

New research shows that Donald Trump's election spurred European unity



Did the election of Donald Trump as US president affect the popularity of the European Union (EU) in Europe? In new research, [Lara Minkus](#), [Emanuel Deutschmann](#) and [Jan Delhey](#) find that that Trump's surprise victory in 2016 did cause a considerable increase in the EU's post-election popularity. Gains in popularity were particularly high among those who perceived their country as economically struggling and, surprisingly, among the political right, suggesting that Trump's victory broadened and ideologically diversified the EU's base of support.

On election night 2016, Donald Trump's electoral victory to become the 45th president of the United States took pollsters by surprise. The *New York Times*' prediction, for instance—followed by a global audience on the newspaper's website during election night—made an exorbitant swing: in a matter of hours, Trump's "chance of winning the presidency" rose from a mere 15 percent at 1:10 UTC to 95 percent at 3:56 UTC, while Hillary Clinton's chance dropped accordingly. And the *New York Times*'s miscalculation was no exception: 14 out of 15 national polls conducted in the United States during the first week of November predicted a Clinton victory.

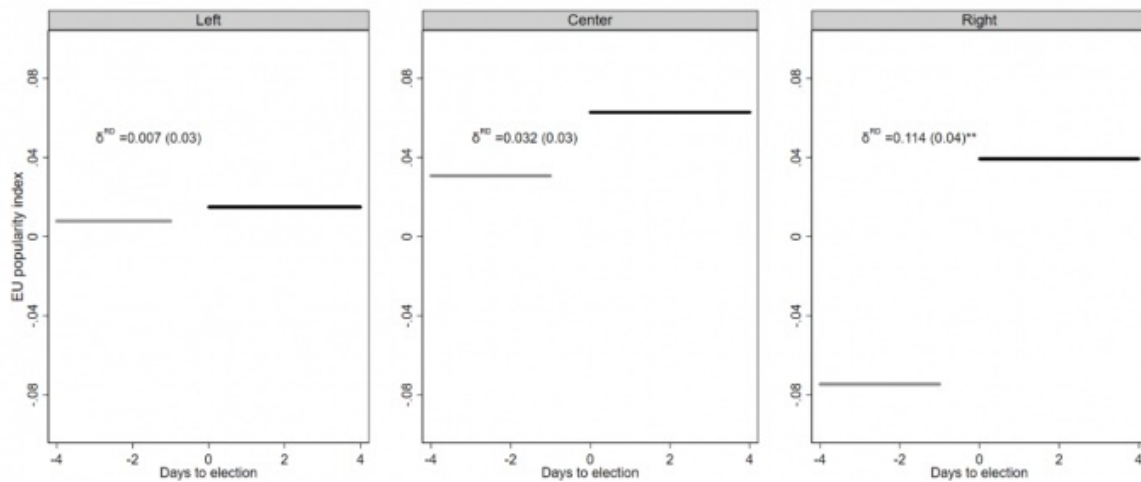
To many European observers, Trump's victory came not only as a surprise but also as a shock. Apart from a general dismay vis-à-vis Trump's apparent misogyny, ableism, and xenophobia, many Europeans suspected that his election would affect transatlantic relations and prospects of European integration. Such concerns were fueled by Trump's nationalist credo "America first," condemnatory statements about NATO and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and similar comments regarding the looming partial breakup of the EU in the wake of Brexit. A need to reinvent Europe's role in the world was one fear; a reinforcement of right-wing populist parties in Europe and according consequences for upcoming national elections was another. Thus, one may wonder whether this political earthquake in North America led to tectonic shifts in public opinion on the old continent. Specifically: did Trump's surprise victory affect the EU's popularity in Europe? To answer this question, we treated Trump's unexpected victory as an "external shock" in the sense of experimental research and used a Eurobarometer survey that was conducted in all EU-28 member states a few days prior to (control group) and after the election (treatment group) as source material for a natural experiment. This method allows us to determine whether Trump's election actually affected what Europeans think of the EU.

Higher EU support immediately after Trump's surprise victory

We found that the EU's popularity did in fact *increase* immediately after the election, suggesting that Trump's surprise victory caused a "rally effect" in Europe, in which Europeans "gathered around the EU's flag." The effect of being interviewed after Trump's election is roughly equivalent to the effect that three additional years of education have on a person's opinion of the EU. Since education has repeatedly been shown to be one of the key predictors of pro-EU attitudes, the size of this Trump effect is anything but negligible.

Gains in the EU's popularity after Trump's victory were particularly high among respondents who perceived their country as economically struggling. There is also a political fault line in that increases in the EU's popularity after Trump's surprise win were particularly high among the political right (where initial support levels for the EU were much lower than among the center and the left). The right overtook the left and remains only slightly below the center, indicating a remarkable shift in the political landscape of EU support (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 – Support for the EU before and after the 2016 US presidential election



No such effect occurred after Obama’s re-election in 2012

An additional analysis of an earlier Eurobarometer survey reveals that Obama’s re-election as US president in 2012 did *not* affect Europeans’ views on the EU. This suggests that what happened in 2016 is not a general “US presidential election effect,” but indeed a unique effect based on the election of Donald Trump specifically. An important limitation of the study is that it only examined the *short-term* Trump effect. Whether this effect persists in the long run and whether politicians will be able to transform it into political capital that may ultimately lead to a deepening of European integration can only be speculated about.



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Notwithstanding, our findings show that the election of Trump as a right-wing nationalist with a declared aversion to supranational institutions—including the EU—did not trigger a domino effect in the same direction in Europe. To the contrary, a rally effect occurred, in which Europe moved closer together, uniting “around the EU’s flag.”

Not necessarily a victory for cosmopolitanism

The large gains in the EU’s popularity among the political right, however, are an important qualifier. They suggest that this increased popularity of the EU is likely not primarily cosmopolitan or liberal in nature. Instead, the Trump effect appears to have given rise to a right-wing variant of pro-EU stances. It could be, then, that the right aims at reshaping Europe and the EU according to its ideas, that is, as a strong and closed fortress and inward-looking power that is fit enough to compete with Trump’s America.

In the first half of the twentieth century, philosopher Hannah Arendt [warned](#) that the unifying effects that arise from a perceived external threat are not necessarily desirable forces. She concluded, “Americanism on one side and Europeanism on the other side of the Atlantic, two ideologies facing, fighting, and, above all, resembling each other as all seemingly opposing ideologies do—this may be one of the dangers we face.” Care must be taken, therefore, not to glorify the positive Trump effect on the EU’s popularity as a victory for cosmopolitan forces in response to a parochialist threat.

- This article is based on the authors’ paper “A Trump Effect on the EU’s Popularity? The US Presidential Election as a Natural Experiment,” forthcoming at *Perspectives on Politics*. A preprint version is [freely available here](#).

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