

U.S. Presidential Election – Domestic and Global Perspectives

In October 2016, there was no other political topic that electrified media and society in the U.S., Germany and all other areas of the world more than the upcoming U.S. presidential election. Therefore, the panel about the election was greatly anticipated by all DAJV members. Finally, the panel was opened by chairwomen of the event and DAJV board member Dr. Jutta Stender-Vorwachs on Friday (October 14th) at 3 p.m. in a noticeable crowded conference room at Harvard Law School. Dr. Stender-Vorwachs gave a brief introduction to the topic and the panel members. Moderator was the director of the Bertelsmann Foundation and media expert Irene Braam from Washington D.C. The other panel members were: Professor Russell Miller, an expert in comparative law and international law at Washington and Lee University. Martin Apfel, an independent consultant with broad experience in the automotive sector, and the U.S. correspondent of the German newspaper "Die Zeit" Kerstin Kohlenberg. Furthermore, the German-American journalist and political scientist Cathryn Cluever, who is the founding executive director of the Future of Diplomacy Project at the Harvard Kennedy School. Last but not least, there was Martin Bialecki, manager of the Northern American office of the biggest German press agency dpa, and highly reputable Bostonian lawyer and director of the Boston Warburg Chapter of the American Council on Germany Marc Redlich.

The first question that was posed to the panel by moderator Braam concerned the election and foreign relations: How will the election effect U.S. foreign relations, especially the relations to the European Union? From the beginning, the panelists slightly moved away from this initial question and addressed the uniqueness of the election in a broader regard. As one of the first speakers, Cathryn Cluever made a very insightful statement about all the historic aspects of the upcoming election. She highlighted particularly three unique characteristics: Both candidates from the big parties are remarkable unpopular among the U.S. population. One of the presidential candidates, Donald Trump, expressed doubts about the democratic foundation of the U.S. Finally, Trump's promise, to instruct the attorney general to appoint a special prosecutor on Hillary Clinton's affairs, would be the first time that a sitting president ordered an attorney general to use federal power to prosecute a political opponent. Towards the end of the discussion, Marc Redlich returned to the initial question. He stated that the election is the most important vote for the transatlantic alliance ever since. To support his point of view, he named Trump's fundamental questions regarding NATO and his demands to allied countries to pay for U.S. military protection. Following this first round of discussion, moderator Braam raised a question of hypothetical nature to the panelists. What can the political establishment of the Democratic Party do, to win back Trump voters if Hillary Clinton wins the election? During the arising debate, all panelists agreed on one point: Winning back frustrated Trump voters will be a difficult task for the establishment, which is unlikely to be fulfilled in the near future. Kerstin Kohlenberg doubted that Clinton's political program is sufficient for this challenge because it doesn't address the everyday problems of white lower class males, who make up the very center of Trump supporters. In the course of the discussion, Cathryn Cluever also put a focus on the internal problems of the Democratic Party such as the dislike of Bernie Sanders supporters towards Hillary Clinton. According to Cluever, solving these internal problems will be at the center of attention for the party leadership instead of making peace with Republican Party voters.

Following Irene Braam's second question, the audience had the opportunity to pose questions directly to the panel members. German DAJV member Dr. Wilske used this opportunity to put forward a question, which was contrary to the previous course of the discussion and made the audience listen attentively. He asked with a wink: What chances do you see in Donald Trump becoming a solid president if he wins the election? In this regard, he named Ronald Reagan as an

example, who was doubted before his election but turned out to be a reliable president in the eyes of most. Professor Russell Miller was the first panelist, who dealt with this question. He had a clear answer: No. He rather described a Trump Presidency as a challenging test for the U.S. Constitution and the U.S. state structure. The other panelists were just as skeptical as Professor Miller was but the reasoning slightly differed. Martin Apfel's doubts, for example, weren't only connected to the person of Donald Trump but also to his political environment and the opposition of the Democratic Party. Further questions from the audience concerned the constitutionality of an electoral duty in the U.S. and the possible ways of restructuring the Republican Party if Trump's run to the White House fails. The last question from the audience coincidentally matched the final third question from moderator Braam: How does the media coverage influence the election? According to Martin Bialecki, the contemporary media coverage goes into the favor of Donald Trump because he is, due to his spectacular statements and behavior, ever-present in every kind of media. In this regard, Kerstin Kohlenberg explained the main differences between U.S. and German media coverage of events like the presidential election. She pointed out that U.S. news agencies only report on facts, whereas the German media also include valuations into their coverage. Thereafter, Professor Stender-Vorwachs thanked the panelists for the insightful and exciting discussion and ended the panel.

In hindsight, the panel about the U.S. presidential election truly matched all my high expectations. The different backgrounds of the panelists guaranteed a discussion on various levels, from a legal to an economical and from an U.S. to European point of view. Furthermore, the panelists were very dedicated and had great expertise in the topic, which resulted in open-minded and informative discussions. My highlights were, on the one hand, the very passionate statements from Cathryn Cluever regarding the dangers for U.S. democracy in case of an electoral victory by Donald Trump. On the other hand, the humorous style of speaking of Mr. Apfel, which loosened the atmosphere and brought a smile on the face of the other panelists as well as the audience. My only point of criticism was the one-sided position of the panelists against candidate Trump, which led to an almost frictionless course of discussion. Nevertheless, the event was definitely worth a visit and created much cause for thought. Therefore, the election and the content of the panel were still discussed between DAJV members later on at the gala dinner and even during the next days of the conference.

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