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6. Increasingly brittle?

US-perceptions of the EU after Brexit and their impact on EU-US relations

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***Abstract:** The US and the EU, the world's most closely connected entities regarding economics, security and politics, have worked hand in hand to build and maintain the liberal world order. Yet, the US also maintains a special relationship with the UK. This twofold singularity of the transatlantic relationship has suffered two severe shocks in 2016: the British decision to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump as President of the US. How have these shocks, particularly Brexit, affected US perceptions of the EU and the transatlantic relationship? This chapter investigates the US political elite's perception of Brexit and the "new EU-27" in 2016 and 2017. Thus, it takes into account the administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump as well as expertise provided by the respective opinion-forming think tanks, the Brookings Institute (for Obama) and the Heritage Foundation (for Trump). We find an extreme politicization of the transatlantic relationship, which had previously enjoyed bipartisan support. While the democrat/liberal position rejects Brexit and pledges continued partnership with the EU, the Trump administration and its republican supporters understand Brexit as a confirmation of a realist worldview that prefers national sovereignty to cooperation and sees the EU as a competitor in a zero-sum game.*

Introduction

As early as summer 2016, observers have noted the portentous parallels between the British decision to leave the European Union (EU) and the ideology of the then presidential candidate Donald Trump (Outhwaite 2017; Reeves 2016b). Populist strategies, rising nationalism and the rejection of globalization are blamed for the electoral success of both, the Leave campaign and the winner of the Republican party primaries. For transatlantic relations, this has apparently ushered in a double crisis. Firstly, the United Kingdom (UK) enjoys a special relationship with the US in many respects and served as the US' bridgehead and advocate inside the EU. The UK's departure from the Union has a potential to impact the EU-US relationship. Secondly, President Trump has run his campaign on the motto "America First", and since taking office, retreated from numerous multilateral arrangements. For some commentators, Trump's actions signal the US' turning away from the liberal world order, which the US has designed and maintained together with its European allies.

Still, the US are arguably the EU's most important partner. Studying the influence of Brexit on transatlantic relations is therefore a top priority for anyone who aims to understand the changing Europe in a changing world and global perceptions of the EU affected by partial disintegration. This chapter attempts to assess how the manifold uncertainties triggered by the Brexit vote and the prolonged and faltering EU-UK negotiations have influenced the way US political elites perceive the EU. Have these perceptions changed since the start of the Brexit referendum campaign and if so, in what way? How do US elites perceive Brexit to impact the EU's legitimacy, credibility and/or coherence? How may US perceptions of the EU in the context of Brexit influence the bi-lateral relationship with the EU? What foreign policy options do the US consider as a result of Brexit?

To answer these questions, this chapter first reviews the development of the transatlantic partnership since World War II, before engaging in a *tour d'horizon* of EU perception research in the US. We then present the data and method underlying our subsequent analysis. Finally, we discuss our results in the light of the analytical positions elaborated in the introduction to this volume (Speyer et al. 2020) and draw some conclusions from our analysis.

US-EU relations before Brexit

Since the end of World War II, the alliance between the US and the EU has been a crucial constant in international relations. It has formed the basis of the liberal world order – an order which rests on a belief in the virtues of democracy, human rights and multilateral cooperation. Both entities have been each other's most important trade and investment partners and actively participated in NATO. The Alliance has been a (highly successful) backbone of the Western security community (Ruggie 1998: 229) however not without frictions (McGuire and Smith 2008; Ryan 2003). While the US have repeatedly alienated its European allies by unilateral moves (Fehl 2011), the EU's reluctance to use military power has been met with incredulity and, sometimes, dismay, across the Atlantic (Kagan 2003: 3).

Nonetheless, prior to the election of Donald Trump, the transatlantic partnership has enjoyed bipartisan support in the US: Republican and Democrat administrations alike have played a vital part in enabling European integration, both by speeding up the post-war economic recovery of Western Europe through the Marshall Plan and by encouraging its transatlantic partners to seek reconciliation and partnership with the defeated Germany (Dinan 2010: 571; Ryan 2003: 53-62). Following the events of 1989, then US President George Bush was instrumental in the reunification of Germany and pushed for the accession of post-communist Eastern European states into the EU and NATO (Cox and Hurst 2002). Yet, the establishment of the single market, the common currency, the drafting of a European constitution, and the development of a European Security and Defence Policy have been met with reluctance by some US elites (Cimbalo 2004).

During the Cold War, the US had a vital security interest in the stability of Western Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet Union. With the recent deterioration of the relations between the West and Putin's Russia, geopolitical considerations have again gained in prominence, particularly inside NATO (Mead 2014). While this development has for quite some time been accompanied by the US demand for increased military spending by their European partners, the current US President's undiplomatic approach to this issue culminated in his threat to leave NATO (Harding 2018).

Undeniably, this statement has left not only the European allies shocked: Fear about the crisis of the transatlantic relationship - and the entire liberal world order - is lingering (Fehl and Thimm 2019).

The EU and the US can be said to “enjoy the most integrated economic relationship in the world” (EC 2018). In terms of total trade, the EU28 constitutes the US’ most important trading partner, accounting for 18.5% of the countries’ imports and exports and outnumbering China (16.5%). Moreover, total US investment in the EU is three times higher than in the whole of Asia (EC 2018). Nevertheless, President Trump has attacked these long-standing and close economic ties with his threat to impose tariffs (for example, on steel and aluminium as well as automobiles) (Liesenhoff 2018).

The relationship between the US and the UK has long been called “special” (e.g. Wallace and Phillips 2009). The UK is the US’ most important trading partner inside the EU. The country rates as the fifth important destination for US exports. Moreover, the UK is the US’ largest source for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), while US investment in the UK is second only to investments emanating from the rest of the EU (Walker and Palumbo 2018). US firms have relied on the UK as a bridgehead to enter the single market. In the early years of European integration, Britain opposed US wishes for the unification of the continent under British leadership (Dell 1995: 3-4). Ever since the country joined the European Community in 1973, it has been a vocal advocate for US interests, such as trade liberalisation, inside the EU (Oliver and Williams 2016: 553-555). Furthermore, the UK remains the US’ crucial ally in matters of security, defence and counterterrorism, as exemplified by the intensive collaboration of American and British intelligence services within the “Five Eyes” network (Tossini 2017). All in all, most analysts agree that the US has in many issue-areas been closer to the UK than to the EU (Wallace and Phillips 2009).

The EU through US-American eyes: State of the Art of EU-Perceptions research

Robert Kagan’s 2003 analogy “American’s are from Mars and Europeans from Venus” succinctly summarizes US perceptions of the EU. This popularized and polemical metaphor is largely supported

by a modest, yet growing number of studies of US perceptions of the EU. These studies rely on a broad set of different sources and take into account policy-making elites (Rydlinski 2019) as well as economic elites, the media and public opinion (Dominguez and Larivé 2018; Sperling 2010; Stivachtis 2012).

Confirming Kagan's metaphor, Americans perceive the EU as peace-loving (Thimm 2013: 91) and a normative force (Rydlinski 2019; Sperling 2010: 28) but as lacking hard power and military clout (Eliasson 2010: 119-139). As a result, the EU was sometimes seen to get free rides on US security guarantees (Brimmer 2007: 20; Fernández Sola 2010: 214). While seen as a trustworthy but "modest political actor", the EU's importance as an "economic powerhouse" (Dominguez and Larivé 2018: 235) is widely acknowledged by US elites and the general population alike. Yet, it is also seen as overly bureaucratic and uncompetitive, an image which has been reinvigorated by the recent negotiations of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) (Hadfield 2017: 299; Sperling 2010: 40-48).

These rather stereotypical images are largely stemming from the US audiences' extremely low level of awareness and knowledge of the EU (Braungart and Braungart 1992; Sperling 2010 ; Stivachtis 2012: 74). Moreover, public perceptions of the EU in the US are highly susceptible to the influences of the media which focus on rare, but dramatic events such as crises (Dominguez and Larivé 2018). In addition, political and economic elites as well as the media still prioritise reports of and relations with individual European nation states rather than the EU as supranational entity (Sperling 2010). Thimm (2013: 91) found that domestic political orientations and ideological predispositions also have an important bearing on US perceptions of the EU: while conservative Americans tend to be skeptical about the EU, liberal Americans are more open-minded and positive towards it.

Recent studies find the EU's perceived importance and capability to be declining (Eliasson 2010; Rydlinski 2019). Analyses by various (especially conservative) US think tanks increasingly question

the EU's capability of dealing with its external crises (such as the Russia-Ukraine crisis) on its own and believe its influence internationally is slowly waning (Bromund 2016b; Rohac 2016; Patrick 2016). Indeed, this image of "deterioration" has become particularly pronounced since the election of Donald Trump as US President. While inter-party divides between Democrats and Republicans may fuel this development (Dominguez and Larivé 2018: 254), these images could also be influenced by EU-specific factors, namely the enormous uncertainties around the UK's exit from the EU and the erratic and prolonged Brexit negotiations.

Method

Our study aims to analyse the perceptions of the EU by US political elites, namely the President as head of the executive and think tanks as major opinion formers among politicians, in the light of the uncertainties triggered by the UK's decision to leave the EU. We focus on elite perceptions contending that "it is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision-makers' beliefs about the world and their images of others" (Jervis 1976: 28). In the case of the US, such an analysis is necessarily informed by the country's two-party political system. As it "should be based upon a set of texts by different people presumed [...] to be authorized speakers/writers of a dominant discourse or to think and act within alternative discourses" (Milliken 1999: 233), the most obvious speaker is naturally the President himself. In addition, US-American politics are heavily influenced by the expertise provided by think tanks. Most of them are ideologically partisan and can thus be associated with Democrat or Republican leanings (McGann 2007).¹

These considerations guided our research design. This analysis will deal with statements on Brexit issued by Presidents Obama and Trump² as well as commentaries, op-eds and testimonies commissioned by two think tanks, which are argued here to be very closely linked to the respective administrations: the liberal *Brookings Institute* with links to Obama and the conservative *Heritage Foundation* with links to Trump.³ As a time frame, we chose 2016 and 2017. This period includes the change in the US administration, and specifically the last year of Obama's and the first year of Trump's presidency. Moreover, this period stretches across the Brexit referendum campaign and vote, the triggering of Article

50 TEU by the UK and the beginning and initial stalling of the EU-UK ‘divorce’ negotiations. Hence, the period captures key uncertainties associated with Brexit in the context of the changing leadership in the US.

Our analysis of the US political discourses is inspired by Milliken’s (1999) predicate analysis, which is particularly suitable for “analysing the social construction of space and political reasoning” (Milliken 1999: 232). Since discourses are systems of signification which construct social realities, the relationship in which terms are placed as well as the use of binary oppositions matter. The language practices of predication, “the verbs, adverbs and adjectives that attach to nouns” (Milliken 1999: 232) are crucial as they construct the meaning, capabilities or character of the ‘things’ in the discourse. Moreover, “[...] in implicit or explicit parallels and contrasts, other things (other subjects) will also be labelled” (Milliken 1999: 232). Thus, predicate analysis is especially suitable to discover, analyse and oppose contradictory positions as well as explicit or implicit oppositions (Milliken 1999: 234).

As Brexit fundamentally upsets the relationship between the UK and Europe, as well as transatlantic relations, predicate analysis is a particularly promising tool for investigating the image of Brexit, the ‘new EU-27’ and transatlantic relations as conceived by US political elites. Thus, we analyse the attributes assigned to the terms *Brexit*, *Britain/UK* and *EU/Europe* with the aim of identifying the dominant representations and narratives. Our analysis also borrows from content analysis (such as the analysis of metaphors, see Carta 2014; Masoudi 2019) to assess US elites’ narratives of the EU affected by Brexit.⁴

Analysis

The most glaring finding of our analysis is the stark contrast between the liberal/Democratic view communicated by the Brookings Institute and Obama and the conservative/Republican representation of the EU by the Heritage Foundation and Trump. Indeed, the studied texts reveal four opposing topoi/images of the EU. The EU is portrayed as: (1) providing economic freedom and fostering growth vs. economically anti-liberal, (2) a peacemaker and norm-promoter vs. a subjugating power and even an

oppressor, (3) a credible and legitimate role model for regional integration vs. a hypocritical anti-democratic elite project, and (4) crises-ridden, but not beyond hope vs. a status-quo, backward-looking and even declining power.

President Obama and the Brookings Institute are rather guarded in their analyses, openly admitting the EU's crises and faults, while valuing its importance for transatlantic relations and world politics. Thus, the liberal commentaries are constructive, giving policy advice on how to remedy transatlantic relations, for which Brexit is described as "the worst news yet" (Talbott 2016). Conversely, the conservative opinions we canvassed vilify the EU and applaud, even urge, its anticipated disintegration and demise. Brexit is consequently praised as a "tremendous opportunity" (Gardiner 2016, 2017a; Bromund 2016f, 2017a, 2017b), even a "wonderful thing" (Trump 2017a), which will reinforce the US-UK special relationship (Bromund 2016f, 2017a; Trump 2017a). The remainder of this chapter dissects the four contrasting attributes assigned to the EU by US political elites.

(1) *The EU is providing economic freedom and fostering growth vs. the EU is economically anti-liberal*

The Brookings commentaries, as well as President Obama, generally acknowledged the EU's economic importance and liberal set-up. The deeply intertwined trade and investment partnership has enabled the US and the EU to "us[e] and deploy [...] economic power, such as sanctions" in a joint effort (Wright 2017). Indeed, Barack Obama is convinced that being part of the EU brings economic freedom and fosters growth (2016a, c). Hence, he warns that by leaving the EU, the UK would mistake self-imposed isolation for economic freedom and that no other trade agreement could ever replace the "extraordinary benefits" (2016a) provided by the Single Market. It would thus be insensible for the UK to trade these benefits for an utterly insecure economic outlook (Obama 2016a). According to this liberal perspective, economic integration and cooperation yields absolute gains for the US, the EU and the UK. Brexit constitutes a threat to the global economy and will ultimately leave all parties worse off (Klein 2016a, b; Reeves 2016c, Obama 2016c). Klein (2016b) goes as far as to diagnose an "immediate impact on prosperity" of the referendum result). Meanwhile, the image of the EU as an economic powerhouse seems to have remained unchallenged by Brexit. When it came to the question of who would be given

priority to negotiate new trade agreements with the US, Obama, in stark contrast to Trump's later remarks, warned that Britain would be "at the back of the queue" (Obama 2016a), making the EU his number one priority.

In contrast, the Heritage commentators and President Trump portray the EU as an obstacle to free trade as it burdens its member states with "unnecessary regulatory impediments" (Abbot 2017). It thereby constrains these countries' economic vitality and capacity to adopt their economies to future demands such as digitalization (Bromund 2017b). Hence, the EU is "a hidebound, anti-growth body" (Gonzalez and Clark 2017), which is declining, desperately "scrambling to keep up with the catastrophes that its own misguided policies are causing" (Bromund 2016b, 2016f). With the Brexit decision, the UK has finally broken free of these bonds to "advance the cause of economic freedom" (Abbot 2017; cf. Trump 2017a) in the face of an EU that even hinders and discredits free trade, presenting itself as a promoter of a free market while maintaining a highly protectionist (agricultural) policy. As a result, the EU is framed as an unfair player in world trade whom many Americans would like to give "one in the eye by doing a [free trade] deal with Britain" (Bromund 2017a). Such a deal would be based on fairness, sovereignty and national interest and thus benefit both the US and the UK (Bromund 2016f). By contrast, the economic relationship with the EU seems to be marked by dire competition and zero-sum games.

(2) *The EU is a peacemaker and norm-promoter vs. the EU is a subjugating power, even an oppressor*

President Obama and the Brookings Institution regard the EU as a benign soft power, a norm promoter. As such, the EU is presented to wield its (positive) influence internationally by leading by example, most notably in areas such as climate protection or preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons (Obama 2016b, c). In this context, Talbott (2016) calls the Union an "example to other parts of the globe" because it has contributed towards ensuring a "zone of peace, based on democracy, open societies and borders, and a rule-based international order". The prospect of Brexit endangers these invaluable achievements, particularly in Northern Ireland (Wright 2017). The withdrawal of the US as a global hegemon under Trump's presidency has even triggered a call for stronger EU "leadership in 'softer'

foreign policy” (Garavoglia 2017). With its exit from the EU, the UK bereaves itself of the chance of being part of a Union that has so far “leverage[d] UK power” (Obama 2016a).

In stark contrast, Trump and the Heritage Foundation accuse the EU of shackling its member states and “trampling upon” their power (Gardiner 2016, 2017c; Trump 2017a). It has “forced itself into every nook and cranny” of life (Bromund 2017b) and pursues “the progressive eradication of sovereign state powers” (Bromund 2016b). The Union is thereby given an almost totalitarian appeal. In this context, it is especially revealing that when Trump made an official visit to the EU and attended the G20 summit in Germany in 2017, the administration chose the Polish capital Warsaw for the President’s only speech (Gardiner 2017c). Throughout this speech, President Trump (2017b) drew up the Polish history of resistance against oppressors, including (if not directly mentioning) the current stand-off against the EU over the rule of law, as an example for the freedom-loving peoples of the West to whom the pooling of sovereignty is culturally alien. To be able to “lead again” (Gardiner 2017b), Britain has to “extricate” (Gardiner 2017a) itself from the EU’s clutches. This will be “a blessing to the world” (Trump 2017a). The EU is trying with all its might to impede the realization of Brexit. Its bad faith is easily apparent in the Brexit negotiations (Bromund 2016f; Gardiner 2017a), but also in its unacceptable arrogance towards US President Trump (Dale 2017). Interestingly, this representation suggests that it is solely the bureaucratic Commission, not the remaining member states, which is equated with the EU and held responsible for the EU’s stance in the negotiations.

(3) *The EU is a credible and legitimate role model for regional integration vs. the EU is a hypocritical anti-democratic elite project*

Brookings affiliates bemoan that the UK has experienced an “amateurish, disastrous session of British political history” (Reeves 2016d). The EU, by contrast, has reasserted itself as a coherent actor in the Brexit negotiations (Wright 2017). Brexit, as possibly “contagious” (Talbott 2016), is likened to a disease rather than constituting the epitome of democracy. Some commentators warn that Russia might have influenced the referendum result in a quest to undermine the EU and, ultimately, the entire West (Stelzenmüller 2017; Talbott 2016; Wright 2017). Moreover, liberal observers worry about increased

Chinese involvement in the EU, which could be eased by European discord (Le Corre 2016, 2017; Wright 2017). In meeting these challenges, regional integration is thus perceived as Europe's most valuable asset, an “accomplishment, [which] remains one of the greatest political and economic achievements of modern times” (Obama 2016c). Furthermore, President Obama stresses that the EU and the US share the values of democracy, peace and liberty. Thanks to this kinship, the EU qualifies as a credible and legitimate partner, irrespective of Brexit ranking among the US’ “closest friends in the world” (2016a, b, c).

By contrast, it is the “unelected” (Gardiner, 2016) “bureaucrats in Brussels” (Gonzalez and Clark 2017) and the “EU’s imperial judiciary” (Bromund 2016a) who, according to the image invoked by the Heritage Foundation, make the EU’s rules in an essentially anti-democratic fashion. Bromund (2016c) goes as far as to call the EU a “faraway autocracy”. Together with companies and the “political and media elite” (Gardiner 2017b), the Brussels-based bureaucrats are the ones to profit from European integration. This small group of Europhiles egoistically promotes their private interest to the detriment of the “working class”, which is to mean the vast majority. In that sense, the result of the British referendum was not surprising: if given the chance, Bromund (2017c) intimates, all sensible European peoples would opt for national sovereignty and control, i.e. for an exit from the EU.

This image of the EU as a parasitic and unresponsive elite project ties in well with the populist ideology advanced by Trump’s presidential campaign (Mudde 2004: 543). Trump (2017a) applauds the British government (and his own administration) for being “responsive to everyday working people” and “represent[ing] their own citizens”. Meanwhile, he identifies “burgeoning bureaucracy” as one of three threats to Western civilization, on a par with Islamic terrorism and cyberwarfare. “If left unchecked, these forces will undermine our courage, sap our spirit, and weaken our will to defend ourselves and our societies” (Trump, 2017b). Concisely, President Trump and the Heritage Foundation accuse the EU of heralding democracy while being essentially anti-democratic, bureaucratic and elitist. This alleged hypocrisy also applies to the EU’s commitment to free trade, internationalism and the fight against populism. “Being in favor of the EU is a way of virtue signaling that you are open-minded and liberal, even if in practice the EU is not” (Bromund 2017b).

(5) *The EU is crisis-ridden, but not beyond hope vs. the EU is a status-quo, backward-looking, even declining power*

In the eyes of Brookings affiliates, Brexit – “a defensive, narrow, backward-looking attempt to reclaim something that many felt had been lost” (Reeves 2016a) – epitomises what is wrong with the EU. It adds to the severe crises already haunting the Union and requiring fundamental reforms.⁵ The EU should strengthen its foreign policy actorness and leadership (Garavoglia 2017, Stelzenmüller 2017), which are perceived to be flawed in certain respects (Le Corre 2016). The tone of liberal pundits is neither apocalyptic, nor penetrated with *schadenfreude*. Instead of pure black and white, they see many shades of grey and demonstrate a genuine interest in righting the ailments of their “historic ally” (Le Corre 2016). In this vein, the EU is described as the “European project” (Talbott 2016; Obama 2016c) or even the “grand experiment” (Klein 2016a, b). This denomination certainly entails the possibility of failure, but it also invokes innovation and progress. Brexit threatens the US’s “historic investment” in European integration (Talbott 2016; 2017; Wright 2017), while only a “strong and prosperous and democratic and united Europe” (Obama 2016c) can counter the current global challenges. President Obama promises that “as you work to strengthen your union [...] you will have the staunch support of the United States” (2016c).

The Heritage-commissioned texts and Trump’s remarks contrast the optimistic, forward-looking and vitalizing decision of the British people with what they see as a statist and rigid EU (Bromund 2017b, Trump 2017a). Pro-EU forces intent on a “remain” victory desperately stoked fear of Brexit with “fictional dangers“, conjured up with the help of fantasy author J.K. Rowling (Bromund 2016a, 2016e, 2016f). The EU is moribund: Brexit precipitates an “exciting new era” (Bromund 2017a; Gardiner 2017a). Indeed, Poland’s and Hungary’s recourse to their sovereignty and their respective stand-offs against the EU are taken as signs of this same development (Gardiner 2017c; Coffey and Muller 2017; Gonzalez and Clark 2017; Trump 2017b). Furthermore President Trump refers to the EU as “the Consortium” (Trump 2017a). A consortium is a *temporal* or even *short-term* association of companies that “pool their [...] resources to undertake a large project that benefits all members of the group”

(Business Dictionary n.d.). Thus, Trump seems to express the view that the EU will not (and maybe was never meant to) endure long term. As the EU does not serve the interest of its members, the “Consortium” seems likely to disintegrate. Brexit “was an example of what was to come”: the exit of more and more member states and finally the end of the EU. Accordingly, “the interests of the U.S. in Europe, and around the world, ultimately rest in the defence of the free, sovereign, capitalist, and democratic nation-state” (Bromund 2016f), but “the EU is not the nations of Europe” (Bromund 2016b). The EU is at best portrayed as an economic, political and military competitor, at worst as antithetical to the US (Bromund 2016b; Dale 2017; Trump 2017b).

Discussion

The differences that we have detected in the selected liberal and conservative political discourses attest to a serious polarization within the US political elite. The perceptions by President Trump and the Heritage Foundation reveal a strongly Manichean view of the world, dividing “the West” into a good and a bad part. The ‘good’ part, comprising the US as “leader of the free world” and a post-Brexit Britain, cherishes sovereignty, democracy, self-determination and freedom. The ‘other’ part, namely the EU, is alleged to pervert Western values. Thus, transatlantic relations are reduced to essentially realist, zero-sum power competitions. The EU is *not credible* (but hypocrite), *not legitimate* (it is an unelected, bureaucratic elite project) and coherent only because Brussels imposes its laws on the subdued member states against their national interest (Bromund 2016b; Gardiner 2016).

Meanwhile, the liberal discourse sees mutual benefit in cooperation and is upset by the crisis of European (dis)integration, ushered in by Brexit. The Brookings Institute’s commentaries strike a constructive tone by suggesting ways to strengthen both the EU and EU-US relations. The EU is perceived as a *credible partner*, even a *role model* for the world (though not the US itself). It is *legitimate* by virtue of its role as a peacemaker/normative power. Its *coherence*, especially in foreign affairs, must be strengthened to increase the EU’s global importance and usefulness as the US’ partner. The liberal discourse names Russia and China as common threats to the EU and the US, thus invoking a common identity of the West by constructing a *constitutive Other* (Neumann and Welsh 1991). Trump, by

contrast, portrays the “creeping [...] bureaucracy” of the EU as a common enemy of all nations that “value individual freedom and sovereignty” (Trump 2017b). He thereby creates a different community, that of the sovereign nations of Europe and the US, whose *constitutive Other* is the EU.

Brexit as an exogenous, i.e. EU-specific factor, mainly comes to bear in the Trump/Heritage Foundation assessments of the EU. Even though there are no indications that the British decision to leave the EU has actually influenced these views, the conservative voices canvassed in this chapter appeal to Brexit as the ultimate proof for their world view. After all, to these political and opinion-making elites Brexit demonstrates that the EU is an oppressive elite project and that sensible nations will opt for their freedom and sovereignty (Gardiner 2016, 2017a; Trump 2017a, 2017b). Liberal commentators, on the other hand, warn of the destructive forces of nationalism, which they see as a global factor at work in both Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, their political rival (Inglehardt and Norris 2016).

Yet, the contrasting views of the EU expressed by the elites of the opposing political camps are in line with the increasing polarization of wider US politics and society. As such, we presume that factors endogenous to the US, epitomized by the election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the US, are decisive for this strong politicization of transatlantic relations.⁶ Furthermore, Donald Trump’s “America First” politics have led to a profound reordering of priorities in US policy, to the detriment of foreign policy. While this turn toward unilateralism remains in line with the foreign policy of previous Republican administrations (Fehl 2011; Fehl and Thimm 2019), its outright hostility toward the EU is a new feature of US policy.

A thorough investigation of cohort-specific differences in the perception of the EU is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, as the findings of the 2017 Eurobarometer “Future of Europe – Views from outside the EU” (EC 2017) indicate, the deep polarization of political elites with regard to the EU has not yet found its way into public opinion. According to the poll, 75% of US citizens hold a positive image of the EU, while a mere 5% report their view to be very negative. On this question, the US ranges in the middle of the eleven countries surveyed. Furthermore, the EU, together with other countries (presumably the US), is seen to stand for peace by 75% of the surveyed, and for freedom of opinion and

tolerance by around two thirds. After all, 68% see the EU as a place of stability in a troubled world, opposing the Trump/Heritage Foundation image of a crumbling EU.

Conclusion

It is impossible to isolate the effects of Brexit on US perceptions of the EU. The tremendous policy upheavals after the change of administration in 2017 are certainly chiefly responsible for the contrasting perceptions of US officials and policy-making elites. Indeed, neither the perceptions of Obama and the Brookings Institute, nor those of Trump and the Heritage Foundation have changed throughout 2016 and 2017, that is during the Brexit referendum campaign, the actual referendum and the start as well as increasing stagnation of the EU-UK divorce negotiations. Liberal voices have consistently warned of the potentially detrimental and destabilizing effect of Brexit on the global economy and the transatlantic partnership. While acknowledging the special bond between the US and the UK, neither Obama nor Brookings pundits have cast any doubt on the paramount importance of the EU, which they see as a credible and legitimate, if sometimes incoherent and crisis-ridden partner of the US. Intent upon strengthening this transatlantic bond, they offer policy suggestions for the EU and the US on how to tackle their domestic as well as international challenges.

The effect of Brexit on Trump and the Heritage Foundation is more immediate. The British decision to pursue a national course rather than to be part of the supranational EU conforms perfectly with the convictions and world view of the current US President. Indeed, a great number of analysts have already stressed the close ideological links between the success of Donald Trump and Brexit (e.g. Outhwaite 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016). Thus, Brexit has been used by President Trump and the think tank closest to him as a proof for the conviction that the EU is an oppressive and illegitimate, hypocritical and moribund body, which is antithetical to the US. In this regard, a counterfactual thought experiment is tempting: Would the right-wing conservative perception of the EU have changed, had the British people voted for remain?

The US have pursued unilateral strategies before. Yet, the current polarization and politicization of the transatlantic partnership is unprecedented. Curiously, it mirrors the results that Hurrelmann (this volume) has found for Canada, while it contrast sharply with the sustained positive perceptions of the EU, which are nurtured among Mexican elites (Dominguez, this volume). This could foreshadow more volatile relations between the EU and its North American partners. For the EU, this underlines the need for standing firm on its own positions and principles, in order to avoid being at the mercy of internal political developments in the US. What is more, the EU is called upon to actively counter the nationalism purported by Donald Trump and an emerging global cosmopolitan-communitarian cleavage (Inglehardt and Norris 2016). If the EU continues to set value by regional integration and multilateral cooperation, it must find effective responses to the internal and external challenges it faces. This way, the EU could engage with or possibly counter any US administration, irrespective of its attitude towards transatlanticism (cf. Fehl and Thimm 2019).

Moreover, the strong polarization of the perceptions of the studied policy elites suggests that Trump's radical views are not shared by a considerable segment of US politicians. Thus, the EU should consider ways to circumvent the federal US government in order to intensify its cooperation with individual US states that express their willingness to do so. This already happens in the realm of climate change but could potentially be a model for other policy areas, too.

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¹ Analyzing congressional activity turned out to be little promising. Firstly, throughout the investigation period, only one hearing and a modest number of debates dealt explicitly with Brexit/the EU. Secondly, both chambers have been dominated by a Republican majority whereas the possibilities of the Democratic Party to put Brexit on the agenda were limited. Finally, in the debates that did take place, speakers essentially reproduced the views reported in this chapter, with Republicans arguing along the lines of President Trump and Democrats along

Obama's position (Hähn 2019). While a comparison with the Democrat-dominated Congress since 2018 could be fruitful, it lies beyond the scope of the present analysis.

² For reasons of comparability and cohesiveness, we only analyze statements which Obama and Trump made during their time in office. We have thus included 3 documents by Barack Obama (his press conference with PM Cameron on April 22, 2016 [Obama 2016a], a letter published in *The Telegraph* on April 23, 2016 [Obama 2016b] and his remarks at the Hannover Fair on April 25, 2016 [Obama 2016c]) and two documents for Donald Trump (his press conference with PM May on January 27, 2017 [Trump 2017a] and his remarks in Warsaw on July 6, 2017 [Trump 2017]).

³ Analysts see the Heritage Foundation as "responsible for helping to craft Trump's agenda [...]" (Shephard 2017), while, according to Abelson "there is little doubt that the Brookings Institution [...] established several points of contact with President Obama and his administration" (2014: 118). We only studied commentaries, op-eds as well as testimonies before Congress which have been published by the think tanks' researchers in 2016 and 2017 and which have appeared in the sections "Europe" or "European Union" on the think tanks' websites. Among these, we have analyzed all texts with one of the following keywords in their title: Brexit, Britain, UK, Europe or European Union. We have identified 25 and 26 relevant texts respectively.

⁴ Our analysis markedly differs from Milliken's approach in that it is not interested in discovering the hierarchies that are being established by a dominant discourse and contested within an alternative discourse (Milliken 1999: 229-233). The methodological approach that is being pursued in this chapter rather leans towards a content analysis, even if it takes Milliken's emphasis on predication as the most important analytical tool.

⁵ Garavoglia 2017; Klein 2016a; Le Corre 2016; Obama 2016a, b, c; Stelzenmüller 2017; Talbott 2016; Wright 2017.

⁶ Note the parallels to the findings on Canadian perceptions of the EU in Hurrelmann's study (this volume).