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What's at stake in the US elections

Today's election will not just determine the future of American society but also the international order at large

For almost four years now, the world had to watch the bizarre spectacle of Trump's dysfunctional presidency. Its 'climax' was reached this year when the US administration completely failed in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting crises. Trapped in the president's primitive 'America First nationalism', the once proud leader of the West did not even claim to determine or shape the global response to corona. The reputation of the US has sunk to an all-time low and international cooperation has suffered serious damage. And the US itself has felt it too.

The corona pandemic has exposed the shortcomings of the American health system, with almost a quarter of a million Americans having succumbed to the disease. High unemployment and countless business closures and bankruptcies are hitting the US workforce and middle class hard. This stands in stark contrast to the still very lucrative stock market. The growing inequality has created very different realities in the US. The resulting political damage to American democracy is already causing some commentators to speculate about the possibility of another civil war.

I think such considerations are absurd. We should rather focus our attention on the complete failure of American-style right-wing populism in the face of the crisis. The Trump administration is incapable of solving real problems or taking care of the practical needs of the population. Instead, Trump is trying to divert attention away from the real problems and his own failure by exploiting emotional distress to further divide the country.

Biden's agenda

Today, America has the opportunity to vote out Trump and make his Democratic challenger president. Joe Biden may not seem a particularly inspiring candidate. But a Biden presidency is certainly promising. Together with Kamala Harris, he is running on a very progressive platform, promising policies with a sense of proportion and common

sense that will change society for the better. In concrete terms, he wants to ease the burden on households with low and middle incomes.

From a European perspective, it is particularly interesting to see how American foreign policy will develop.

While the majority of left-wing social democrats were disappointed that Biden won the nomination, he went through a steep learning curve during the election campaign. Early on, he made clear that wanted to forge the broadest possible alliance to beat Donald Trump. Accordingly, he invited all currents and camps of the Democratic Party and developed a forward-looking and comprehensive election programme for the Democrats. 'United' is his battle cry.

Biden also wants to bring the country together. Not only does he want to bring dignity and decency back into the White House, he also stands for a reliable and honest policy. It is no longer a question of just going back to how it was before Trump's election victory. American society and the international environment have changed too much since then.

The life risks of illness and unemployment should be better covered; access to education and affordable housing should be improved; and care and early education should be strongly promoted so that all families can participate. Major economic stimulus packages are to make the US fit for the future and promote the transformation of industrial society.

A pivot back to Europe

The Biden-Harris agenda is not a revolution. But it is feasible and can deliver quick results. Especially if the Democrats succeed today not only in defending their majority in the House of Representatives, but also in winning the Senate majority. Biden would bring a lot of political experience to his presidency and he knows how to implement policy in the legislative process.

From a European perspective, it is particularly interesting to see how American foreign policy will develop. This actually didn't play a role in the election campaign, but Biden always emphasised how much the position of the US in the world is close to his heart. With a Biden administration, a credible commitment to democracy and an international order of law would once again be possible.

The last four years in the

Under Biden there will also be a US pivot back to Europe – not to protect Europe, but to work

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with the EU and European countries to explore a new transatlantic relationship. Biden will be concerned with defending an international order based on international rules, with democracies setting the tone. He will expect proposals from Europe as to what they want to contribute to the stabilisation and maintenance of this order and how to work together to counter disruption.

Protecting the international order

In Washington, an understanding is developing that American relations with Europe are not just about military relations or economic interests, but that other, supposedly 'softer' issues are also important – because they are clearly existential: the climate crisis, dealing with corona and future pandemics, as well as working conditions and social welfare. A new transatlantic trade agreement could set not only trade standards but also social and consumer standards.

The overhaul of dysfunctional multilateral institutions such as the World Health Organisation or the World Trade Organisation would be another potential area for cooperation. Imagine what could have happened in January 2020 if the US, the EU and China had honestly exchanged views on the novel coronavirus and perhaps even developed common solutions to deal with the crisis.

The last four years in the US have been a disastrous flirt with right-wing populism and extremism. Today, we will very likely have the opportunity to heal the wounds in American democracy and society and to reinvent the transatlantic partnership beyond defence cooperation and economics.



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