatic “routine” under a Biden administration, except for the return of “good manners” and a certain dose of predictability. “Manners and predictability are important and should not be underestimated”, noted former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain, Ana Palacio, during a [conference](#) organized by the Tocqueville Foundation, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and the French American Foundation.

But let’s face it. The post-Trump era will be rough and full of traps. Still there is an opportunity, on both sides of the Atlantic, for rethinking and reinventing a West in turmoil. Trumpism will remain very much a part of the conversation because the massive rebellion that Trump has been riding has always been much bigger than the real estate billionaire himself. He was only the “tree” masking a whole forest of anger directed at the elites, the vessel of a revolt, which is

far from over as we learned during the 2020 election. Trump was in fact the symptom of a deep democratic crisis, which is apparent in the ocean of distrust separating the two “American countries” facing each other. This crisis will have to be reassessed to go forward.

Alexis de Tocqueville, who was so clear-eyed in his assessment of the strength but also of the potential illnesses of democracy and its potential incline towards despotism, was very weary of a political class, which would become deaf and condescending towards the people, cut off from their needs and feelings. In 1848, he called his fellow parliamentarians to face the reality of the coming Revolution in France, pointing to the rift between the power and the people. “We are sitting on a volcano”, he warned, a warning very much valid today, in the current context of social insurgencies throughout the West.

In appearance, clouds seem to be clearing up in America in the aftermath of the 2020 election. The transition is starting. The system seems to have resisted. The norms and laws are functioning, the courts, and individuals who in various capacity had to take crucial decisions, when confronted with Donald Trump’s attempt to litigate the results of the election, have spoken to confirm Joe Biden’s victory. Even if the president continues to state, with striking and worrying insistence, that the election was “a fraud” and “was stolen from him”, even if he refused to concede and promised further surprises, he has made clear in the last few weeks that a classical transfer of power will be happening in the “greater interest of the nation” after the election of the electoral college on the 14th of December and the expiration of all the legal cases his campaign team forwarded to the courts. The apocalyptic scenario of a Trump turning into a dictator has not materialized, neither did we sink into some kind of civil war or anarchy, contrary to what many observers feared. The Trump supporters, who were “painted” very grossly as extensions of white supremacist militias by too many observers, are very frustrated and under shock that their champion lost, often in denial. However, most promised to accept the result. “We will respect the new president because that’s what Americans do¹”.

Despite this formal resilience, the country is in a deep political and democratic crisis. What are the major elements of this ongoing instability and how can Europe and the United States reinvigorate a transatlantic relationship in disarray?

¹ Laure Mandeville « En Pennsylvanie, la gueule de bois de la nébuleuse trumpienne », le Figaro, 16/11/2020.

1 Main lessons of the 2020 US presidential election

The divided house of 2 American countries

"A divided house cannot stand". The famous warning, expressed by Abraham Lincoln as his fellow citizens faced the civil war, has become a mantra for the current time. Nevertheless, for now, there is no sign in view that the gap between the two Americas could be filled. The United States have to a large extent become the Disunited States of America. They do not share the same views, the same beliefs and values, the same references, not even the same truth any more, since they watch different TV news, read different papers and, more often than not, mix mostly with communities of like-minded people on social media. With a very dire consequence: Politics has become a quasi-religious fight, presented as a contest between good and evil. From this point of view, the rhetorics that have been playing out in the last four years and during this election have been very revealing. On the left, Trump has been presented as the absolute devil, a racist, a sinister clown, who brought America to the "dark side" of racism and more. During their nomination speeches, both Joe Biden and Kamala Harris used the metaphors of "Light and Darkness" to present the choice between the Democrats and the Republicans. Concurrently, Trump was framed by fans in his camp almost as a Biblical figure that would outmaneuver his attackers and save America from socialism, riots and decay. This migration of religious sentiment from Church to politics has been very convincingly described by the public intellectual Joseph Bottum in his book on post-protestantism². The trend would certainly have worried Tocqueville, since for him religion was to play a tempering role in regard to politics, in the sense of anchoring citizens away from the political turmoil. In "Democracy in America", he described and lauded a nation of citizens very much involved in the handling of political matters on the local level, but not obsessed with it, and aware that things like family, church or economic development mattered more. In the current situation, something new has happened, since families now find themselves deeply divided and split on the question of being pro-Trump or anti-Trump, split exactly as they were during the civil war. It is no surprise, therefore, given this quasi-religious approach to politics, that it is becoming very hard to accept a normal political transition and transfer of

power. If the whole fight is about good and evil, not just matters of policy on which the two camps disagree, how could they possibly relinquish power after an election and wait for another 4 years before sparring again? The phenomenon was first observed in 2016, when Hillary Clinton conceded the defeat but then spent years talking about a stolen election, asserting repeatedly that the Russians were probably behind Trump's victory. At the time, the Democratic camp as a whole immediately announced a resistance movement to fight Trump and contest his legitimacy as president. Four years later, things are even more brutal, Trump announcing that he will not concede and that the election has been stolen. A declaration that has thrown the country into an uneasy and dangerous limbo

Behind Trump's contesting strategy, the worrying suspicions of his camp

Among the reasons that explain why Trump has not conceded the election, even as he reluctantly acknowledges that there will be a normal transfer of power on the 20th of January 2021, his unwillingness or even incapacity to accept defeat certainly played an important part. Raised by a very harsh and demanding father, Fred Trump, who Donald Trump always presents as a source of inspiration, the president was brought up to think that in a world made of "losers and winners", you better be on the winner's side. This philosophy turned into a way of life as he grew as a businessman focused on selling "his image" and brand of success. Trump never accepted defeat or failure because that is not what a salesman does. He was wired to sell a dream of eternal success, the success of the "Art of the deal"³, his book written in 1987, whose script he kept intact, always striving to keep control of the narrative of his life and achievements through a love-hatred relationship with the media. His whole presidency, the entire Twitter game, for instance, is the attempt of Trump to keep control of the "story", and circumventing "his enemies of the press" to speak directly to his electorate and the whole world, even at the risk of telling lies or transforming the truth.

² Joseph Bottum, *The post-protestant ethic and the spirit of America*, Crown Publishing Group, 2014. Also see Joshua Mitchell, *American Awakening*, Encounter Books, 2020.

³ His « philosophy » of life is summed up in his book « Art of the deal », Random House, 1987. The book remains a very telling dive into Trump's thinking.

However, our understanding of Trump's psychology is that he also probably truly believes that the election was indeed stolen from him. The fact that his legitimacy was constantly put into question during his four years of presidency certainly contributed to forging his strong conviction that the "deep State"⁴, together with his political adversaries, were determined to prevent him from being reelected. The nastiness of the political ping-pong, which took place during his term – the collusion investigation followed by a case of impeachment and numerous smaller battles – only reinforced his suspicions. The most dangerous part of this story is that around 68% of Republicans apparently believe at this point that the election was stolen from their champion⁵. A suspicion which is not a healthy situation for the incoming president. Of course, Trump is certainly guilty for instilling this persistent and dangerous doubt but he would argue that this is just payback for the suspicion of illegitimacy that weighed upon his own presidency, as well as a cynical way to prepare a possible return in 2024. In any case, the lack of mutual trust that has engulfed the entire political stage, overflowing into society, goes back earlier than November 2020 and lies much deeper. The two Americas may be respecting the formalities of democracy – just about! – but there is a rift between them which has grown as large as an ocean. Not because of their disagreements over policy or even morals and values (this was to a large extent always the case), but because of their willingness to dismiss the "Other". There is a dangerous inclination towards a "nullification" temptation. Americans seem more and more incapable of agreeing to disagree, an arrangement that used to be the central pillar of political liberalism "à la Tocqueville".

Trumpism is alive and well

In examining the results of the November presidential election, one could provocatively argue that despite Trump's defeat, Trumpism "won". He was defeated by Covid (although the criticism of his approach to Covid did not get the traction expected), but also by his own personal shortcomings and the mail-in ballots. There is little doubt that without the pandemic, and the economic downturn that followed, the president would have been reelected thanks to the excellent economic results that he was enjoying. It also seems clear that Donald Trump's divisive, chaotic and abrasive manners put off many people, especially among the educated voters. His governing style created a very strong mobilization on the left, bringing out masses of young and African-American voters. The possibility of mail-in ballots voting on a massive

scale enabled the Democrats to reach out to segments of their electorate who did not usually go to the polling stations. All of these voters were not necessarily voting for Biden, but definitely voting against Trump. The tumultuous President also turned off centrist leaning male Republicans or independents, some of whom shifted to Biden at the margin. As a couple of former Republicans turned Democrats in the suburbs of Philadelphia stated, "We can't stand his style. This has to stop. We are exhausted"⁶.

But the story of the 2020 election is also the tale of a impressive mobilisation of the presidential camp for his champion. While 80 million voters came out for Biden, a number never reached before, more than 74 million voters came out for Trump – 7 million more than in 2016! A number, which can hardly be interpreted as a rejection of his legacy, as was underlined by Arthur Goldhammer at the [Tocqueville Conference](#) mentioned above. Except for Biden's score, this was the biggest number ever reached by a president, Obama included. While the Democrats managed to win Georgia, an impressive achievement for this traditionally red Southern state, in the swing states of the MidWest, the scores ended up being extremely close. The fact that Trump was able to achieve such tight margins in the middle of a crushing pandemic, and in spite of the media commentariat and pollsters hammering for months their prediction of Biden's landslide victory, demonstrates the solidity of the movement the president has been riding. Trumpism, this mixture of nationalism, Christian conservatism, rejection of uncontrolled immigration, anti-elitism, protection of the working man and exasperation at political correctness, is well alive. Besides, not only did Trump manage to keep his fans, he woke up completely new segments of voters from a forgotten America which had disappeared below the radars for decades or had never voted. The premise of Trump, which hit a sensitive chord, was that the elites' persistence to see the globalization post 1989 as a "win win game" was incredibly blind to whole segments of Western societies. He connected with them and brought them back into the conversation. Many of these voters used to be Democrats. One could go as far as saying that Trump became the leader of the rural and working class America, flipping completely the American political chessboard. Three out of four uneducated workers voted for Trump. It will be interesting to see how Joe Biden, who was elected mostly thanks to educated and minority voters, engages and tries to attract the working man back into the Democratic party. He has clearly stated this intention.

⁴ By the deep state, a formula he used constantly during his presidency, Trump means the elites and civil servants that have remained the skeleton of the government bureaucracy and supposedly conspired against him.

⁵ Dana Blanton, « Fox News Poll, Most Republicans say President Trump was robbed », 12/12/2020.

⁶ Laure Mandeville, « La Pennsylvanie, champ de bataille et baromètre d'une Amérique divisée », Le Figaro, 10/28/2020.

The 2020 election, a blow to identity politics

Since his candidacy was announced in 2015, one of the major talking points of the Democratic camp has been to present Trump as a racist president, and his electorate's vote in his favor as a racist reaction to the election of Barack Obama. While it is undeniable and very troubling that Trump used the Birthers' controversy to test a potential run in 2011, our personal opinion is that such a framing of Trumpism as a racist phenomenon is misleading. One must not forget, first of all, that the very people who carried Trump's election in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Ohio in 2016, were the working class "Reagan Democrats" that had voted for Barack Obama, the first black president, in 2008. Their issue was not race, but class! There was certainly a "nativist" element in Trump's instincts, in regard to immigration policies and borders that he sought to control, arguing that "a country without borders is not a country". However, his agenda has been a "color blind", nationalist American agenda, that pushes back against identity politics and the Left's growing obsession with race and gender.

Interestingly, the 2020 election was, to a substantial extent, the beginning of a vindication of this approach. Joe Biden, a representative of the centrist, old school Democratic party, more interested in policy than in ideological "woke battles", became the winner of the race (after having to fight against accusations of racism from his rivals, among them his future running mate Kamala Harris – quite ironic for the man who had been the vice-president of the first Black president!). The identity politics argument did not win the day then. Even if Biden had to pay lip service to the Black Lives Matter movement by endorsing the idea of systemic racism during the campaign and by remaining long silent during the summer race riots of 2020, he largely owes his electoral success to the help of James Clyburn, a black Senator who supports a much more moderate approach to race issues than BLM and has framed "the Defund the police" campaign as counterproductive.

During the general election, identity politics did not work very well either⁷. Contrary to the opinions repeated again and again by pollsters and the mainstream liberal media, Trump actually did very well among women (he carried a majority of white women, although he lost some in comparison to 2016). This is proof that the obsession with gender is not so widely shared in the American electorate. Even more striking was Trump's appeal among Latinos, who gave him around 35% of the votes. Overall, Latinos cast a majority of votes to Biden but the significant rise in support (7%) achieved by the

Republicans has sent shockwaves across the Democratic Party, who had wrongly endorsed the view of the "Blue demographic irreversibility". This analysis, which is still widely shared in the liberal commentariat, takes as a given that as America grows more diverse, it will become quasi-impossible for Republicans to win presidential and Congressional elections, because of a "browning of the American electorate". The 2020 election comes to question this postulate in a fundamental way, showing that for many minority voters, race is not the major engine of their votes. Many Latino voters, from Texas to Florida or New Mexico, expressed their strong disapproval of the identity obsessions that have engulfed the Democratic Party. They said they had voted for Trump because they liked his business approach and were culturally conservative. "Most Latinos identify first as working-class Americans, and Trump spoke to that", said Josh Zaragoza, a top Democratic data specialist in Arizona, adding that "Hispanic men in particular are very entrepreneurial. Their economic language is more aligned with the way Republicans speak; pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, owning your own business". 97% of Latinos resented the "term" Latinx, thrown into the conversation to please the supporters of gender neutral language, as well as the word "Brown", used to qualify them⁸, according a recent pew poll. The 2020 election also saw a significant rise of support for Trump among black voters (from 8% to 12%, especially among black males (17%)), despite the ideological pressure of the Black Lives Matter movement, which intimated a reading of Trump as THE enemy. Although still limited, this beginning of a shift in black vote could well be the sign of a very significant political revolution to come in America around the idea of race. During our trips in Pennsylvania and Georgia, we came across many black voters who resented very strongly the "racist lens" and "victimhood" approach that the Democratic Party has been using to shape the agenda of the Afro-American community. In fact, the beginning of a black rebellion against identity politics is in the making, led by very interesting black leaders like the President of the Woodson Institute, Robert Woodson, a former civil right activist, or Professor Glenn Loury, both figures who contest the view of an America struck by systemic racism and unable to escape the legacy of slavery⁹. New figures like the young liberal biracial writer Thomas Chatterton Williams¹⁰ have also started to refuse the idea of being defined exclusively by their race. It will be very interesting to see how Joe Biden ponders the real need to address the deep racial wounds that persist in America and this rejection of identity politics expressed at the polling stations. This question is certainly one of the most significant that America, and the West in general, will have to face and answer in the coming years.

⁷ « A Democratic vision blurs », New York Times, /11/18/2020.

⁸ « Culture wars fuel Trump's blue Collar Latino gains », Politico, /11/21/2020.

⁹ See Bob Woodson, Lessons of the least of these, the Woodson principles », 2020, Bob Woodson on Fox News, « Institutional racism is a ruse », 7/06/2020. See also, Glenn Loury, « Les Noirs américains sont maîtres de leur destin malgré tous les vents contraires », Le Figaro, 26/11/2020.

¹⁰ Thomas Chatterton Williams, Black and White, Unlearning race, WWNorton and company, 2019.

Biden's strange victory: Why the future president, squeezed between two revolutions, will have a narrow path

Brought to power by 80 million voters, Joe Biden was elected with the highest number of votes in American history, 6 million more than his rival Donald Trump. However, this impressive number paradoxically hides a fragile and complicated political chessboard for the next President of the United States, nearly a pyrrhic victory of sorts. The reality is that Joe Biden begins his presidency in a country swept by two revolutions. But he is not riding any of them. On the Right blows the Trump revolution (or rather rebellion), which gives no sign of calming down, while a "woke" revolution led by tenants of critical race theory blows from the Left, inspired by the radicalization of American campuses.

On the Right, Biden will have to deal with the potential ambushes of Donald Trump, whose political future is not clear. Will the latter use his powerful 88 million followers Twitter account and his 74 million supporters to orchestrate a very political post-presidency? Will he start building up a strategy for a comeback in the presidential race in 2024, create his new channel to present his version of truth, as he has alluded to? Could he weaken Biden in the White House and paralyze his action by mobilizing this formidable political force? To what extent will he remain the leader of the Republican Party, given the fact that this party has been totally transformed under his watch? Will potential successors start fighting him and claiming the mantle, or go along with Trump to receive his potential endorsement? Observers in America assert that many contenders could line up to claim the "crown", from Nikki Haley to Mike Pompeo, Josh Hawley, Marco Rubio, or some more "asymmetrical" candidates like the conservative TV star Tucker Carlson.

Much of Biden's ability to implement a minimal agenda will depend on the Democrats' capacity to win the Georgia special election, which will take place on January the 4th and will decide whether the Senate remains Republican or goes Democrat. In any case, the country seems very much divided in two equal parts. In the House, Democrats kept their majority by a very thin margin. This political configuration will put a very powerful check on Joe Biden's policies and could even transform him in an enchained Gulliver from the start if he fails to win the Senate.

"This of course will influence the transatlantic relationship in the sense that Europe will be wondering about the capacity of their American ally to go forward with his policies. There is a big question mark here", said Ambassador Pierre Vimont during the [Tocqueville Conference](#) on the 2020 election. Even if Trump recedes into the background, Biden would have to deal with the powerful majority leader of the Senate, Mitch McConnell, if the Republicans keep the House. Even with

control of both branches of Congress, Obama had a tough path with the Republican minority, which blocked many of its reforms. The optimists underline that Biden's 50 years experience in the arcana of Congress, and his numerous ties and friendships among old school Republicans, will help him overcome the strong divides and animosities. From that point of view, he may be able to do better than Obama, who despite his public aura, was very much perceived on Capitol Hill, even among his fellow democrats, as a cold-mannered and policy-oriented president, often remote and Hamlet like, and unable to cajole and convince. The hope is that Biden's more traditional political skills could help cross the aisle and push forward some legislation of common interest based on the model of what Lyndon Johnson or Bill Clinton did. The big question will be to find topics of common interest on which Biden could build a cooperative approach with fellow Republicans in the Senate. China could be a fruitful topic of "rapprochement" and consensus. Aiming at pushing a realistic policy reform that would build on the project pushed forward under Trump's watch by Tim Scott, a Republican African-American senator, could also bear some fruit and maybe contribute to appease the emotion of the black community on issues of policing. But that would require a lot of arm-twisting against the "Defund the police" faction of the Democratic Party, that will probably try to push much more radical changes. From that point of view, Biden and Harris will be tested constantly from all sides.

The challenge of the "woke" revolution

Tensions are indeed expected on the left side of the political spectrum, where Biden is facing an ideological "woke" revolution, which puts social Justice and identity above the fundamental principle of equality before the law. Clearly, this revolutionary movement, which has been overflowing at great speed from academics into the Democratic Party, the media and the corporate world is far from receiving unanimous support among Democrats. As soon as the election was over, a very passionate debate started between centrists and progressives, each side accusing the other of having failed to convince independent voters in the swing states. One of the most interesting reflections and attacks came from Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin from Michigan, who survived a very bad season for Democrats in the House of Representatives, where they lost a significant number of 10 seats, instead of winning new ones as they had expected. Slotkin was one of very few centrist Democrats who carried her district while Trump carried it also. In a remarkable interview given to Politico¹¹, she pointed to the devastating condescendence of the Democratic Party towards working class people and enjoined them to draw some lessons from... Donald Trump! She underlined that he had managed to connect with working class America because he did not "look down" on them. The compliment was unexpected from a Congresswoman who had actually been one of the

driving forces to impeach Trump a few months earlier. But it was a telling sign of the very difficult situation in which the Democratic Party finds itself. “You know, the one thing I will say about Donald Trump,” Slotkin said, “is that he is who he is but he doesn’t talk down to anybody... And I think that there is a certain voter out there because of that who identifies with him and appreciates him.” The Congresswoman added that “we sometimes make people feel like they aren’t conscientious enough. They aren’t thoughtful enough. They aren’t ‘woke’ enough. They aren’t smart enough or educated enough to just understand what’s good for them”. It’s talking down to people. It’s alienating them”, she insisted. The central point of Slotkin was to underline that the Democrats “have created a barrier, along cultural lines, that makes the party fundamentally unwelcoming to anyone with supposedly retrograde views of the world around them”, commented Politico in the article. Other Democrats spoke up, among them Slotkin’s closest friend, Abigail Spanberger, a fellow CIA alumna, who survived the race in Virginia by a slim margin. During a call organized by Speaker Nancy Pelosi to draw lessons from the 2020 results, she slammed the Speaker for talking about “a 2020 success” in Congress and declared that the radical slogans calling for “Defunding the police” or bringing socialism to American shores “had to go” if the party was to resist the coming 2022 counter-attack of the Republican Party. Since then, Barack Obama also assessed in an interview that this slogan was a mistake that had cost his party seats in Congress.

On the other side of the Democratic Party, Alexandra Ocazio Cortes, the young progressive star that became the most popular face of the radical Left, fired back using an interview in the New York Times¹² just after the election to deny that the leftist stands of the party had cost it important seats. AOC argued that “racism had been a potent influence” at the polls and that Black Lives Matter’s actions were not to blame. Her point was that the party had to go ahead with its accusations of systemic racism and its goal of transforming American society, instead of blaming its losses on the progressist wing. She argued that Democratic centrists had lost because they were not modern and active enough on social media and had behaved “like sitting ducks”, implying that the future was with the grassroots energy of the Left. “I need my colleagues to understand that we are not the enemy. And that their basis is not the enemy. That the movement Black Lives Matter is not the enemy, that Medicare for all is not the enemy. This isn’t just about winning an argument. It’s that if they keep going after the wrong thing, I mean, they are just setting up their own obsolescence”.

Observers underline that these flare-ups of post-electoral tension just bring to the surface the growing contradictions that have been piling up since the midterms of 2018. Trying to contain this „civil war“ will be one of the first headaches Joe Biden will have to deal with when he enters the White

House on the 20th of January. Elissa Slotkin explains that the unresolved contradictions of the Democratic Party make it a „mushy brand“, with the consequence that “people don’t know what we stand for, what we’re about. So, every two years when the new flavor of attack comes out, it’s easy to convince a portion of the population that those attacks are true, because they still don’t know our brand”. “I think that’s the real strategic problem for the Democratic Party... and until we get that right, until we really work that out, we’re going to have a problem every two years”, concludes Slotkin in the interview.

The only good news in this pretty dire political environment is that unlike the wave of euphoria and outlandish expectations that were the starting point of the Obama presidency, the expectations are so low that one could in fact have a few good surprises. Slotkin defends the idea of a very pragmatic and narrow agenda that would help the suffering working and middle class throughout the political and racial spectrum by pumping stimulus money into the bank accounts of those most hit by the collapse of 2020. She also pushes the idea of waging an all-out push to dramatically reduce the price of insulin, a measure that would be popular and useful in a country cursed by very high levels of diabetes. Small things, aimed at bringing back trust and concrete results.

Figuring out how to heal

„That’s called Phase 3: figuring out how to heal“, notes Elissa Slotkin in the Politico Interview. „It’s going to be exceptionally hard to do. But if we do not keep the door open for people, and allow them to walk through that door, and keep a hand out to help them through, we’re just gonna [move] in pendulum swings. One party wins and we only govern for half of America; then the next party wins and they only govern for half of America ... We’re going to have stalemated government that can’t do anything“, she observes. Pondering Phase Three, the Politico journalist who interviewed Slotkin speaks of a “daunting” and “herculean task”. “The hardest thing to do is have empathy for other people. My experience is that there is still a lot of agreement on values between Americans – if you can get to that conversation. But it’s hard to get there. Solving the identity crisis of the Democratic Party is no longer just about winning elections, it’s about rebuilding a healthy society—and, very possibly, about preserving American democracy“, says Slotkin.

¹¹ Elissa Slotkin braces for a Democratic civil war, Politico, /11/13/2020.

¹² “Alexandra Ocazio Cortez on Biden’s win, House losses and what’s next for the Left”, NYT, 11/7/2020.

2 The crisis of democracy in America

Reconnect the elites and the people

In 1848, Tocqueville discerned the growing blindness of those at the top to the needs of those at the bottom. “It was not about such or such man in power, but about a narrow governing class, which gathered all the influence, all the honors, all the political life... and below, nothing”. The philosopher and parliamentarian described “two classes, one small, the other numerous, both parting with one another”. “Because I saw them marching in isolation, in opposite direction, I told myself that the wind of revolutions would soon arise”. Strikingly, as we now attempt to discern the shadow hanging over American and European democracies, we seem to be making the same mistakes that Tocqueville had warned his contemporaries against. We are looking at the symptom, not the cause.

Indeed, as Tocqueville explained, it is not about “such or such man in power”, but about what lies beyond. Behind Trump’s “Rocky horror political show”, lies a formidable rejection of the elites’ stewardship of the country by growing segments of working and middle classes which saw an impressive decline of their real incomes over 30 years of globalization, desindustrialization and robotization. In that sense, one of the key issues of today’s democratic crisis is the willingness of half the country to question the “post 1989 consensus”, which aimed at constructing a post-national global world, and replace it with a more balanced model globalization. Trump also became the unexpected bearer (given his own biography) of what is a strong cultural rebellion of a conservative Christian America, which is still very much attached to the nation and the pillars of traditional values, and fears greatly the doxa of multiculturalism and identity politics pushed forward by the Liberal establishment. Trumpism, and more generally populism, are therefore an attempt by a significant segment of Western societies, long ignored as “outdated”, to get a seat back at the table of politics and challenge the ideological corpus that is dominating most citadels of intellectual influence; the Universities, the media, Hollywood, and now the all-powerful world of the Tech industry and social media. In the Politico article devoted to Slotkin’s deep rethinking of the political situation, the journalist sums up this reality by quoting the Congresswoman saying that “one half of the country believes it is enlightened and the other half resents it”. The rebellious part does not accept the “expertise”

of the higher class, and, exasperated to have been ignored, prefers to support a total outsider like Trump, to inflict mayhem on the whole system. “This is not merely about race and racism”, comments the journalist. “The schisms go far deeper, to matters of faith and conscience, economic freedom and individual liberty,” he continues. Indeed, for the heavy losses Trump sustained among affluent college-educated whites, he nearly won a second term because of his gains with Black and brown voters. That these Americans were willing to support Trump, often in spite of his rhetoric, reveals an uncomfortable truth for the Left. There are millions of voters —working-class whites and working-class minorities — whose stances on social controversies put them out of touch with the Democratic Party”.

The grave failure of the American media and intellectual class

It is very rare today to find a description of what is happening in current American politics as frank and unbiased as the Elissa Slotkin Politico article. Such a candid approach has unfortunately become nearly anathema in the world of mainstream journalism, where considerations of social justice and political correctness have often blurred the picture, leading to striking failures of analysis. The failure of the American press (and pollsters) to predict and understand the Trump phenomenon in 2016 and again, to assess its remarkably persisting strength in 2020, is one of the key and most worrying elements of the current democratic crisis. While the New York Times, the Washington Post and 95% of the media have had many reasons to be alarmed by Donald Trump’s disdain of the rules and norms of the presidency – and by his many rhetorical attacks against the “fake news” media – it is also undeniable that the hysterical ping pong that played out between the press and the President during 4 years was a shared responsibility. Most of American media joined the “resistance” overnight when Trump won in 2016. The partisan, often hysterical tone, that permeated most coverage of his presidency never allowed for a serious and nuanced observation of what he was trying to do. Everything was dismissed a priori, in order to rail and discredit a president who was perceived as illegitimate and evil. His attempt to renegotiate the terms of globalization, his more protectionist approach and questioning of Nafta, his China policy

or Middle East strategy, all of it would have deserved more serious and nuanced analysis. But the excommunication of Trump and his electorate prevented a normal journalistic approach. Everything therefore came to be described as an “apocalypse” named Trump (with the exception of conservative media like Fox or Newsmax which were biased the other way). The result was that instead of contributing to detach the Trump electorate from its leader, the press reinforced their bond on a nearly irrational basis. Perceived as totally biased in favor of the Democrats – an assessment to a large extent deserved – the mainstream media lost the trust of Republicans, who migrated to conservative outlets and TV shows, also largely biased, leading to the divided America we know. Today, nearly 70% of American people think the media is biased and cannot be trusted while in 1974, after the Watergate, the press, on the contrary, enjoyed the trust of 70% of the citizens, according to Gallup. The New York Times, which has moved significantly to the Left and embraced the “woke” revolution nearly as a crusade¹³, is barely trusted by 30% of the Republicans, compared to 50% in 2016. This is a general trend that should be reversed urgently if the US want to restore a healthy political and intellectual debate. Indeed, if journalists are not able to better grasp the significance of the Trump revolt and look for new ways in which current problems could be addressed, the crisis of Democracy will only get deeper, leaving us stuck, as the philosopher Pierre Manent states “between contempt (of the elites) and anger (of the people)”. In that case, the distrust towards the media will continue to grow, leaving the door open to alternative sources of information... and desinformation.

The challenge of Big Tech: rising controversy about their role

Among the many components of the democratic crisis we are witnessing, the challenge of Big Tech industry turning into an industrial oligarchy, empowered with the possibility to control our privacy and increasingly shape our views and beliefs, is the one of the most daunting. In theory, the internet was supposed to become a free world that would serve as an equalizer of opportunities by opening to everyone a limitless world of possibilities and increasing freedoms. However, if indeed the internet opened a huge horizon, it also brought along looming and growing dangers for our liberty, privacy, our way of life and mental sanity. The recent documentary “The Social Dilemma” has eloquently summed up the challenges of an industry which is using a technological and commercial algorithm aimed at transforming users into

products sold to commercial firms. The result is that the social networks, in the name of connecting human beings to one another, has entangled us in a web of technological devices and commercial proposals that intrude on our privacy in a truly orwellian fashion, spying on our preferences and on our daily life and then slowly building a flurry of offers of purchases, readings and videos that reinforce our prejudices instead of exposing us to different views. We are becoming slaves to the little screens, which have come to isolate us and divide us into tribes. The internet has in fact become a formidable vector of polarization, clearly a challenge for our democracies. A reality that the Californian intellectual Joel Kotkin very eloquently describes in his last book¹⁴, comparing the reign of the Tech industry to an return to the oligarchy of the Middle Ages, which threatens to disrupt the very existence of the American middle class. In a recent article¹⁵, he underlines that the Tech giants now account for nearly 40% of the value of the Standard and Poor Index, “a level of concentration unprecedented in modern history”. The very structure of the Tech industry, which is acquiring and crushing competitors and eroding anti-trust enforcement, has become a topic of worry for Americans, two thirds of whom want a break up of these monopolies. The pandemic-related shift to everything online has accelerated this process even more. The attempts by Twitter and other social media to install controls on the content of the platforms in the name of fighting extremism and fake news have generated very hot controversy. The Republicans have been particularly adamant in criticizing Twitter and Facebook for what they see as a systemic bias in favor of the Democrats. The blocking of an article carried by the New York Post, which incriminated Joe Biden’s son during the campaign, contributed to the outcry on the conservative side, leading to several tense hearings with the head of Twitter, led by Senator Ted Cruz. The censorship imposed on some tweets of the President increased the anger on the Right, but this topic also draws criticism on the libertarian left regarding freedom of speech. It will be very interesting to see how Joe Biden, who has stated his willingness to fight fake news and preserve freedom of speech, will approach this hot issue, given the close ties of the Democracy party with the donors of the Tech.

¹³ This sad trend has received growing coverage, after the departure of both the editor in chief of the Opinion pages James Bennett and the journalist Bari Weiss. See among others, bariweiss.com, resignationletter. Also « Bari Weiss, Why I left The New York Times », lepoint.fr, 11/19/20.

¹⁴ Joel Kotkin, « The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class », Encounter Books, 2020.

¹⁵ Joel Kotkin, « Why Trump’s America will live on », Spiked, 12/4/2020.

3 The transatlantic relation after Trump: an urgent need for protection and reinvention

The eerily familiar echoes of the American crisis

It is impossible to watch the American political and democratic crisis unfolding without getting a sense of eerily familiar challenges. Europe has been swept by a wind of rebellions, very much similar to the Trumpist revolt. Despite his very American “brand”, Trump has other names and shapes in Europe, whether it be “Brexit”, or Matteo Salvini, or the Gilets Jaunes. The segments of the population that support them have to a large extent stopped trusting the establishment with their destinies, attempting to turn to outsiders to solve problems they believe are not successfully addressed by the traditional governing elites, like immigration or Islamism (in the case of Brexiteers, they have nevertheless returned to the Conservative Party under the leadership of Boris Johnson, a proof that these voters are not lost for establishment parties if these parties move in their direction). According to the Cevipof statistics, 33% of the French think that Democracy is no more the best political regime, quite a frightening result. And 38% of the French under 35 say they could support a strong man that would not worry about Parliament and vote! The significant interest that Trump has generated in France in this segment of the population, from this point of view is very striking. It underlines once more the importance of understanding the significance of Trumpism. The weakening of democracy is a Western phenomenon, which has to be addressed, if we do not want to face more and more attacks on our way of life. When they see Western democracies divided and weakened, authoritarian regimes have an impetus to sow discord and take advantage of the situation, as we have seen it for instance from Russia in the hacking operations carried out during the 2016 election. The question for the transatlantic partners should, therefore, not be a willingness to repair the Western alliance by dismissing everything linked to Trump as fundamentally flawed, but to analyze the pluses and minuses of the Trump and other populists’ agenda, in order to build on their merits and formulate a better answer to the afflictions of our time. From that point of view, the opening Biden presidency offers is a much needed and expected opportunity for a thorough reassessment of the Atlantic alliance. His willingness to address the crisis of democracy by convening a summit of democracies (where Asian democracies like India, Taiwan or South Korea would have their seats) is promising. However, it should not only be a rhetorical reaffirmation of the importance of

alliances, but a search for ways to solve our internal divides and equip ourselves intellectually, politically and militarily to respond to attacks from the outside (on our electoral process through cyber attacks, on our freedoms of speech by way of intimidation etc). More importantly, the response to authoritarian challenges from Russia, China or Turkey has to go hand in hand with the reinvention of a convincing social contract inside our own societies. One of the important ways to defend our values and our way of life should be to find a way to try to propagate our norms and approaches on the big and concrete issues of trade, tech, privacy and climate on the world stage.

The Chinese technological challenge, an opportunity to strengthen the transatlantic alliance.

The nearly obsessive attention with which the whole world watched the peripetia of the American election seems to have validated the idea that the United States are still “the center of the world”. But it has not escaped anyone’s attention that while racial demonstrations and riots spread throughout America over the summer or while President Trump was spending time and energy to litigate the result of the election, blurring the picture of his opponent’s victory, an immense free exchange zone was being created in Asia, gathering 30% of the world production and 1 out of 3 consumers worldwide. “It is in the Far East that the planet is turning quicker and quicker”, was rightly noted by columnist Luc De Barochez in *Le Point*, underlining this painful contrast of situations.

It is indeed hard to overstate to what extent China has become a formidable power on the international stage. The capacity of Beijing to get out of the pandemic successfully while America is still in the throes of the virus crisis has proved the resilience of the Chinese model. For David Goldman, an expert of China, who published a remarkable book in June 2020 on the rise of China as a technological superpower¹⁶, this discrepancy represents a “Tsushima moment” for the United States, since they were taken by surprise by the transformation of China into a rival. “We still can’t believe our eyes”, he confides in an interview to *Le Figaro*. In that respect, the author explains that Trump played an important part in breaking with decades of blindness and understand-

¹⁶ David Goldman, « You will be assimilated; how the Chinese want to sinoform the world », 2020.

ing the acuteness of the challenge. After the naiveté of the post-1989 period, which saw the West surrendering most of its industrial basis to China for the sake of cheap labor, the model being that China's modernisation would lead to its democratization and would transform it in a responsible stakeholder of the international economic system, Trump was the first to denounce a model that had destroyed the West's industrial basis without transforming China into a partner with fair practices. His attempt to shift from "free trade" to fair trade was an attempt to force China to play by the rules of the WTO and to try and stop China's technological advance. However, he failed to make the next step. For a brief moment, after a period of harsh criticism of Trump among allies, it nearly seemed that an epiphany was happening, a wake up call that would lead to the launch of a new strategy towards China. After relying on "America First" - an approach too solitary to succeed - Mike Pompeo eventually organized the Quad (a coalition of Japan, India, South Korean and Vietnam) to face China. He also started to tour Europe to warn Europeans against Beijing. Worried by Chinese aggressive push in Europe (notably in Central Europe), the Europeans announced a committee for screening Chinese investments. Several countries, including Britain, decided to reverse their decision to accept Huawei's 5G technology. The hostility to the Silk Road grew. The US blocked Tik Tok from operating in America. And the pandemic seemed to have united the West even more against China.

However, it appears now that these setbacks were rather temporary and that the dependence of numerous countries on the Chinese economy has balanced this game and introduced many doubts and nuances. The Chinese have taken advantage of the pandemic to retake the initiative. The free economic zone that has just been created in Asia, is the most striking evidence of this trend. For David Goldman, this has been possible because "Chinese technological power in 5G and, more importantly, the industrial, commercial and medical applications made possible by 5G, have persuaded most of the West it cannot isolate China". "Huawei has always viewed 5G as the core of an 'ecosystem' of new technologies that 5G makes possible", he says. "As the chief technology officer of Huawei told me, the 'control point' in the world economy is the porting and storage of data in machine-readable form", explains Goldman. "If oil was the fuel of the 20th century, data will be the fuel of the 21st century", he continues. China, for example, has already digitized the medical records and sequenced the DNA of hundreds of millions of its own citizens, and Huawei expects to add the records of another half billion people outside of China during the next ten years. This sort of database will transform pharmaceutical research. Every major European pharmaceutical firm now has an AI joint venture with one of the major Chinese tech companies. It also can revolutionize manufactur-

ing and logics. "With Russia and Germany integrated into Chinese systems, Beijing will have a fourth Industrial Revolution complex that reaches from the South China Sea to the Rhine", Goldman warns, in reference to a possible upcoming decision of the German government supposedly to accept Huawei's 5G. A situation that would give the totalitarian Chinese communist regime a decisive edge to dominate a totalitarian technology.

It will be interesting to see if Biden can reverse this trend by engaging his allies. The growing bipartisan concern in Congress over dependence on Beijing for high tech gear could help the new president. Biden has not hidden that he would favor a de facto united front with Europe, Australia, Canada, Indian, Japan and other East-Asian countries against China, a goal that Mike Pompeo tried to pursue without much success in European countries, where governments were puzzled and irritated by Trump's war on tariffs. Most observers think that he will keep in place the punitive measures imposed by Trump to slow down Huawei, including domestic restrictions, crippling export controls and sanctions on its supply chain. But the success of a Biden strategy will depend on the new administration's ability to propose a credible technological alternative to Huawei's 5G. For now, this is absent. Any success on the transatlantic front should leave a space open for autonomous European moves in the digital space as well. Worried by China, but also by the astronomical weight in the digital economy of a handful of American tech giants, Europeans intend to continue to build on their effort to develop a corpus of regulations of digital markets and services (Digital Service Act) in the European space.

"I have no doubt that a credible American initiative would be most welcome in Europe, Japan, South Korea and of course Taiwan, and that our allies would want to join us. We have taken the problematic position during the past several years of discouraging our allies from using Chinese telecommunications technology without offering a competing technology of our own. But we are late! To maintain its technological edge over China, the United States would have to take dramatic action. The fact is that we have a great deal of catching up to do. To restore high-tech manufacturing, we would need the sort of tax credits and subsidies for capital-intensive industry that Asian governments provide. We would need the sort of support from the defense department that led to every important technology of the digital age, from microprocessors to the internet, and we would need a greater emphasis on mathematics and science at every level of education", comments David Goldman. In another words, America would need no less than a "missile gap" moment if it wants to avoid to be overcome rapidly by China as a superpower.

The way forward: 5 elements towards a new transatlantic relationship

- 1 After the 2020 election, important elements of Trumpism will remain in American Politics. Polarization will persist and will become one of the big challenges of the incoming Biden administration. Policy makers and representatives of civil society in the West should promote, through debates, papers and transatlantic exchange, a better understanding of “the Trumpist planet” and more generally of populist rebellions, in order to establish fruitful contacts and look to points of agreement and understanding, in order to heal our very divided societies. Such bipartisan and multinational exchanges could produce more adequate political answers to the rebellions sweeping our shores. The Conversations Tocqueville, supported by the Friedrich-Naumann Foundation for Freedom, are one policy platform for an enhanced Franco-German transatlantic dialogue in this regard.
- 2 One of the pillars of any vibrant democracy is the situation of its universities and its press, which shape the intellectual debate and the minds of rising generations. There is a need for reflection on the intellectual crisis which is developing in American and increasingly in European universities. How do we make sure that these institutions remain places of free inquiry and intellectual diversity instead of succumbing to a dangerous cancel culture that censors freethinking and promotes intolerance in the name of tolerance? How do we respond to minorities’ difficulties at the same time? The Biden administration has announced a summit of democracies in the coming months. Foundations, political leaders, think tanks and media should promote a discussion on the meaning and use of this initiative and look for ways of participation.
- 3 Police killings in minority communities and acts of violence against the police have generated a very tense and dangerous situation, both in Europe and in the US. In response, a spiral of violence has become nearly routine, which is a very worrying trend. Radical demands like “Defund” the police have ensued. Given the controversies surrounding policing, both in the US and in France, the promotion of exchanges of experience between police forces, experts and representatives of minority groups should be encouraged to improve law and order techniques and approaches.
- 4 The potential transformation of technology into an instrument of control is one of the most daunting dangers of our time. Political parties should work at making sure that serious reflection continues on the question of citizens’ privacy, which seems increasingly in question. They should also look for technological, political, civic and legislative responses to diversify the choice of internet platforms, and temper the growing role of the GAFA monopolies. They might find inspiration in going back to the Sherman act of 1890, which famously helped radically change the industrial landscape of Theodore Roosevelt’s America, by dismantling the powerful trusts of the time. The idea of a European digital champion who able to compete in the platforms’ world should also be revisited.
- 5 It is hard to overstate the growing power of China on the international stage. Its big leap to the status of technological superpower has equipped it with the capacity to dominate very soon a totalitarian technology, through 5G and other technological breakthroughs in AI, if the United States and its allies stay idle. Given the magnitude of the Chinese technological challenge, the United States and its partners should take advantage of the reset of transatlantic relations at the onset of the Biden administration to put the creation of a convincing technological alternative to Huawei 5G at the top of their agenda.

About the author



Laure Mandeville

is a Senior reporter at Le Figaro, where she has worked on Foreign Affairs for 31 years. She is currently in charge of a weekly page on Debates around the world. She spent 8 years as bureau chief in Washington and covered the Trump phenomenon extensively. She is the author « Qui est vraiment Donald Trump », Les Equateurs, 2016. She cofounded The Tocqueville Conversations, a Transatlantic conference on Democracy, with Jean Guillaume de Tocqueville.

