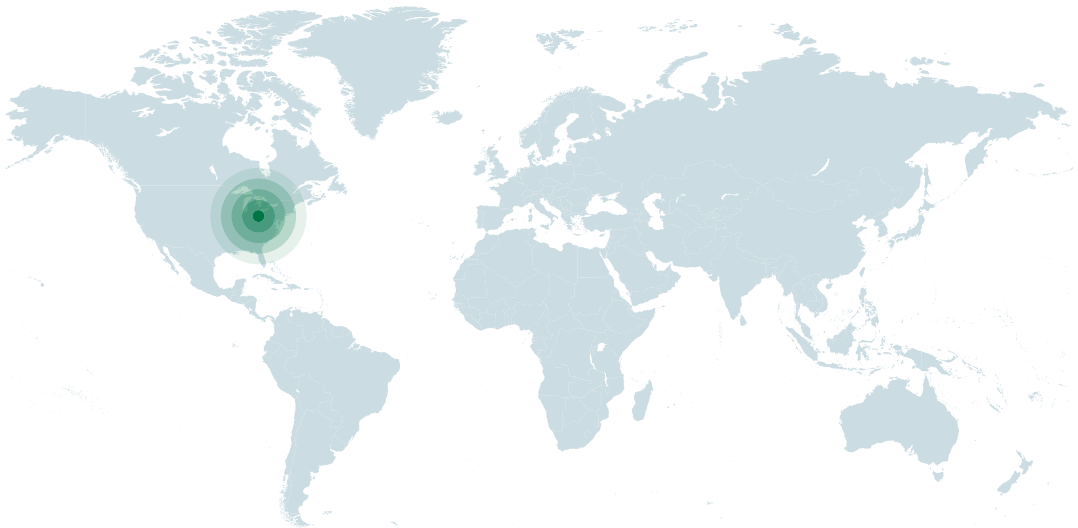


# Trump is Simply the End Product

The Polarisation of U.S. Politics  
Is the Culmination of Long-Term Trends

Céline-Agathe Caro



At the beginning of the U.S. primaries, the candidacies of political outsiders Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders invoked laughter among the political establishment in Washington. But the possibility of a candidate such as Trump actually ending up in the White House can no longer be ruled out. This article addresses a number of factors in the polarisation of U.S. politics and society and will illustrate that this is the result of long-term trends.

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In early summer 2015, the political establishment in Washington laughed about it; billionaire real-estate mogul Donald Trump had entered the race for the White House in mid-June. Most political observers rated his chances of being nominated as the Republican Party candidate as extremely slim, and his poll ratings were still very low. At that point, Trump, the businessman with no political experience who “tells it like it is”, was the unlikely candidate of the 2016 presidential elections. The general feeling was that he would at least provide some entertainment during the summer slump, but that his campaign would fizzle out sooner or later.

The situation seemed equally clear on the Democrat side: after losing to Barack Obama in 2008, former Secretary of State, Senator from New York and First Lady Hillary Clinton portrayed herself as her party’s only viable candidate. Bernie Sanders, at that time still an independent Senator from Vermont and a long-serving Member of the House of Representatives, had announced his candidacy in late April. However, at that stage barely any mention had been made of this self-professed “democratic socialist”. His positions were considered far too left of center to present any serious challenge to the favourite, Clinton. Political commentators in the capital considered Sanders to be an extremely unlikely candidate as well.

Just a few weeks later, the situation had already changed radically. Trump and Sanders soon achieved good poll ratings as anti-establishment candidates, which led to them being increasingly

seen as a serious alternative to the traditional candidates of both parties by the start of the Presidential primaries in February 2016. Since early May, we have been witnessing an unprecedented situation in the United States. Trump is now the only Republican candidate in the race following his victory in the State of Indiana. His main rivals, Senator Ted Cruz from Texas (an ultra-conservative Tea Party representative) and moderate Governor of Ohio, John Kasich, have thrown in the towel. In addition to that, as of May, Trump has reached the necessary number of delegates. As a result, it is highly likely that he will be nominated as his party’s Presidential candidate at the Republican National Convention in July.

What makes this situation all the more astounding is that the billionaire is not in fact a “true” Republican at all: several points on his platform are highly unorthodox for the GOP.<sup>1</sup> His lifestyle also fails to fit the traditional conservative mould (for instance, Trump is not very religious and has been divorced several times). His derogatory comments about various sectors of the population (Mexicans, Muslims, migrants and women) and his simple solutions to all manner of political issues show that, whatever else he is, he is certainly a populist. His nationalistic and xenophobic remarks and his hostility towards Islam evoke clear parallels with right-wing extremists in the EU.

This inevitably begs the question as to why extreme candidates such as Trump and Sanders are faring so well in the current U.S. primaries. What is giving rise to the trends of radicalisation, populism and anti-establishmentarianism that



The improbable candidate: The unthinkable has now become a reality – Trump is the Republican Party's nominee for President of the United States in the 2016 election. [Source: © Brian Snyder, Reuters.](#)

are currently found in both political camps and are dominating the 2016 election campaigns (elections for the House of Representatives are also due to be held in November)?

The fierce debates and controversies that have accompanied the rise of Trump and Sanders illustrate once more just how polarised U.S. politics and society have now become. This polarisation is proving to be a decisive factor in the elections, as it is benefitting the outsiders most of all. It would appear that this phenomenon has long exceeded the critical threshold, as the possibility of a candidate such as Trump actually ending up in the White House can no longer be fully ruled out.

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to shed light on the polarisation taking place within U.S.

politics and society and to explain the factors contributing to the success of Sanders and, more especially, Trump. To this end, it outlines five factors, all of which were contentious before the current presidential elections. Indeed, the polarisation of both political camps has not suddenly come about in recent months and years, rather it is the result of long-term trends in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the United States.

#### **Factor One: Gerrymandering**

Gerrymandering has been identified as the first factor because it is an institutional element that has been contributing to the polarisation of U.S. politics and society for decades now. It describes a political practice readily used by Republicans and Democrats alike to improve their chances

of success in local and parliamentary elections. While the practice is an effective one, it has the side effect of increasing competition *within* the parties during the primaries, thereby encouraging the radicalisation of their respective positions.

## Gerrymandering involves modifying the boundaries of electoral constituencies in order to optimise the election results of one party.

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The goal of gerrymandering is to modify the boundaries of electoral constituencies so as to optimise the election results of one party.<sup>2</sup> This practice is permitted every ten years following the national census and has been commonly employed in U.S. politics since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The strategy is used by both Democrats and Republicans when they are in power in a given state to increase the number of their mandates in the House of Representatives of the United States Congress and in the lower houses of each state.<sup>3</sup> One of the key strategies, packing, involves cramming as many opposition voters as possible into small, politically homogeneous districts in order to secure victory for one's own camp in the other more numerous constituencies. Another strategy, cracking, involves spreading opposition voters across several constituencies in which they have no prospect of success. At the same time, both parties may choose to agree on the constituency boundaries, for instance, if they wish to facilitate the re-election of their respective incumbents.<sup>4</sup>

In 2004, the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed that gerrymandering was not unconstitutional, provided that there were no underlying racist motives.<sup>5</sup> This ruling has consolidated a trend that began to emerge some 30 years ago. After the last census in 2010, Democrats and Republicans employed this instrument once more. One of the main results of this is that the boundaries of most electoral constituencies for elections to the House

of Representatives are drawn based on this principle. Due to a lack of geographical unity and/or the amalgamation of strongholds of uniform voter profiles, there is talk in some states of the balkanisation of constituency boundaries (see fig. 1).

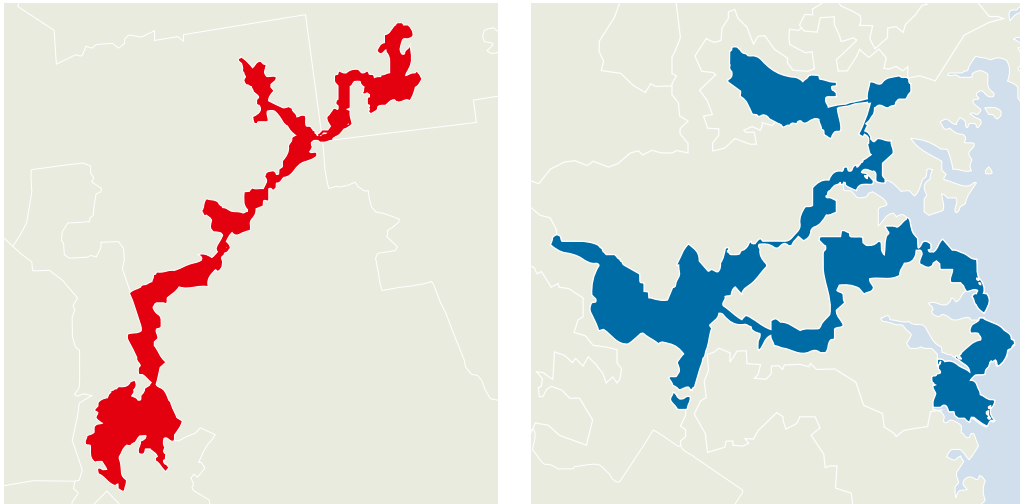
Against this backdrop, the result of the House of Representatives elections is only open to a limited degree. According to the projections of the Cook Political Report, 86.6 per cent of seats are already secured for the Republicans or Democrats. Due to weak competition from the other party, it should be relatively easy for one side or the other to win in eight per cent of cases. A real election battle and an open race is only expected for 5.2 per cent of seats.<sup>6</sup> The system creates similar conditions at the state level.

As a consequence of these trends, election campaigns in the United States are often fought *within*, rather than *between* parties, since in many cases, the nomination of one's own party guarantees subsequent electoral victory. At the national level, this situation leads to less competition of ideas between the two political camps and instead to greater rivalry between party colleagues. For politically moderate candidates, this means they are primarily competing with others from different wings of their own party.

Such internal competition is a factor in the radicalisation of the political discourse, as candidates do not need to take account of swing voters in the moderate center ground if they wish to win. Rather than appealing to a broad electorate and representing positions acceptable to the majority of voters, they attempt to outdo one another in appealing to their own clientele. The goal is frequently to portray oneself as the most authentic candidate for one's own party. While this can encourage the loyal defence of the ideological positions and principles of one's political family, the need to compete with the election pledges of more radical opponents also promotes the adoption of more hard-line, if not extreme positions.

For elected representatives, the highest priority after elections are over is to ensure internal com-

**Fig. 1: Electoral Constituencies in North Carolina and Maryland**



The 12<sup>th</sup> electoral constituency in North Carolina (top, Republican boundary) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> electoral constituency in Maryland (bottom, Democratic boundary) for the House of Representatives elections represent extreme examples of gerrymandering. [Source: Own illustration based on Ingraham, n. 4.](#)

petition within parties in relation to the next election is kept in check (for example, House of Representatives elections take place every two years). This also encourages these representatives to adopt positions that are clearly identifiable as right wing (for the Republicans) or left wing (for the Democrats) in order to guard against attacks from the party fringe. At any rate, in all districts considered to be safe (for one or the other political camp), politicians do not have to fear that their party will be reprimanded by voters for their failure to deliver on election pledges.

While gerrymandering does not play a role in the presidential elections themselves, since the voting rules are different, this year's national elections still reflect the centrifugal tendencies that have been fostered nationally in recent decades as a result of this practice.

### **Factor Two: The Role of the Media**

The media play an important role in politics generally, but their room for manoeuvre varies from country to country. In the United States, the influence of the media is relatively great. As forums for initiating discussion and conducting debate,

they have a considerable impact on public opinion. Consequently, the media also have a hand in the polarisation of politics and society. This has been especially true since the 1990s.

1987 saw the Fairness Doctrine abolished. Adopted in 1949, this policy was designed to prevent politically one-sided coverage of issues of public interest and applied to radio and television stations broadcasting on public frequencies. It required stations to “afford reasonable opportunity” for the discussion of controversial matters and conflicting views.<sup>7</sup> In 2000, two corollary rules of the Fairness Doctrine – the personal attack rule and the political editorial rule – were also abolished. In both instances, during one of their programs the stations were required to contact any individuals who had been personally attacked or targeted for political criticism, to inform these individuals accordingly and give them airtime to respond.

The abolition of the Fairness Doctrine contributed to a general sharpening of the political tone in the U.S. media from the 1990s onwards. This has facilitated the politicisation of news and societal debate.

This trend is particularly marked on a number of private television stations and radio talk shows. It is leading to the use of one-sided rhetoric and the separation of the world into good and evil to the benefit of one of the two political camps, with discourse often veering far to the left or the right as a result. Examples of this trend in the conservative camp include the political talk shows hosted by Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck on radio or on the TV channel Fox News, broadcasts by talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh, and news websites such as Breitbart.com. Examples on the left of the political spectrum include programs on the MSNBC television channel, such as "The Last Word" with Lawrence O'Donnell and the "Ed Show" with Ed Schultz, as well as broadcasts by Progressive Radio. Given the nationwide popularity of several of these programs (for example, many commuters listen to the radio shows in their cars), they are playing a particularly prominent role in the polarisation of public opinion.

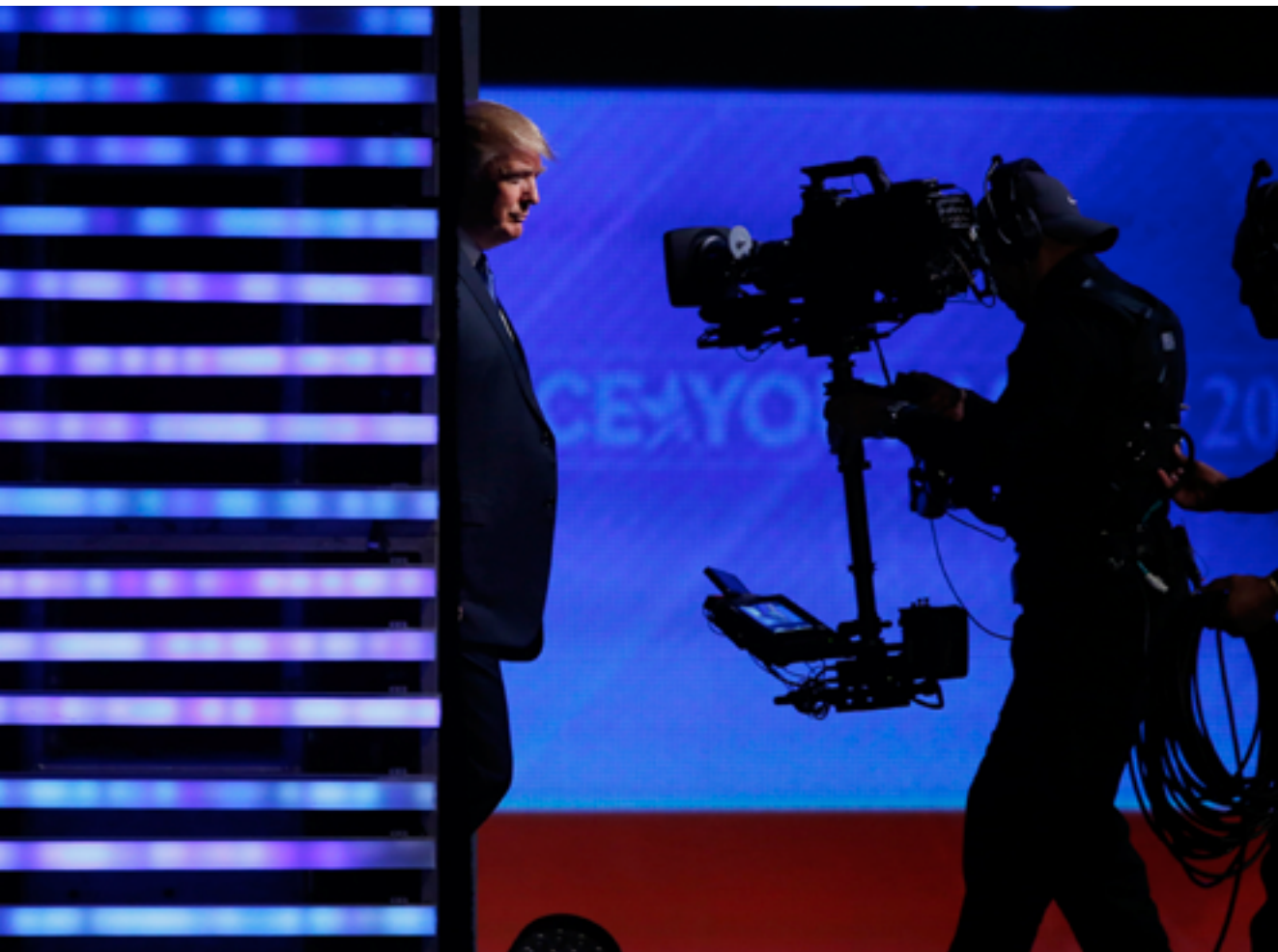
Alongside this journalistic genre, which involves a strong combination of news and opinion, mainstream media can also contribute to the polarisation of politics during election years by giving disproportionate coverage to candidates on the political margins who gain attention with their polemical remarks. This can create an impression in the minds of the general public which, although not actually reflecting political realities in the country, can help to influence those realities in a corresponding direction.

While the media can be observed to have a polarising effect in many places, the connection between this phenomenon and the success of Donald Trump has raised a new set of questions. The key question concerns the extent to which the U.S. media have helped to turn the real estate mogul into the favourite in the Republican primaries. Particular reference is made in this context to the role of the 24-hour news stations. These channels use live broadcasts to attract views

A caricature published in the Boston Gazette in 1812 has led to the coining of the portmanteau "Gerrymander". The district was created by Massachusetts legislature to favor the incumbent Democratic-Republican party candidates of Governor Elbridge Gerry over the Federalists. The shape of the contorted districts was said to resemble a salamander.

Source: Elkanah Tisdale © / PD-US, overworked by Chowbok, Wikimedia.






The media's favorite: 24-hour television news channels are granting Trump excessive attention, in an attempt to garner more and more viewers. [Source: © Carlo Allegri, Reuters.](#)

and advertisers willing to pay for airtime. They began to focus on Donald Trump at a very early stage in the election campaign without giving his jarring statements any serious scrutiny, not least due to a fear of being boycotted by him. Already famous in the United States before the election and promising high entertainment value, Trump was precisely what many media outlets had been looking for.

For example, the conservative Media Research Center calculated that news station CNN had devoted 80 per cent of its coverage of the Republican primaries to Donald Trump between 24 August and 4 September 2015,<sup>8</sup> even though

there was no way of knowing at that time how well the billionaire would fare with voters in those elections. This “Trumpmania” was also reflected in the sector of the U.S. press which is permanently seeking to attract new readers on smartphones and tablets and is therefore currently reporting on an almost daily basis on what the GOP favourite is up to and what he is tweeting (Trump has over eight million Twitter followers).

This trend of polarisation in U.S. media coverage of political events has been particularly marked since the 1990s and is also related to the fact that U.S. elections, and the White House race



especially, are strongly personality driven. The first reason for this is that the parties are mainly active at local level, where they develop most of their programs, and do not play such a central role nationally. Secondly, the U.S. election campaign system allows individuals to run for election under the banner of a party without necessarily needing to have that party's blessing to do so. As such, the leadership of each party does not control who runs for election in its name. This means that the various candidates from one political camp may adopt very different positions to one another in an attempt to raise their profile in the primaries. In this respect, the media are particularly focused on the statements the candidates make and tend, as one would expect, to give the majority of coverage to those candidates who stand out the most. This creates an especially strong media presence for outsiders such as Trump, giving the public the impression that they are more politically influential than is actually the case and at the same time supporting their election campaign for free.

### **Factor Three: Campaign Finance**

The system for financing election campaigns in the U.S. allows for substantial donations to be made. This too plays a role in the polarisation of the political landscape, but not because candidates who raise the most funding for their campaign automatically win. Rather, it is because this system is now giving rise to a great deal of mistrust on the part of the population. This has been especially true since the adoption of new regulations as a result of the *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission (FEC)* case. This mistrust is directed principally against the establishment candidates who gain the most from campaign financing legislation, and in turn benefits protest candidates on the right and left of the political spectrum who claim they have not been bought by the system.

Following the *Citizens United vs. FEC* case in 2010, companies, trade unions and associations in the United States can now fund individual candidates. This Supreme Court ruling based on the principle of freedom of speech states that

donations from the private sector and organised interest groups fall under this category. It also allows individuals to avoid the otherwise applicable 2,500 U.S. dollars limit per election and donate large amounts of money to campaigns. This trend has led to the formation of highly flexible super PACs:<sup>9</sup> Donors are not subject to any upper limit for donations and can remain anonymous until the end of an election campaign. However, donations cannot be made directly to candidates' campaign kitties. This is why they are usually managed separately by individuals whom the candidates trust. This fund is used primarily to finance election advertising.

Large donations are not a new development in U.S. elections and have long been discussed in this context. The difference is, however, that, since 2010, the donations collected by the super PACs are considerably larger than the direct donations collected by candidates. By early 2016, this year's presidential and House elections had already generated the highest volume of private-sector donations since 2010. A large proportion of this funding has been provided by a small number of multi-millionaires and billionaires via their companies. Over half of donations made up to summer 2015 came from some 400 families, most of them in the financial, energy and real estate sectors.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that major donors can fund a range of initiatives through their networks makes it more difficult to track their political activities. For example, donations can be made to super PACs via "501 (c) (4) organisations". These social-welfare lobby groups are not required to publish the names of their donors. Election observers also point out that many super PACs in both political camps are receiving funding from potential ghost corporations and pop-up groups this year, a phenomenon that makes the campaign finance system appear even less transparent.<sup>11</sup>

This means that, unlike in Germany and, in particular, since the *Citizens United* case, wealthy donors and companies can use large donations to gain influence in U.S. politics. It is difficult to gauge their impact on candidate discourse, as it



is not clear whether the candidates are receiving support from certain donors on the basis of the specific convictions they hold to or vice-versa. For example, we may wonder about the extent to which Ted Cruz's critical stance on the human dimension of global warming<sup>12</sup> and his support for fossil fuels are influenced by his loyalty to a number of his major donors.<sup>13</sup> Hillary Clinton's opponents on the right and the left repeatedly ask her how she can claim with any credibility that she would curb the power of Wall Street as President when she has benefited considerably from its generosity in the past.

With the U.S. campaign finance rules the way they are, it is certainly possible that elected representatives could face conflicts of interest. This issue is the subject of regular public discussion and many voters view this system critically, especially as they consider it to lack transparency. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, 76 per cent of the Americans currently believe that money is a more significant factor in politics than it used to be. 77 per cent believe

that, generally speaking, limits should be placed on campaign donations by individuals and companies.<sup>14</sup>

This mistrust on the part of voters with regard to the current campaign finance system is a disadvantage to traditional Republican and Democrat candidates who generally benefit from private-sector donations. Since 2010, they have also been the main recipients of the super PACs. This close link between money and politics lends further support to the assertion made by critics of the financing rules that the elites in both political camps are primarily concerned with promoting the interests of the country's rich and powerful, if necessary even at the expense of the rest of the population.

At the same time, the merging of money and politics plays into the hands of candidates who have nothing apparent to gain from this system. This is the case with the two protest candidates, Trump and Sanders, in this year's presidential elections. Unlike their opponents, they do not



receive any support from super PACs. Donald Trump is largely using his own means to finance his primaries campaign, and Bernie Sanders had raised over 150 million U.S. dollars by late March, primarily from numerous small online donations (averaging 27 U.S. dollars each).<sup>15</sup> The two candidates have made their financial independence a key theme of their primary campaigns. Their central argument, which is the same in both cases and not without populist tones, is that only a financially independent candidate is capable once he is President of implementing reforms that benefit ordinary citizens and resisting pressure to serve the particular interests of the business and financial sectors.

#### **Factor Four: Ideological Trench Warfare Instead of Bipartisanship**

In many political institutions at national level and in the U.S. states alike, cross-party cooperation is essential if any decisions are to be made and any legislation adopted in the first place. This requires elected Republican and Democratic representatives to be willing to compromise and undertake joint initiatives. However, such bipartisanship has increasingly faded into the background in the United States in recent decades. As such, politics is also becoming increasingly polarised at this level. There are many reasons for this, but it is certainly related to the fact that a large proportion of voters has moved away from the political center ground.

Differences, whether of opinion or in the political agendas of the government and the opposition (parties) are part and parcel of life in a democracy, indeed they are the prerequisite for true political competition. What is unique about the U.S. situation, however, is that the ideological overlap between the Democrats and the Republicans is steadily decreasing. In some cases, the differences are so pronounced that there is no way of reaching agreement, something which leads to enormous obstructions in the system.

## **There has been a significant increase in the degree of polarisation within the U.S. Congress in recent decades.**

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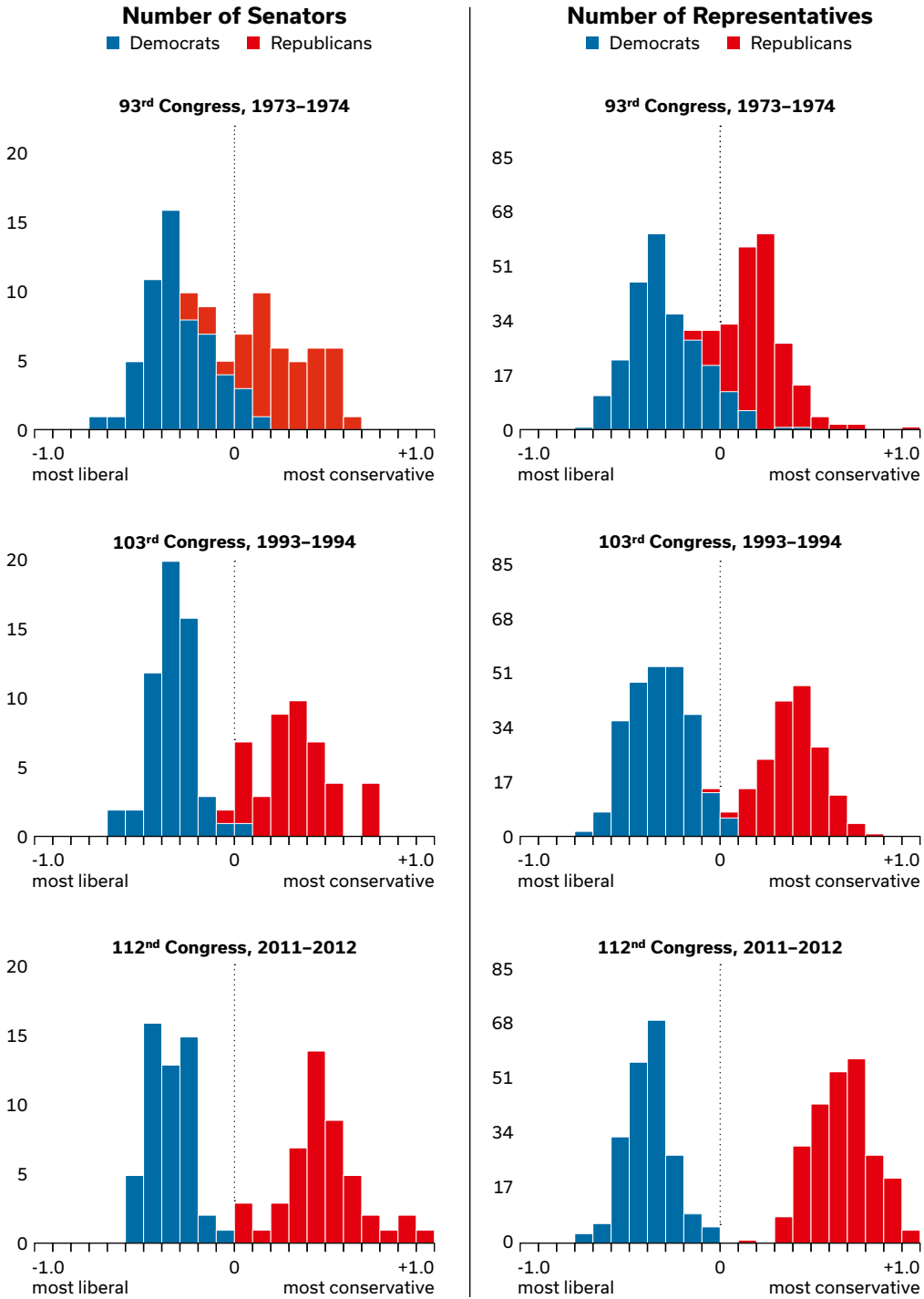
This polarisation has been hindering the political decision-making process in both parties for several decades now. For example, researchers have calculated that the degree of polarisation in the U.S. Congress (House and Senate) has increased significantly on both sides since the 1970s and that it is now at its highest level since the 1870s (see fig. 2).<sup>16</sup> Its effect is most notable at national level when the House Majority and the President are from different political camps and the House of Representatives uses its budgetary powers to block the government's decisions. In one case, that of the bitter battle between Republicans and Democrats over the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), this even led to a two-week government shutdown in October 2013. There could be another explosive case of partisan warfare following the unexpected death of conservative Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in February 2016. These examples illustrate the difficulties at national level, but such challenges also arise in the U.S. states, within both the legislature and the judiciary, where they can trigger similar obstructions. The system can also be severely paralysed if the federal government and the executive of a given state are unable to agree on a uniform policy and choose to obstruct one another.

The trend of increasing polarisation within the political system is being exacerbated by a number of factors, several of which have been addressed already.<sup>17</sup> Another of these factors is the system of primaries which tend only to involve particularly dedicated party members. These members are often the ones with the most radical views. As such, it is candidates with extreme positions who fare better in primaries, even if their opinions are not representative of the party membership as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, when the political situation is already polarised, it often leads to even more polarisation

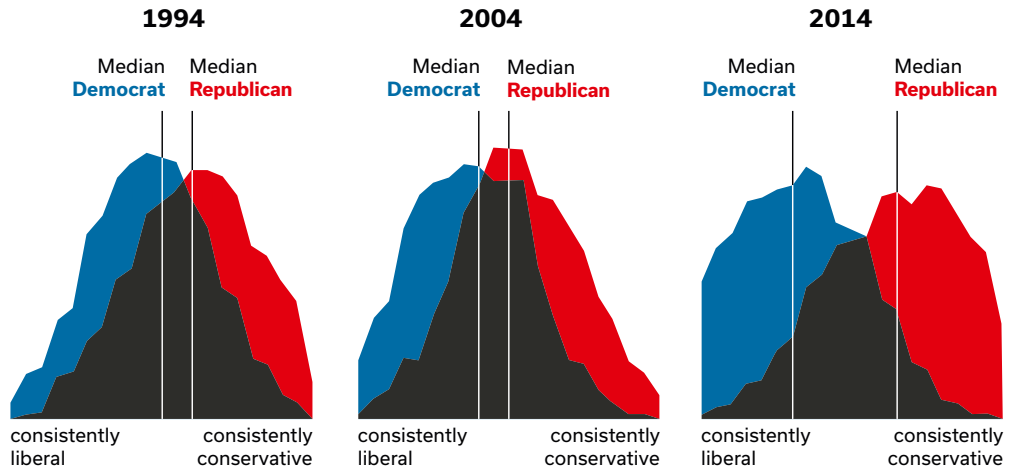
← "Berning Man": Financial independence of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump plays a crucial role in the primary elections. Source: © Lucas Jackson, Reuters.

**Fig. 2: Ideological Gap I**



Ideological scores of senators and representatives based on roll-call votes. Negative numbers represent liberal views and positive numbers conservative views. [Source: Own illustration based on DeSilver, n. 16.](#)

Fig. 3: Ideological Gap II



Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values.

Source: Own illustration based on Pew Research Center, n. 18.

within society. The main reason for this is that such a situation is frequently accompanied by a policy of tactical obstruction designed to deny the opposition political victory and discredit it. This strategy of obstruction is accompanied by rhetoric which frequently awakens unrealistic expectations. Failure to deliver on the associated promises leads to disenchantment among some followers. In such an environment, it is easy for more radical politicians to criticise the incumbent as weak. During elections, this situation causes many candidates to step up their rhetoric even further in recognition of the frustration at grass roots level and as a way to counteract outside competition.

Current polls also show that citizens have had enough of the obstructions and dysfunction in the political system in general.<sup>19</sup> This has the counter-productive effect at election time of playing into the hands of the most extreme politicians who blame the political establishment in both camps for the situation and announce their intention to overhaul the political system which they consider to be ailing.

Related to this polarisation within the political system is the fact that the average U.S. voter has

become more radical in his or her views in recent years.<sup>20</sup> Eric M. Uslaner, Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland (College Park), makes the following observation with regard to the increasing polarisation within the U.S. Congress: “As Republicans in the electorate have become more conservative and Democrats more liberal, the electoral base for moderation has shrunk. The traditional strategy of seeking the middle, the centrist median voter, no longer is the path to success.”<sup>21</sup>

Research studies confirm that the ideological identity of citizens on both sides of the political fence is now more pronounced than it used to be (see fig. 3), especially in the case of individuals who are politically active and who vote regularly. The concept of ideological silos is used to explain the increasing distaste that both camps have for each other’s political convictions.<sup>22</sup> This encourages mutual intolerance and also promotes a trend of social retreat into one’s own political “family”, something which affects everyday life within society. One indicator of the increasing divide between Democrat and Republican supporters is the fact that, for a number of years now, there have been fewer voters changing sides from one party to the other.<sup>23</sup>

## **Factor Five: White, Middle Class Anger Against the Establishment**

Long-term economic, social and cultural trends within U.S. society also help to explain the gradual polarisation of U.S. politics. They illustrate, in part at least, why a protest candidate with populist slogans can do so well in this year's presidential primaries on both the Democrat and the Republican side.

Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders' ideological differences are abundantly clear, yet several aspects of their discourse sound very similar and are considered by observers to be the reason for their popularity. The common denominator in these positions is that they address the everyday economic and social concerns of the (lower) middle classes and promise greater equity/less economic inequality. As such, long-term tensions within the U.S. population are a key reason for their success, something which their rivals in the primaries, from Clinton and Kasich to Cruz, have been far too slow to understand.

### **Both Trump and Sanders are addressing the concerns of the (lower) middle classes in this election campaign.**

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Trump and Sanders delight their followers by criticising the party establishment in both camps for, as they see it, ignoring the concerns of the middle classes. They decry the role of money in politics and claim that, if they were President, they would be able to limit the political influence of the economic elite and major corporations and push through key reforms for citizens. Under President Obama, the United States is showing more restraint in its actions on the international stage than in the past, yet both candidates are calling for even greater restraint in foreign policy and military matters to enable a larger proportion of the national budget to be invested domestically and support to be provided to citizens in need.

When it comes to social matters, both candidates are in favour of strong social security systems, including in the health sector. Bernie Sanders also has the support of many millennials because of his promise to significantly reduce university tuition fees which are very high in the United States on average.

Additionally, both candidates claim to offer simple solutions that will quickly improve the situation of people at the bottom. For example, Trump intends to use drastic means to combat illegal migration and therefore relieve pressure on the American working classes, while Sanders plans to have his welfare state financed by the banks and Wall Street. Both candidates are also critical of the consequences of globalisation and free trade. While their respective parties are in broad agreement with regard to the benefits of liberal global trade, they stress that many jobs have been lost in the United States as a result and give the impression that they would turn back the clock if they could.

Under these circumstances, we may wonder why Trump is achieving far more success than Sanders in the current primaries, especially given Trump's nationalistic and xenophobic overtures, glaring knowledge gaps, almost non-existent political experience, derogatory comments, and more or less intentional breaking of taboos. One reason for this is that, while both candidates address the economic and social concerns of the lower middle classes, the billionaire's election campaign resonates far more strongly with the white working classes and mobilises them.

From an economic perspective, this group is still bearing the brunt of the consequences of the last economic crisis from which the nation as a whole has largely recovered since 2009. Several studies show that the income gap between the rich and poor in the United States has widened over the last five years and that distressed communities in particular are among the main losers of the current economic upturn.<sup>24</sup> Generally speaking, these individuals with no academic background are also the biggest losers of globali-



Far from being commonplace: Willingness to compromise on the part of the two camps in Congress (here: Nancy Pelosi from the Democrats and John Boehner from the Republicans) has dropped significantly over the past decades. Source: © Jonathan Ernst, Reuters.

sation, the increase in free trade and advances in the technology sector, with their employment and income prospects deteriorating considerably in recent years and a spending capacity that has declined in many cases since 2007. Despite this fact, both the Democrats and the Republicans have failed at the national and state levels to provide effective support to these lower classes over the last few years to enable them to adapt to the new economic environment.

Additionally, studies show<sup>25</sup> that these white, modest income voters currently backing Trump feel that they have been betrayed and left behind by modern society. They have had enough of the establishment and are eagerly awaiting the out-

sider who has never held any political responsibility before. They are concerned about their jobs and circumstances and so find anti-immigration speeches appealing. They harbour resentment against movements promoting minorities such as Black Lives Matter, as they feel they have no one to represent their own interests. Their criticism of political correctness should also be viewed in this context. There is more to it than simply “telling it like it is”; these individuals are expressing their indignation at the affirmative action being taken with regard to certain social groups, especially minorities. In a diverse, cosmopolitan society, these white lower classes feel increasingly culturally and demographically inferior. This creates social insecur-

## What the Trump Voters Care About

**78%**

of Mr Trump's backers agree (46% strongly) that "I'm falling further and further behind economically".

**80%**

believe (55% strongly) that, "the government has gone too far in assisting minority groups".

**85%**

agree (55% strongly) that "America has lost its identity".

**91%**

report feeling (76% strongly) that "my beliefs and values are under attack in America these days".

**95%**

of Mr Trump's backers agree (83% strongly) that "America needs a powerful political leader who will save us from the problems we face".

**84%**

assert (54% strongly) that we need a leader who is "willing to say or do anything to solve America's problems".

**74%**

believe (44% strongly) that real leaders "don't worry about what other people say, they follow their own path".

Source: Quinnipiac University Survey, 5 Apr 2016, in: Galston, n. 25.

rity and makes them feel threatened, triggering in them a hatred of strangers (Muslims, homosexuals, foreigners). Many of these individuals are also frustrated, fearing they have no prospect of social mobility, something which is closely associated in the United States with freedom and the American Dream.

Donald Trump openly addresses such concerns among the white lower middle classes. He speaks in dramatic fashion of the nation's demise and its impotence on the world stage (in the face of Iran, ISIS, China), to the delight of this sector of the population, which views these trends in exactly the same way and wants to stop and reverse them.

The businessman's positive and simple message – "Make America Great Again" – restores these individuals' hopes of political self-determination, security, control and order.

Finally, there is an even more subtle element explaining why Trump is particularly good at mobilising the white middle classes, especially middle-aged men: his tone and style, despite how off-putting they may be to others. A number of sociological studies have found that authoritarian reflexes are activated in people when they feel threatened directly or indirectly, internally or externally, economically or culturally. In such moments, they look for the strong man who promises to do everything in his power to protect them from danger and change.<sup>26</sup> In this year's White House race, it is Donald Trump who no longer has any hesitation on the platform at campaign events in encouraging his followers to use violence against demonstrators – and he is reaping the rewards of these authoritarian aspirations. This dynamic is a sign of social unease among the white lower middle classes that is deeply rooted in American society and will continue long after the presidential elections are over.

## Conclusion

Each of the five factors addressed in this article – gerrymandering, the role of the media, campaign finance regulations, the lack of bipartisanship and the protests of the white middle classes – plays a part in explaining the Trump and Sanders phenomenon. At the same time, these factors also illustrate long-term trends in the U.S. political system and within American society.

The voting patterns in the U.S. Congress, especially within the House, since the 1970s (see fig. 2) show that polarising trends are more pronounced in the Republican camp than among the Democrats. There are several reasons for this, a small number of which are briefly outlined below:

- More than seven years of opposition at national level have been particularly influential in leading the GOP to become less pragmatic and moderate in its positions.



Influx: Especially white lower-middle class voters are increasingly feeling threatened by immigration and a rapidly changing society. Source: © Carlos Barria, Reuters.

- Since the 2010 mid-term elections, it has been crucial for the Republicans to mobilise supporters of the Tea Party movement established in 2009, including conservative Christians, in order to consolidate the party's power in the U.S. Congress and improve its chances in the presidential elections. Consequently, ultra-conservative positions have been strengthened within the GOP.
- Following its defeat in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, the party has failed to increase its appeal among ethnic minorities (especially African Americans, Latinos and Asians). Efforts to address the party's own conservative clientele have been redoubled to make up for these losses.
- Experts are largely in agreement that the Republicans have made particularly heavy use of gerrymandering in recent years.<sup>27</sup> Due to controlling more states than the Democrats, they were more often in a position to employ this instrument. However, demographic trends also play a role in this context. The growth of ethnic minority groups, who are not traditionally Republican supporters, is tending to send the conservative camp into what Senator Lindsey Graham (Republican, South Carolina) once referred to as a “demographic death spiral”.<sup>28</sup> On a tactical level, the GOP has certainly benefited from its own gerrymandering, as it has enabled many Republicans to achieve electoral wins at state and national level. However, from a strategic per-





Proximity to the people: For both in the U.S. and Europa, there is no other way to overcome the current crises than by listening to their citizens and taking their worries and fears seriously. [Source: © Kevin Lamarque, Reuters.](#)

spective, the practice also has negative effects because, as already mentioned, it gives rise to radicalisation within parties.

All these factors combine to produce a unique GOP dynamism which has gradually helped to shift the party ever further from the political center ground.

This radicalisation phenomenon, more pronounced in the GOP camp, will tend to make it more difficult for the party to win elections where the result is open and there is consequently a need for it to secure the support of moderate voters from its own ranks and from the political center ground. This is the case, for example, when gerrymandering plays no role at all, such

as in presidential and U.S. Senate elections. This means, for instance, that an ultra-conservative candidate such as Ted Cruz would most likely have lost against a moderate Democrat such as Clinton.

The ease with which Donald Trump triumphed over Ted Cruz in the Republican primaries shows in another respect just how dangerous political radicalisation can be for a party. It can be observed with regard to the Republican primaries that the at times very hard-line positions of some candidates concerning the GOP's program priorities, namely low taxes, less regulations, a small government and welfare state, law and order and traditional values, fail to appeal to millions of Republican supporters. The argument pro-



One thing is certain – the polarisation of the lower middle classes on the left and the right of the political spectrum will still be one of the greatest challenges facing the political system in the U.S. after the elections. And not only in the U.S.: we are also seeing in Europe how important it is for established parties to take seriously the fears and concerns of all citizens in order to avoid strengthening populist and anti-establishment movements. The recent gains by the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in Germany, the popularity of the Front National in France and the performance of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) candidate in the Austrian Presidential elections show that protest voters have long been an influential force in the EU as well. Consequently, it is high time that moderate powers find convincing answers to the political challenges that people face, as this is ultimately the only way to ensure that the recent gains by the populists remain a side note in the history books.

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pounded by GOP politicians that Trump is not a true conservative did not stop many primary voters from voting for him anyway. This shows that, for many voters, ideological purity is not a decisive factor, especially when they have economic and social concerns.

One question from this year's presidential elections that remains to be answered concerns Sanders' supporters: will they remain loyal to the Democratic Party in November if Clinton is nominated instead of their favourite? Analyses show that U.S. voters are currently reluctant to switch political camps.<sup>29</sup> Will some of them do so, nonetheless, and vote for Trump, especially if he adopts a position to the left of Clinton on certain issues?

- 1 GOP stands for Grand Old Party and refers in the United States to the Republican Party.
- 2 The term “gerrymandering” is derived from the name of former Governor of Massachusetts (1744 to 1814) and Vice-President of the United States (1813 to 1814) Elbridge Gerry, who was the first to make very heavy use of this instrument in his state
- 3 The electoral constituencies for House of Representatives elections are determined by the states.
- 4 Cf. Ingraham, Christopher 2014: America’s most gerrymandered congressional districts, *The Washington Post*, 15 May 2014, in: <http://wpo.st/y-5d1> [26 May 2016].
- 5 Please refer to the case of *Vieth v. Jubelirer*, 2004.
- 6 Cf. The Cook Political Report 2016: 2016 House Race Ratings for April 22, 2016, in: <http://cookpolitical.com/house/charts/race-ratings/9562> [26 May 2016].
- 7 President Reagan pushed through the abolition of the doctrine. The arguments for doing so were as follows: the doctrine violates the First Amendment to the United States Constitution (freedom of speech and freedom of the press) and property rights; radio and television stations should have the same rights as print media (no licensing obligation); abolishing the doctrine would help to reduce state interference in society; and, finally, this rule is no longer necessary, as technological advances enable broadcasts by a wide variety of television and radio channels, ensuring a broad range of ideas and opinions within society. Cf. Pagano, Penny 1987: Reagan’s Veto Kills Fairness Doctrine Bill, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Jun 1987, in: [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-06-21/news/mn-8908\\_1\\_fairness-doctrine](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-06-21/news/mn-8908_1_fairness-doctrine) [26 May 2016].
- 8 Cf. Ingram, Mathew 2016: Yes, the Media Is Partly to Blame for the Rise of Donald Trump, *Fortune*, 17 Mar 2016, in: <http://for.tn/1S6LlBj> [26 May 2016].
- 9 Super PACs are referred to in a similar way to the PACs that already exist. PACs stand for political action committees. These bodies collect donations for election campaigns, subject to specific legal requirements.
- 10 Cf. Confessore, Nicholas / Cohen, Sarah / Yourish, Karen 2015: The Families Funding the 2016 Presidential Election, *The New York Times*, 10 Oct 2015, in: <http://nyti.ms/1LcuEva> [26 May 2016].
- 11 Cf. Gold, Matea / Narayanswamy, Anu 2016: How ‘ghost corporations’ are funding the 2016 election, *The Washington Post*, 18 Mar 2016, in: <http://wpo.st/335d1> [26 May 2016].
- 12 Cf. Fulde, Lukas 2016: Data or Dogma? A Senate Hearing on the Human Impact on Climate Change, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Washington D.C., 5 Jan 2016, in: <http://kas.de/usa/en/publications/43862> [26 May 2016].
- 13 Such as Farris and Jo Ann Wilks, the founders of fracking firm Frac Tech, who are top donors to Cruz’s super PACs, having provided them with over ten million U.S. dollars.
- 14 Cf. Pew Research Center 2015: Perceptions of elected officials and the role of money in politics, 23 Nov 2015, in: <http://pewrsr.ch/1LuVmhz> [26 May 2016].
- 15 The official contributions made to each candidate’s campaign fund are shown on the Federal Election Commission’s homepage: <http://www.fec.gov/disclosure/pnational.do> [26 May 2016].
- 16 Cf. DeSilver, Drew 2014: The polarized Congress of today has its roots in the 1970s, Pew Research Center, 12 Jun 2014, in: <http://pewrsr.ch/SCAUr3> [26 May 2016].
- 17 See factors one to three.
- 18 Cf. Pew Research Center 2014: Political Polarization in the American Public, 12 Jun 2014, in: <http://pewrsr.ch/1mHULO2> [26 May 2016].
- 19 Cf. Pew Research Center 2016: Campaign Exposes Fissures Over Issues, Values and How Life Has Changed in the U.S., 31 May 2016, in: <http://pewrsr.ch/1VavnFO> [26 May 2016].
- 20 Political scientists differ when it comes to the causal affects between radicalisation within the political and the public sphere. However, they agree, that radicalisation is happening in both spheres.
- 21 Uslaner Eric M. 2015: Election 2016: Republican (and Democratic) Polarization in 6 Graphs, 17 Nov 2015, in: <https://igs.berkeley.edu/politics-blog/election-2016-republican-and-democratic-polarization-in-6-graphs> [26 May 2016].
- 22 Cf. Pew Research Center, n.18.
- 23 Cf. Beinart, Peter 2016: The Myth of the ‘Reagan Democrat’, *The Atlantic*, 28 Mar 2016, in: <http://theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/the-myth-of-the-reagan-democrat/475608> [26 May 2016].
- 24 See in particular the „Distressed Communities Index“ (February 2016) by the Economic Innovation Group, in: <http://eig.org/news/over-50-million-americans-live-in-economically-distressed-communities> [26 May 2016].
- 25 See among others: Galston, William A. 2016: How the GOP can win Trump’s supporters, Brookings Institution, 6 Apr 2016, in: <http://brook.gs/1Y2JEoQ> [26 May 2016].
- 26 Overview and summary of several studies: Taub, Amanda 2016: The rise of American authoritarianism, *Vox Media*, 1 Mar 2016, in: <http://vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism> [26 May 2016].
- 27 Cf. State Legislative and Congressional Redistricting after the 2010 Census, in: [https://ballotpedia.org/State\\_Legislative\\_and\\_Congressional\\_Redistricting\\_after\\_the\\_2010\\_Census](https://ballotpedia.org/State_Legislative_and_Congressional_Redistricting_after_the_2010_Census) ; Wang, Sam 2013: The Great Gerrymander of 2012, *The New York Times*, 2 Feb 2013, in: <http://nyti.ms/WMCC7Q> [26 May 2016].
- 28 Cf. Flegenheimer, Matt / Haberman, Maggie 2016: Money Pours In as Move to Stop Donald Trump Expands, *The New York Times*, 6 Mar 2016, in: <http://nyti.ms/1LKLHdB> [6 May 2016].
- 29 Cf. Beinart, n.23.