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‘Things are going to get uncomfortable’

Reinhard Krumm in Washington on media bubbles, the mood among Democrats and the consequences of a second Trump term for Europe

Donald Trump won the presidential election by a relatively large margin. What is the current mood in Washington?

The mood is very sombre, as the city is dominated by the Democrats. They got over 90 per cent of the vote here. Younger people in particular are very disappointed, as many feel that the core values of democracy have been at least partially called into question by Trump’s election victory. Nevertheless, the situation in the city is calm and, as far as I know, there has been no unrest.

Which issues were ultimately decisive for the outcome of the election?

It was the result of a mixture of issues, people and general sentiment. The economy played a central role, which is remarkable as it is doing well overall and many of the indicators are positive. However, high prices are weighing on people’s minds. Many remember the Trump era, when the situation was different — even if that was before the pandemic. The negative effects of inflation did not go down well with voters.

Moreover, the issue of abortion simply didn’t catch on for the Democrats, let’s be clear about that. Illegal immigration did play a role, but was not a top issue in the post-election polls. Trump has strongly criticised Kamala Harris for this, as she was responsible for border protection in the South during the Biden administration. And then there is the general mood: Joe Biden is simply very unpopular, which can be attributed above all to the high prices.

What about Trump himself?

Trump’s character didn’t play a role. What mattered more was how well he could handle the media and position himself in the public eye

over many years — a presence that Harris simply did not have. Moreover, this was possibly the first major election where the truth hardly mattered. Republican arguments, especially Trump's, were often made up of gross exaggerations and lies, but this had no impact whatsoever. Fact checks or attempts to hold him accountable were completely ineffective. Trump's media presence, which he has built up since the 1980s, and the familiarity with the person associated with it, was paramount.

It looks like the Republicans will be able to maintain their majority in the House of Representatives and have also captured the Senate. Conservative judges dominate the Supreme Court. What does this mean for US politics over the next four years?

The election to the House of Representatives is not yet decided. However, if the Republicans gain control of the presidency, the Congress and the Supreme Court, high-ranking appointments, including those of controversial candidates, will be much easier to push through. However, their majority in the Senate, like that in the House of Representatives, is unlikely to be very large. In addition, the Republican Party remains divided on some issues, such as support for Ukraine or expanding the power of the president. Some Republicans are likely to vote against such plans. For certain legislative proposals, they need a super majority of 60 votes in the Senate anyway, which they will find difficult to achieve. Although there are still some institutional hurdles, they are significantly fewer than with a divided Congress. Overall, it will be much easier for Trump to govern.

The media and polling organisations predicted a neck-and-neck race — they were way off the mark. Many Hollywood celebrities were firmly on Harris' side. How great is the alienation between the political-media complex and the general public?

This has of course been an issue for years. Polls and media forecasts were already wildly off the mark in 2016 and 2020. This time, there was great confidence that the predictions would be more accurate — a misplaced hope. The worst example was the poll in Iowa, which was completely incorrect. A key problem remains that many Trump voters do not openly express their preference in polls. There is now a broad discussion in the media about their influence: How relevant is it at all anymore for candidates to receive support from newspapers such as *The New York Times* or other leading media outlets? Do leading media still exist at all? After all, they often operate in a 'bubble' that has lost contact with the majority of Republican voters. In many cases, there is a lack of understanding in the political-media complex about the motives of the Trump electorate, and the moral

rejection of the candidate also influences the way topics are set and reported.

In addition, the highly polarised media landscape makes any exchange more difficult. While major daily newspapers are often close to the Democratic side, Republican-orientated stations or platforms, such as conservative talk radio, are often ignored or simply not taken seriously. The result is a deep alienation between the two camps, in which the respective 'other' voters are barely understood and the influence of the traditional media on the general population continues to decline.

After Biden's withdrawal, the Democrats chose Harris as their candidate in a fast-track process without a primary election. Was this a mistake in hindsight?

There is certainly a discussion about this. However, the majority of the party is of the opinion that there was hardly any other choice. For one thing, Harris was able to access the election donations for Biden in her capacity as Vice President. Using the funds for another candidate would have been very complicated. For another, the country was already in an election campaign and it was probably too late for other potential candidates; no other person was pushing themselves to the fore. Another point is that it was unclear whether this election could be won at all — and whether Harris did not make the best of the situation in the end. The party is divided on this question. Many believe that she and the campaign did an excellent job. But there are also those who say that Harris was already a rather mediocre candidate in 2019 and has now reached her limits relatively quickly. But that seems rather unfair to me. I just don't think there was more in it for her and the party.

What does a second Trump 'time-out' mean for Europe?

First of all, uncertainty. In his first term of office and during the pre-election campaign, Trump repeatedly showed that he has absolutely no interest in longer-term alliances and multilateral organisations. He considers these costly and useless for the US. It is only possible to reach an ad hoc coalition or deal with him in certain areas that is favourable to both, but especially for the US. Otherwise, things will be difficult. This applies primarily to NATO. Although a break-up is not necessarily to be expected, he could undermine the alliance through words alone and weaken it by calling Article 5, the mutual defence clause, into question.

Trump's focus is likely to be on China. His argument that the US does not have enough resources for Europe and Asia at the same time

could mean that Europe would increasingly be left to its own devices when it comes to security policy issues, including its responsibility towards Ukraine. A withdrawal or relocation of US troops from Germany to Poland would also be conceivable. In the economic sector, higher tariffs and trade barriers are to be expected, possibly also against German products. Trump has already accused Germany of blocking the import of American cars. Things are going to get uncomfortable. A return of former Trump confidants such as Richard Grenell or Mike Pompeo to important positions would also be conceivable, with a policy that is more focussed on cost-benefit considerations. Alliances that do not bring any immediate advantage from the US' perspective could become ever less important.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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