

The Trump and Sanders Phenomena

by Edit Inotai

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Mainstream was yesterday, today the stage belongs to anti-establishment politicians on both sides of the Atlantic. American commentators are usually puzzled by the rise of populist - radical right or left - politicians in the European Union, while Europeans are horrified by the US presidential election campaign, especially by the so-called Trump phenomenon. Like it or not, the trends are similar.

The 2016 US election campaign is indeed extraordinary in many respects. The two leading candidates - Hillary Clinton on the Democratic and Donald Trump on the Republican side - are both viewed unfavorably by the majority of Americans. Mrs. Clinton has the worst rating of any Democratic candidate in the past 30 years, writes the BBC. Mr. Trump's rating is even lower, with 67 % of the voters rejecting him, according to a survey of The Washington Post and ABC News. Yet the business mogul and billionaire successfully portrays himself as the voice of the silent majority, disillusioned by the political elite, career politicians and Washington as such. Mrs. Clinton's surprisingly stiff rival, Bernie Sanders is another candidate riding on the anti-establishment feeling. Somewhat paradoxically, the 74-year-old Sanders is the longest serving independent in the US Senate, but campaigning for a Democratic nomination - highly unusual in itself. Both "outsiders" are doing surprisingly well, Trump having secured 739 delegates and is in fact the only Republican candidate who still has a chance to reach the magical 1237 delegates before the Republican Convention. Sanders has 1011 delegates of the required 2383 - lagging behind Hillary Clinton, but making the life of the previous First Lady and Secretary of State astonishingly hard.

The world is watching with certain disbelief as the political center is losing ground and politics becomes more polarized, the political discourse gets harsher overseas. Politicians and commentators are speculating whether the US remains a reliable and predictable ally in the international arena, takes a more interventionist, or just on the contrary, an isolationist stance? Interestingly, Europe usually evaluates American politics and presidents according to their foreign and military policies, but finds it difficult to understand and interpret the American domestic politics underlining the foreign agenda.

Insecurity and anger

But what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic? One answer could be that the American society is in transformation and many voters are deeply disillusioned, feeling the American dream shattered. Although the economy has recovered much faster than in Europe after the 2009 crisis, and unemployment fell from 10% to 5% (2015), many middle and working class families do not feel any progress. Household incomes have stagnated in the last 15 years - as William Galston from Brookings Institute points out. The demographic and ethnic changes are baffling and for many, frightening.

According to Pew Research, forty years ago more than 80 % of the US population consisted of non-Hispanic white people, in 2015 the ratio was only 62 %, and if the current trends prevail, in 2055 they will make up less than 50 percent. “Some older, whiter voters do not recognize the country they grew up in”- says Paul Taylor, author of *The New America*, to BBC. Immigration, especially illegal immigration has become a hotly debated issue overseas, prompting Donald Trump to suggest banning all Muslims out of the country and deporting 11 million illegal immigrants. But if you hunted down the enemy outside, there is still the enemy inside: these are the federal institutions, the gridlock in Congress, a testimony of the failure of mainstream politics and the two major parties. Even in foreign policy, the status of being a superpower is being questioned. A 2013 Pew Research reveals that 70% of Americans think the US is losing respect internationally. Roberto Suro from the University of Southern California argues that there is a feeling that the country has been at war ever since 9/11, but Washington does not really know what it wants and things are not working out well at all.

All this contributes to the general insecurity of the globalized and increasingly digitalized world, where jobs are no longer guaranteed and skills fade away quickly. For 40 percent of Americans, work means a series of part-time, temporary, on-call and contract jobs, writes *The Economist*. People need to face insecurity, stress and anxiety on a daily basis. Traditional political parties are losing ground as a growing number of voters look for alternatives. The expectations are diverse, and range from a revolutionary solution to an authoritarian model. Bernie Sanders is actually shaking the foundations of the system, advocating a Nordic model, with universal health care and paid leave for parents. Donald Trump proposes the authoritarian way, promising to Make America Great again, as a strong leader, who finally gets the house in order.

The most unusual challengers

Yet there are some similarities: both Trump and Sanders reject the influence of major companies and key investors. Transparency of campaign funding is a long-term issue of the US and global politics. Both candidates are promising that they will not let “big money” influence them, and chose alternative financing for their campaign, therefore portray themselves clean and independent. On the other hand, Hillary Clinton has been seen - even by Democrats - as the politician financed by the Wall Street, making her the candidate who would rather defend and not challenge the status quo.

Both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump are ready to challenge political correctness and traditions. Sanders has gone further in social questions than any of his predecessors. Campaigning for social justice had sounded like a communist threat and often became a political trap - but only prior to Sanders. The growing distrust and insecurity of the working class and younger generations overwrote these traditions. Sanders may sound oddly leftist in the US, but he is especially popular among the young generation, claiming he is the only real authentic candidate. Hillary Clinton is having a credibility problem when facing Sanders: although her professional experience is appreciated, she is not seen as an authentic, honest politician. It is indeed difficult to promise changes and reforms when you have been in politics for 30 years and are viewed as a member of the elite.

Trump, on the other hand, is the state-of-the-art populist and has no problem with it. He is the one offering simple answers and a strong hand, building his political credo on the premise that running a country should not differ from running a company. Trump appeals to many non-traditional Republican voters: the vast majority of them supports tax increases for the rich, and take leftist positions when it comes to tuition fees or increasing minimal wage. He is for more social spending and against free trade agreements, one might even wonder if he is really a Democrat in a disguise? However, in identity politics or cultural issues, like immigration, same sex marriage, gun control or abortion, Trump's supporters are taking a significantly more conservative position than mainstream Republicans. He is bringing in the frustrated, radical, angry layers of the society, but alienating the political center. The Republicans face a serious dilemma whether to send Trump into the race or push for a more centrist candidate, but then lose Trump's camp? In addition, he has a clear problem attracting women voters, who find his macho attitude anything but trendy, and his controversial sentences on abortion recently have just added fuel to the fire.

International implications

Although the outcome of the elections is still very unpredictable, many politicians in Europe would hope for Hillary Clinton's victory, because she is known, she is predictable. and she has international experience. In that sense, she is an exception, US presidential candidates usually do not show either special interest nor expertise in foreign policy. Although Clinton is favored by many world powers, it is often forgotten, that she is one of the most hawkish politicians of the Democrats. She is advocating a more active involvement in the world's conflict zones (most notably in Syria) and would keep the US troops in Afghanistan. When she is faithful to her heritage as Secretary of State, she would build her policy on the combination of soft and hard powers, and balance between a strong human rights agenda and a pragmatic approach. Bernie Sanders would follow more Barack Obama's careful withdrawal from conflict zones, a more traditional Democrat approach.

The big puzzle is of course Donald Trump, whose potential presidency is already considered one of the top ten risks facing the world, according to the European Intelligence Unit. Trump has just given two major interviews to convince the public that he would be able to handle international affairs. But his ideas are strikingly pre-World War 2, when talking about cutting back on US support to Korea and Japan, and calling NATO a rather obsolete institution, paid mostly by the US, whereas Germany and the others are basically free-riders. One of his most frightening ideas was about nuclear proliferation, suggesting that the world could be safer with more nuclear weapons. He had also found kind words for Russian President Vladimir Putin and apparently is ready to give him a lead on Syria. Obviously, campaigning is not governing, but in an unstable, exceedingly multipolar global environment having an unpredictable US President would still add to the troubles.



As for Hungary, Budapest would be in a difficult position facing Mrs. Clinton as the next US President. Personal and political relations are both problematic between Mrs. Clinton and the current Hungarian government. Although the Hungarian support for the war against ISIS has been and will be an important anchor, nobody has forgotten that as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton and her team criticized the government on democracy and freedom rights. A pragmatic approach could help, but an invitation to the White House would not be likely. A President Trump (or much rather, anybody from the Republicans) could sound like good news for the current Hungarian government, but just on the short run.

Our ninth Euro-Atlantic Café will focus on the US presidential primaries, the profile and the discourse of the potential candidates, and the background of the Sanders and Trump phenomena. Are the anti-elite, anti-establishment candidates just a temporary phenomenon? Is there perhaps a need for a more colorful, diverse party-landscape in the US? What are the major fears, motivations and expectations of the voters in the 2016 elections? What can be the consequence of the polarization of the society, is it still possible to bridge the gaps? Are we facing a disintegration of the society, and as a consequence, the disintegration of the party system? Where is the US heading domestically and internationally? And what can Europe expect (or fear) after the 2016 elections?

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