

Top experts offer their reactions to the US election results

In recent weeks we have hosted pre-election briefings exploring the central issues in the 2012 election. To bring this feature to a close we asked a range of academics to offer their thoughts on the results of the election, as well as its significance for the wider world. Here is what they had to say:

- **We still matter for US foreign policy** - Richard Sennett, LSE Sociology
- **Obama's election should be good news for us in Europe** - Christopher Pissarides, LSE Economics
- **Against the odds, Obama has pushed forward** - Anne Power, LSE Social Policy
- **A more neutral Secretary of State is now needed** - James Ker-Lindsay, LSE European Institute
- **If the Republican party lurches to the right, they run the real risk of marginalising themselves even further** - Matthew Ashton, Nottingham Trent University
- **Obama's victory can be understood as delaying some difficult policy decisions about the future shape of the economy** - Steve Fuller, University of Warwick

Richard Sennett, *Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the LSE:*

My reaction is simple. Had Romney come in, the US would have forgotten about Europe, or at least Western Europe. Obama's re-election means that we still matter for US foreign policy.



Christopher Pissarides, *School Professor of Economics and Political Science at the LSE and winner of the 2010 Nobel Prize in Economics:*

Just as Europe is sinking itself deeper into recession with its austerity politics, the United States is showing signs of recovery with policies that are having some impact on job creation. But sooner or later America will have to face its debt problems, otherwise disruption in world financial markets will continue to the detriment of us all. Obama seems to be more prepared to tackle the debt problem than his rival, and his election should be good news for us in Europe. And unlike us, he seems to be doing it the right way, waiting for the economy to show firm signs of recovery before hitting it with cuts. Or at least let's hope that this is what he plans to do, now that the election threat is out of the way.



Anne Power, *Professor of Social Policy at the LSE:*

Against huge odds, Barack Obama has pushed forward, and will continue to push forward, a more tolerant, more generous and more thoughtful America – he helps all our futures.



James Ker-Lindsay, *Senior Research Fellow on the Politics of South East Europe at the LSE European Institute.*

There was a time not so very long ago when the Balkans, with its large concentration of US military on peacekeeping duties, would have featured in any debate on US foreign policy. Not now. Indeed, Europe as a whole was barely mentioned. On the one hand, this is to be welcomed. It is a clear sign that the region is now seen to be relatively stable. On the other, it is important that the United States continued to remain engaged in South



East Europe. There are many problems that still need to be tackled, such as Bosnia and Kosovo, which can only be addressed if the United States works alongside the European Union.

In this regard, perhaps the key question at this stage is who will replace Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. Her stature, and obvious interest in the Balkans, has ensured continued US engagement in the area. The problem is that she is also a very divisive figure. For instance, on her recent farewell trip to region, she said that Kosovo was a 'personal matter' for her family. This real or perceived bias complicates efforts to address many problems. Therefore, from the perspective of South East Europe, what is perhaps now needed is a new Secretary of State with a high degree of political clout, but who is also felt to be more overtly neutral.

Matthew Ashton, *Lecturer in Politics at Nottingham Trent University:*

Only a few hours after the election result being announced, Republicans are already beginning to ask the two key questions: what went wrong, and where do we go from here? The first is relatively easy to answer, the second a little harder.



While Romney largely succeeded in pounding home his economic message, he failed the more basic likability test. He also seemed to fail in broadening out his core vote to embrace African-Americans, Hispanics, and young people. This, combined with a series of awkward gaffes, meant that he didn't gain momentum until his supposed victory in the first of the electoral debates. In retrospect though, even this might be considered unfortunate. Up until that point most pollsters and commentators were tipping Obama to win. After that the narrative changed to a dead heat and this may have had the effect of driving up Obama's vote amongst certain key demographics.

Already certain Republican politicians, bloggers and media supporters are beginning to look ahead to 2016. Some have strangely decided that Romney lost, not because he was too centralist a candidate, but because he wasn't right wing enough. It has to be remembered that the Republican Party flirted with almost every other candidate available during the Primaries before finally picking Romney. They may take the view now that he, and previously McCain in 2004, represented a flawed strategy of trying to appeal to everybody. If the party does lurch to the right after this, especially if the Tea Party become increasingly prominent, they run the real risk of marginalising themselves even further.

Steve Fuller, *Auguste Comte Chair in Social Epistemology at the University of Warwick.*

I supported Obama after having backed Hillary Clinton in 2008 and have continued to support him, basically sharing the same opinion as virtually all mainstream Left and Right politicians and media outlets in the UK: Obama has made the best of a bad hand – not only the economy but also a recalcitrant Congress. Obama's achievement is all the greater when we recall that the authors of the US Constitution explicitly divided the executive from the legislature (and judiciary) to prevent the sort of party-based rule encouraged by the parliamentary system. The difficulties that Cameron faces in coalition is merely a taster of what American Presidents normally face in full force.



But what is the exact significance of Obama's victory? The popular vote is very close, which suggests that much of the victory can be assigned to successful strategic campaigning in swing states. This goes beyond speeches and adverts to include some of Obama's major policy decisions, most notably his bailout of the US automotive industry, which bore significantly on workers in Michigan and Ohio. (60% of General Motors' equity is now owned by the US government.) Now, some eco-friendly economic liberals – a Green Republican in 2016? – might argue that this is just short-termism to appease union voters. Seen in the long term, letting the domestic auto industry die a natural death in the marketplace would be just the opportunity needed to attract investment to expedite the development of alternative energy-based cars. In other words, a good part of Obama's victory can be understood as delaying some difficult policy decisions about the future shape of the economy, which will haunt Democratic candidates in the coming years – especially as Obama has also provided incentives for students to enter into high-tech fields that will remove them from the traditional concerns of organized labour.

Similarly, all the victories for disabled, gay, Asian, female candidates and more liberal social policies do

not necessarily add up to a reassertion of the old social democratic, welfare state idea that Obama's rhetoric continues to play to. For example, people who supported all of above may also have no problem with mandated private health care, which is what 'Obamacare', the supposed US version of 'nationalised medicine', turns out to be. Obamacare requires people to purchase medical coverage (if not already covered by employers) in a state-regulated market and with state subsidies for the poor. But this is not the same as the state itself being the principal provider. Obama's original plan had a state-based provision for healthcare but that did not pass the Congress. Whatever subsequent battles take place in Congress over Obamacare, they will not be over its need for greater socialisation. The larger take-home point is that we should not read victories in individual self-assertion in the US elections as somehow paving the way to some social democratic ideal. That will take a more fundamental ideological debate that Obama's victory has deftly – and perhaps rightly – avoided for now.

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