

eupinions slides

November 20, 2024

Old Habits Die Hard

Part I:

Remaking the Transatlantic Partnership:
EU and US Public Opinion

Isabell Hoffmann & Catherine E. De Vries

Introduction

A reframing of the transatlantic partnership has been long in the making. For 60 years, the American-European relationship has been steadfast. At the turn of the century, a rift started to emerge, however. Different threat analyses of Iraq's military capacities led to public disagreements between the Bush administration and some European leaders. A few years later, the rise of China led to a pivot to the Asia-Pacific by the Obama administration.

The re-election of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States who openly questions the value of the traditional western alliance put the relationship under further strain. When elected for the first time, Donald Trump viewed NATO as “obsolete” and the obstruction of the first G7 summit he attended was followed by a sigh of frustration in a Bavarian beer tent that made headlines worldwide.

“The times in which we can fully count on others are somewhat over, as I have experienced in the last few days,” said the then German Chancellor Angela Merkel. “We Europeans must really take our destiny into our own hands.” (McGee and Parker 2017)

Old habits die hard. European politics moved much slower than the circumstances required. So did the European public. In eupinions surveys from 2017, the European public expressed their strong dislike of Donald Trump. At the same time, however, only 25% of Europeans agreed “that it is time to go our own way” by the end of his first year in office. (De Vries and Hoffmann 2018)

The subsequent Democratic win of the White House and Joe Biden's presidency seemed to mark a return to a more cooperative approach to the transatlantic relationship. In October 2022, his administration published a new National Security Strategy that affirmed this view: “To effectively pursue a common global agenda, we are broadening and deepening the transatlantic bond—strengthening NATO, raising the level of ambition in the U.S.-EU relationship, and standing with our European allies and partners in defense of the rules-based system that underpins our security, prosperity, and values.” (United States National Security Council 2022) But Trump's lesson could not be unlearned. Europeans had understood that the United States were in the process of redefining their engagement with the world.

In every recent US election, two world visions are on the ballot: One focusses on a redefined American engagement in the world alongside partners, and another that is largely isolationist and puts narrowly understood national interest at its core. Against this backdrop, the outcome of the 2024 US presidential election, with Donald Trump returning to the White House, provides clarity about what to expect from the world's most powerful nation and the need for Europeans to adopt.

In view of this decision by the American voters, we revisited previous eupinions work and expanded our usual EU-wide sample by an American one. Drawing on a September 2024 survey, we examine how European and American citizens assess their role in the world, the threats they perceive and the allies they value. We present evidence for overall EU and US public opinion and a breakdown of the results by location, by age, by education and by political leaning.

In a nutshell, we see that 80 years of prime partnership have created a solid base of mutual appreciation and similar sensitivities: Europeans and Americans still see in the other their most valuable ally, NATO is highly regarded, cooperation trumps competition. However, eight years of American hyper-polarization at home and mixed messaging abroad have taken their toll. In 2024, 63% of Europeans agree that it is time for Europe to go its own way.

In this report, we focus on EU and US data. For survey results in seven EU member states, see **Part II: [Old Habits Die Hard – Member States Report](#)**.

Following a breakdown of our key findings question by question, as well as all results as infographics, including subgroups:

Who's the European Union's / the United States' most valuable ally?

51% of Europeans pick the United States as the EU's most valuable ally. One's location – city or rural – does not seem to have an important impact on this assessment. Age however, does. Our data suggests that younger people are less likely to pick the US as most valuable ally: 38% of those aged 18–35 do, 52% of those aged 36–55 do and 63% of those over the age of 55 do. Europeans with a university degree are more likely to point to the US as the EU's most valuable ally and those who position themselves politically in the center are more likely than those at the edges. Americans point either to the EU (25%) or the UK (27%) as their most valuable ally. In either subgroup (location, age, education or political leaning), a large majority looks towards Europe for support. Again, those younger and those with lower education differ slightly: 40% of those aged 18–35, 34% of those without a high school degree and 46% of those with a high school degree make the same choice. (see page 6)

What is the greatest threat to peace in the European Union / the United States today?

Failing to secure borders is the top concern for Europeans and Americans alike. 25% of Europeans and 35% of Americans name it as the greatest threat to peace today. Second in place for Europeans are terrorist attacks (21%), Americans worry more about large size cyber attacks (26%). The picture is fairly similar through all subgroups.

It is interesting though that political leaning matters most when assessing the importance of border security. The more a person is on the right, the more salient the issue. In the EU, 28% of those on the center-right pick it, 37% of those on the right. In the US, 46% of those on the center-right choose it and 63% of those on the right. (see page 7)

Do you think your country's membership in NATO protects against that threat?

Europeans and Americans see NATO as a cornerstone of their security. 64% of Europeans and 59% of Americans believe that NATO protects against what they assess as the prime threat. In the EU, those on the right (48%) are as least likely to believe that NATO protects against their prime threat. In the US, those in cities (64%), those with low education (65%), and those on the center-left (71%) or left (71%) are most likely to believe that NATO does protect against that threat. (see page 8)

Do international relations thrive on cooperation or on competition?

80% of Americans and Europeans believe that international relations thrive on cooperation, not on competition. In Europe, those younger (18-35: 29%), those with low education (29%), and those on the left (29%) are more likely to pick competition rather than cooperation as a thriver of international relations. In the US, those younger (18-35: 30%), those with lower education (36%), and those positioning themselves rather on the political edges (left: 25% / right: 23%) than in the political center do the same. (see page 9)

Imagine you could choose what the EU / US should focus on in the coming years. What would it be?

Europeans pick “Secure peace” (20%) as the most important task for the EU, whereas Americans choose “Protect citizens’ rights” (23%) as the most important task for the US in the years to come. “Manage migration” comes in second on both sides of the Atlantic (EU 15% / US 16%). (see page 10)

The European Union / United States should play a more active role in world affairs.

Here, important differences emerge. A large majority of Europeans (73%) want the EU to play a more active role in world affairs. A notably smaller majority of Americans want the same for the US (56%). Political leaning influences one's position towards international engagement on both sides of the Atlantic: The more to the left, the higher the support for a more active role in world affairs. In the EU, 83% on the left, 79% on the center-left, 71% on the center-right, and 50% on the right support a more active role in world affairs. In the US, 77% on the left, 62% on the center-left, 46% on the center-right and 40% on the right share this assessment. (see page 11)

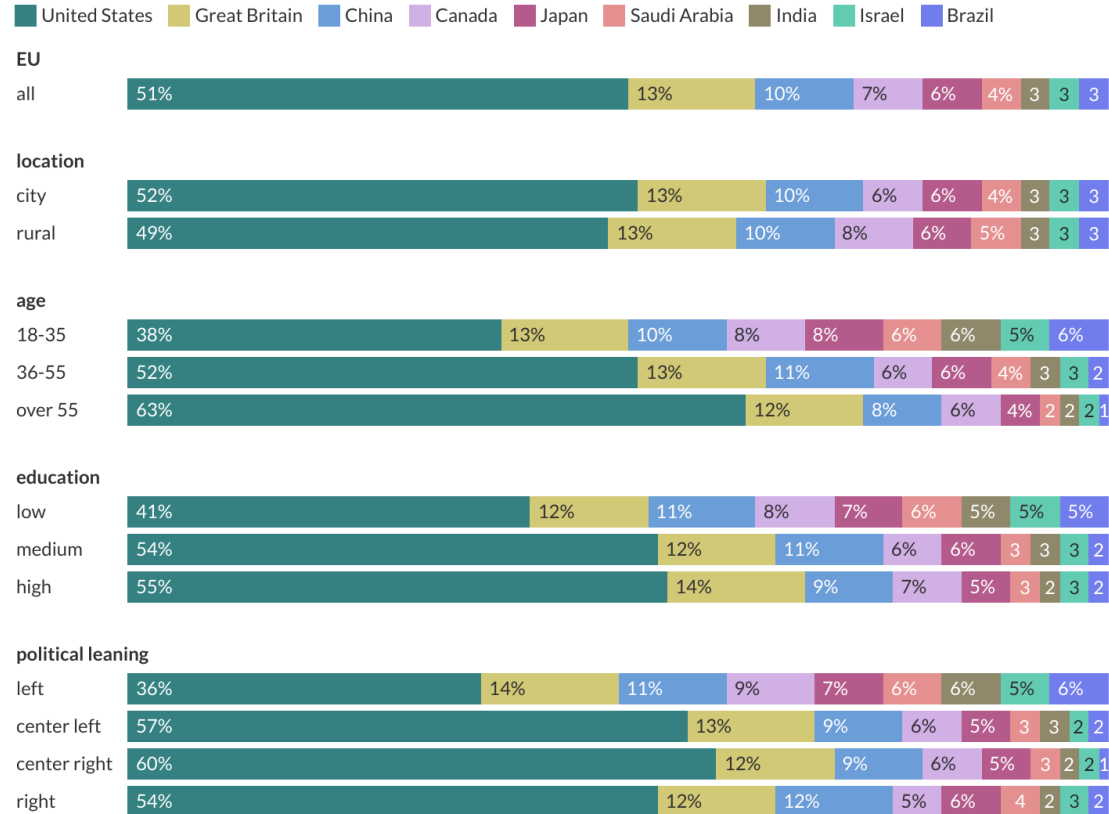
In the last half century, Europe and the United States have often cooperated closely. Do you think that it is time for the EU / the US to go its own way?

Most Americans (65%) disagree with this question. Most Europeans (63%) agree with it. Young people (18–35: 68%) and those on the left (74%) agree even more strongly. (see page 12)

EU: Who's the European Union's most valuable ally?

Results for the EU, and by location, age, education, and political leaning

Only one answer possible

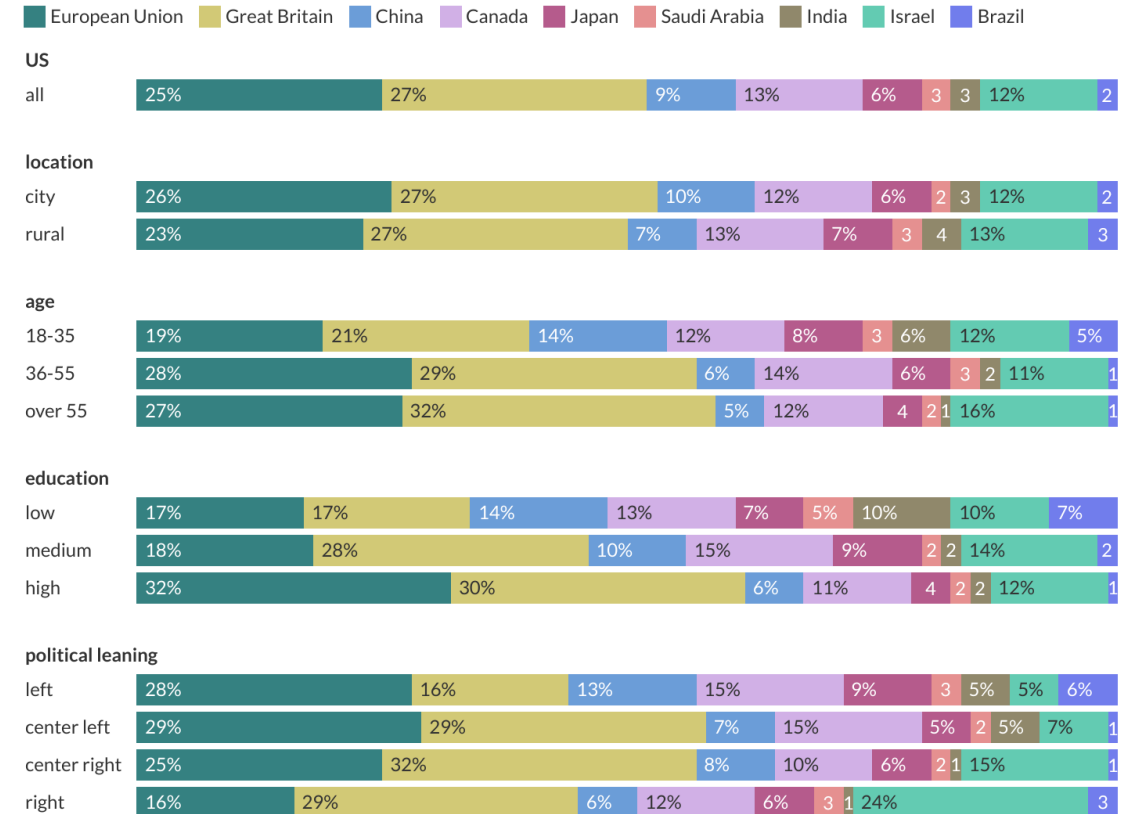


September 2024

US: Who's the United States' most valuable ally?

Results for the US, and by location, age, education, and political leaning

Only one answer possible



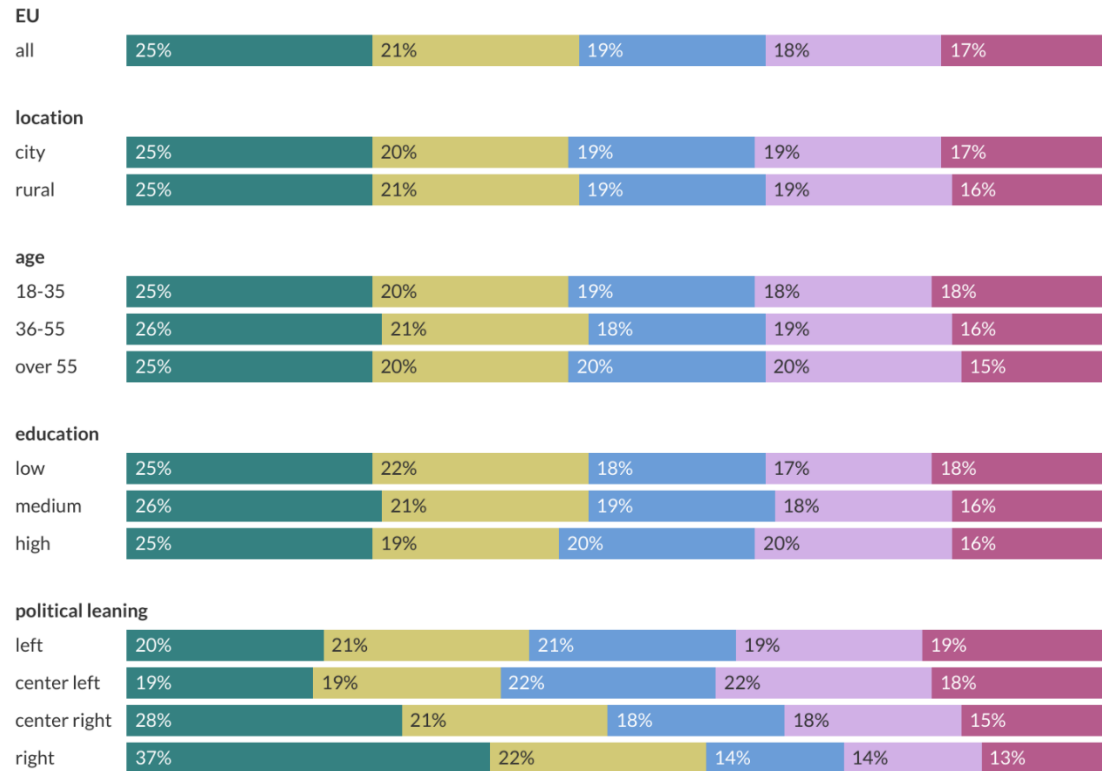
September 2024

EU: What is the greatest threat to peace in the European Union today?

Results for the EU, and by location, age, education, and political leaning

Only one answer possible

■ Failing to secure borders
 ■ Being attacked by terrorists
 ■ Falling victim to a large size cyber attack
 ■ Being attacked by a foreign aggressor
 ■ Being undermined by organised crime



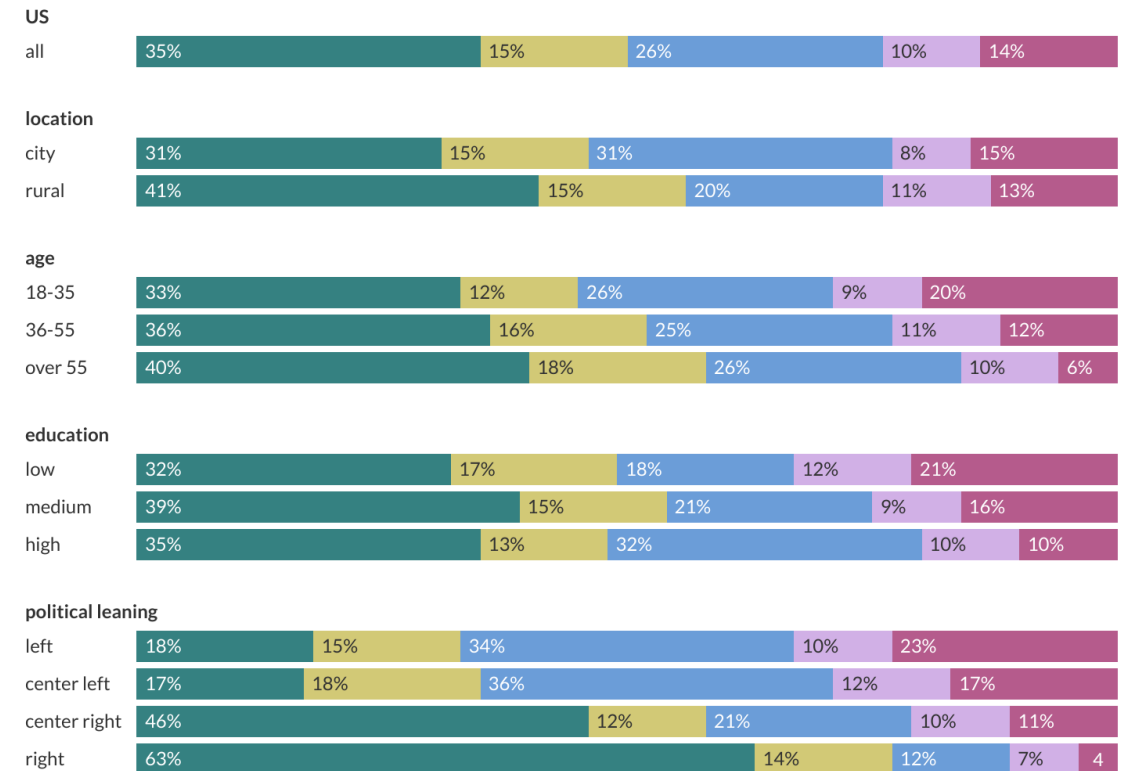
September 2024

US: What is the greatest threat to peace in the United States today?

Results for the US, and by location, age, education, and political leaning

Only one answer possible

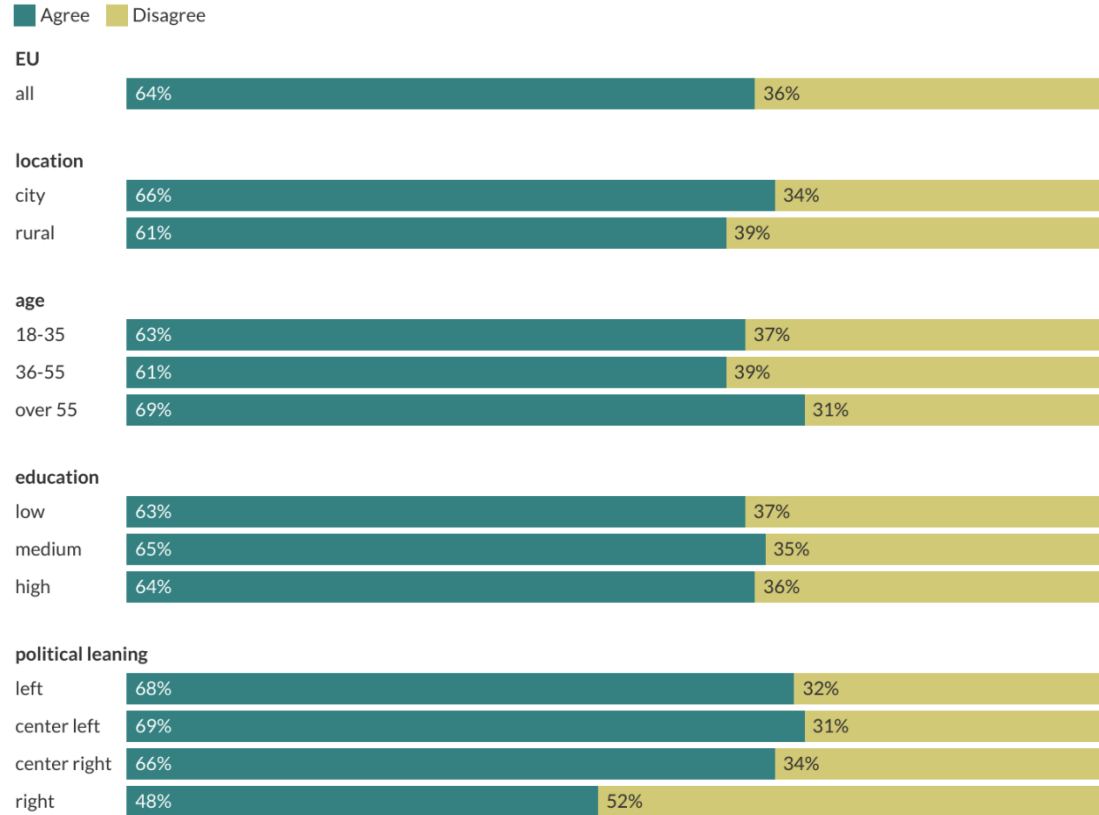
■ Failing to secure borders
 ■ Being attacked by terrorists
 ■ Falling victim to a large size cyber attack
 ■ Being attacked by a foreign aggressor
 ■ Being undermined by organised crime



September 2024

EU: Do you think your country's membership in NATO protects against that threat?

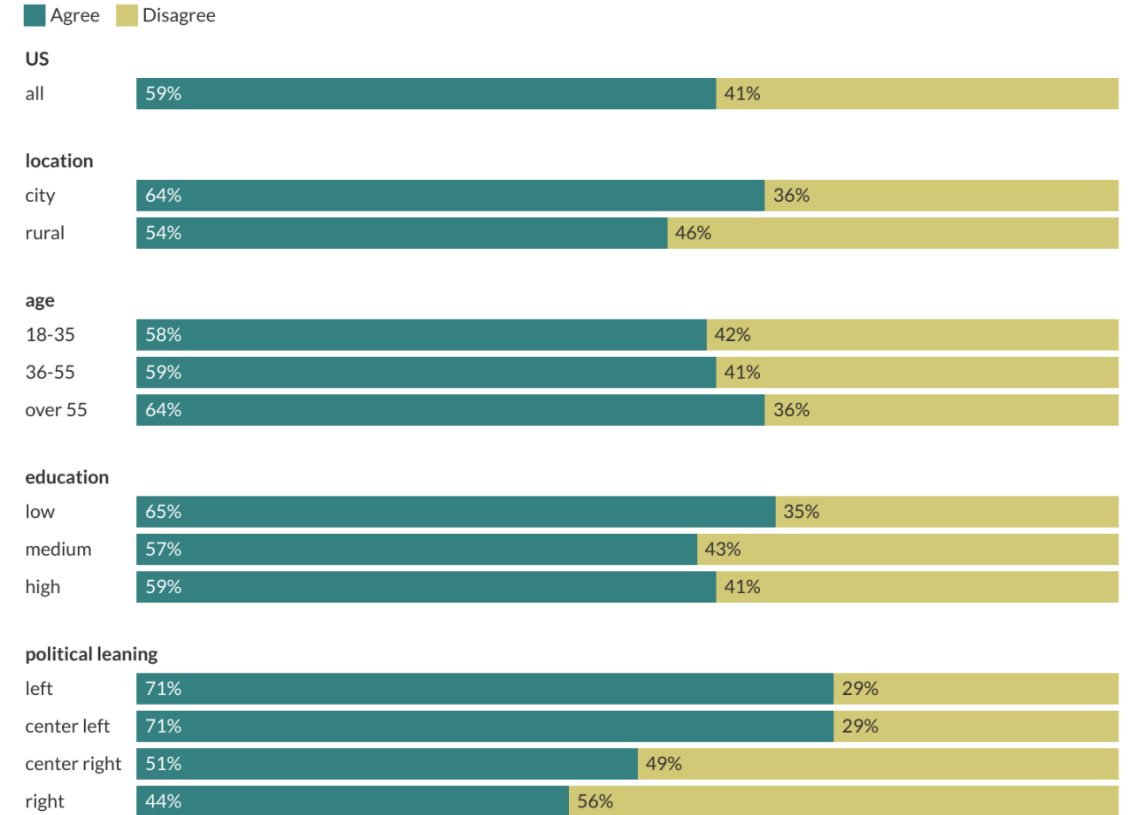
Results for the EU, and by location, age, education, and political leaning



September 2024

US: Do you think your country's membership in NATO protects against that threat?

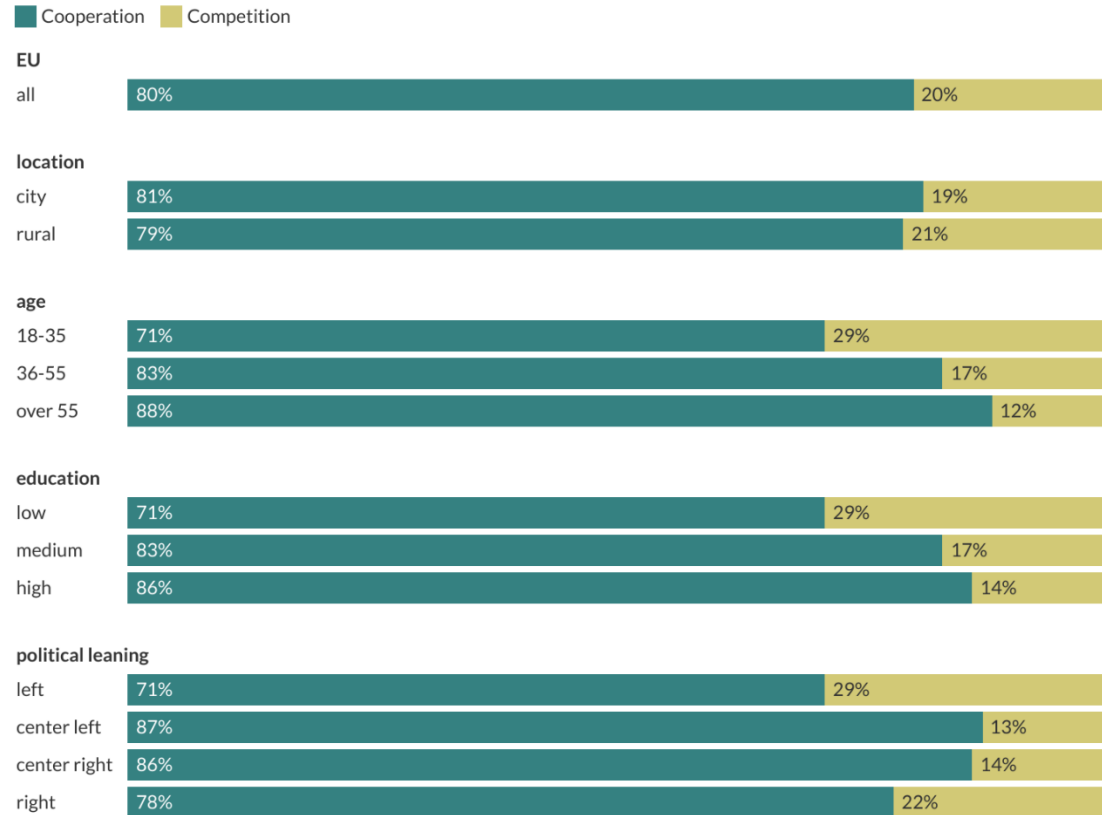
Results for the US, and by location, age, education, and political leaning



September 2024

EU: International relations thrive on ...

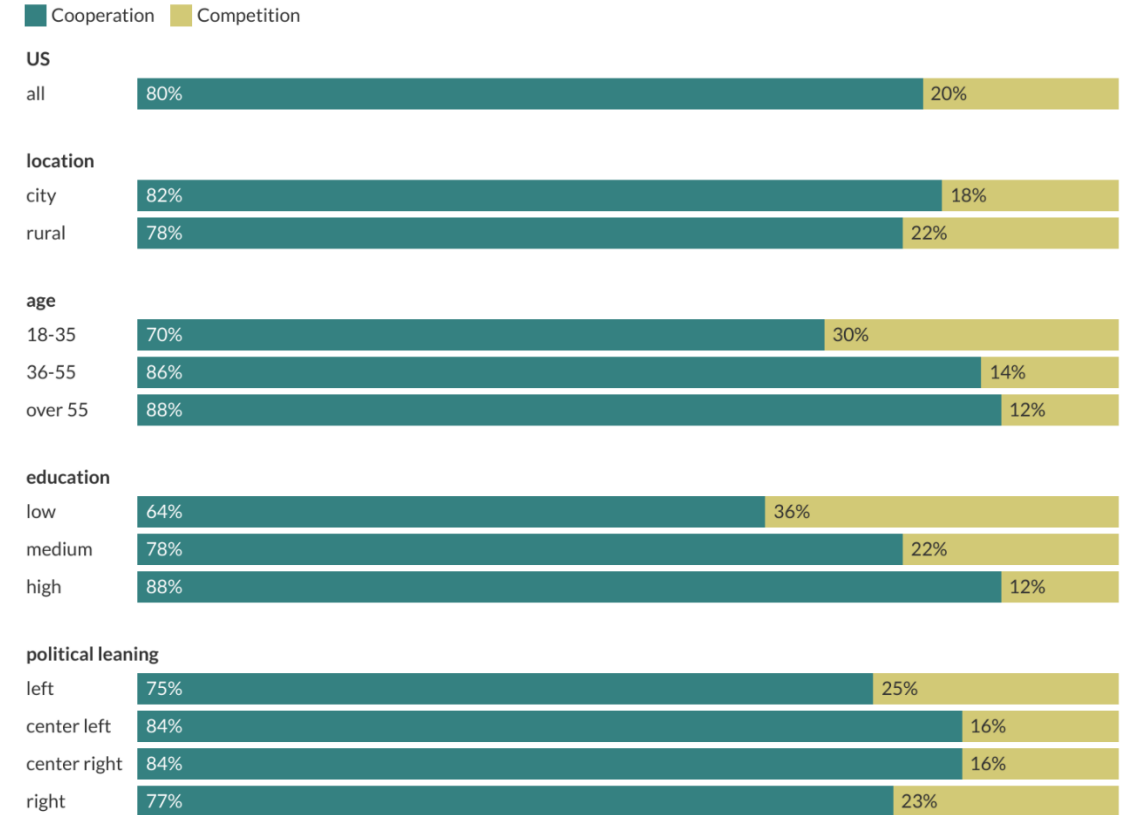
Results for the EU, and by location, age, education, and political leaning



September 2024

US: International relations thrive on ...

Results for the US, and by location, age, education, and political leaning



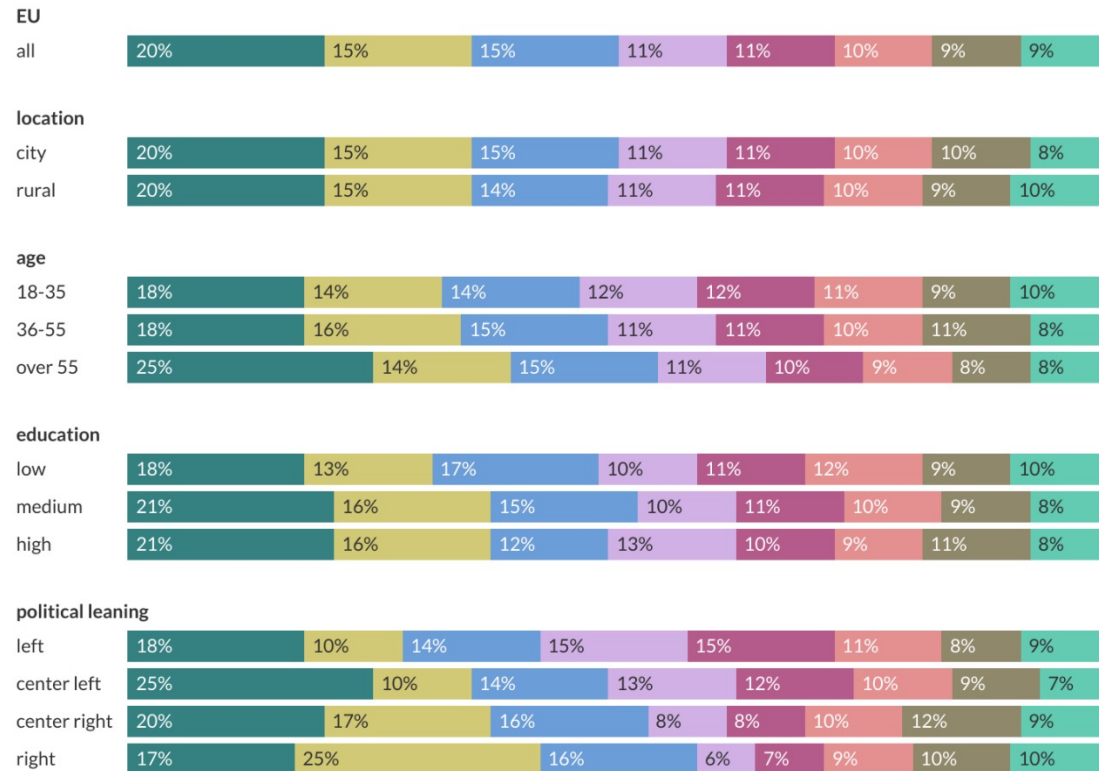
September 2024

EU: Imagine you could choose what the EU should focus on in the coming years. What would it be?

Results for the EU, and by location, age, education, and political leaning

Only one answer possible

Secure peace Manage migration Protect citizens' rights Stop climate change Fight inequality Secure public health Create growth Fight terrorism



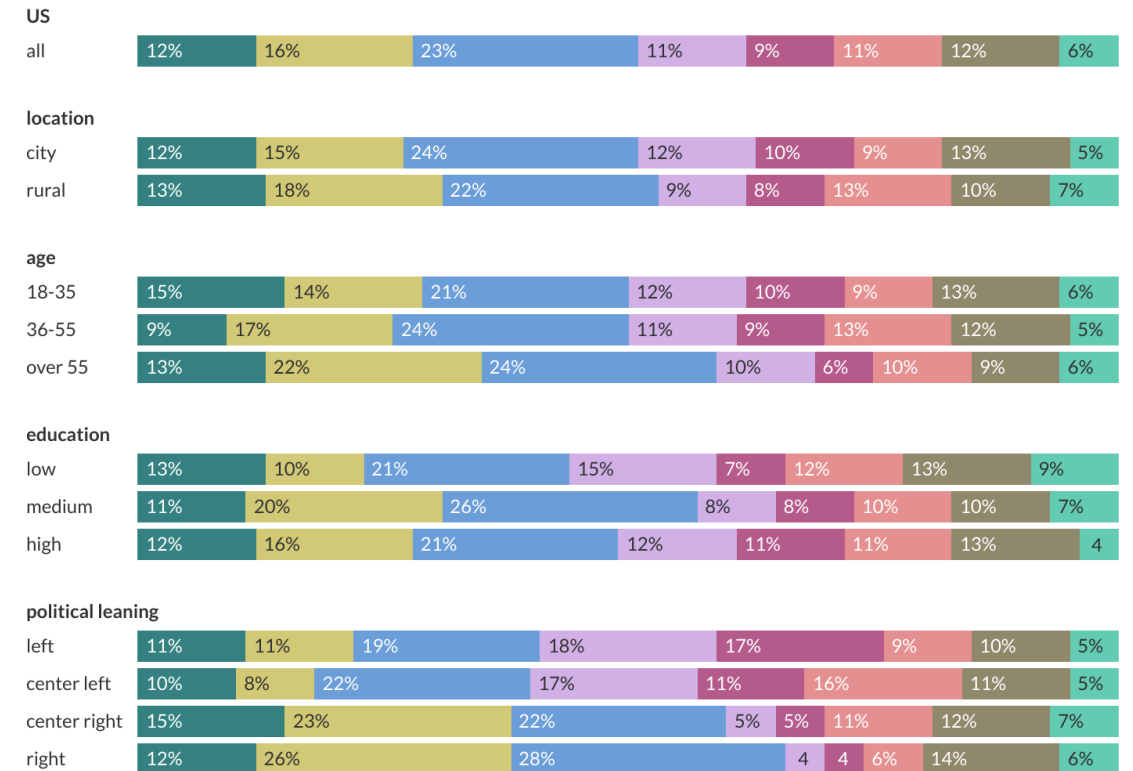
September 2024

US: Imagine you could choose what the US should focus on in the coming years. What would it be?

Results for the US, and by location, age, education, and political leaning

Only one answer possible

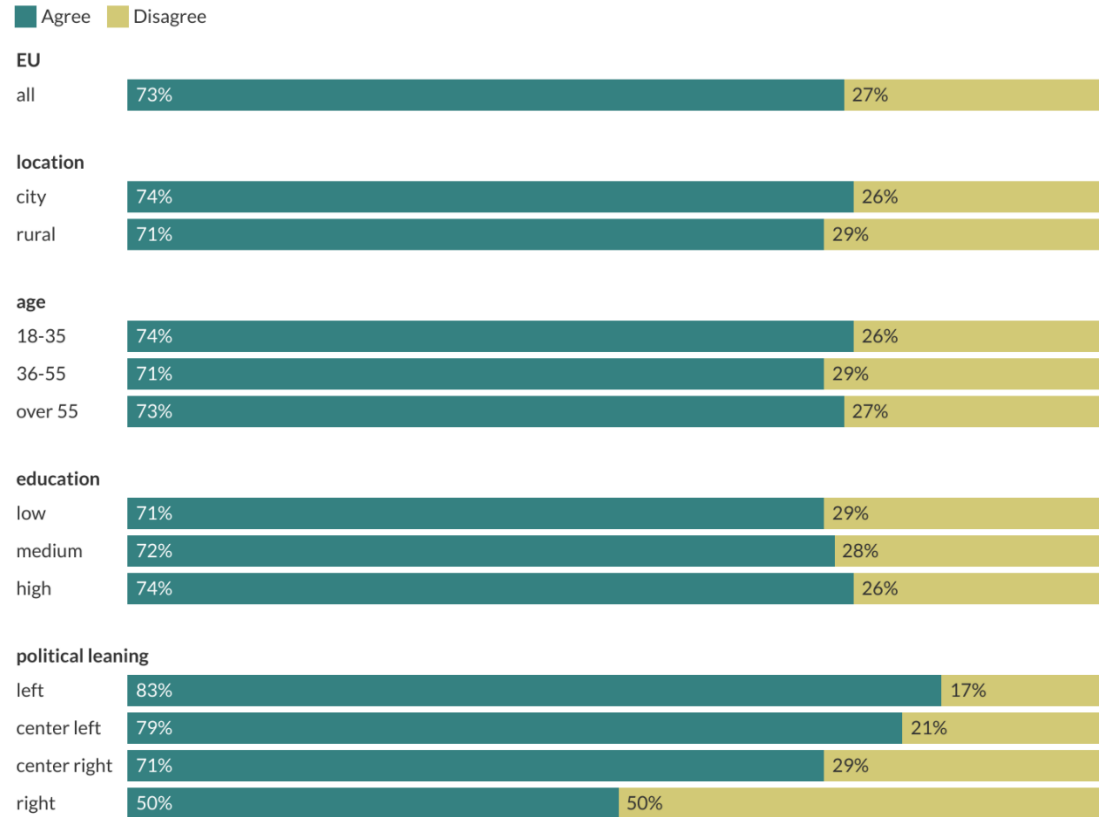
Secure peace Manage migration Protect citizens' rights Stop climate change Fight inequality Secure public health Create growth Fight terrorism



September 2024

EU: The European Union should play a more active role in world affairs.

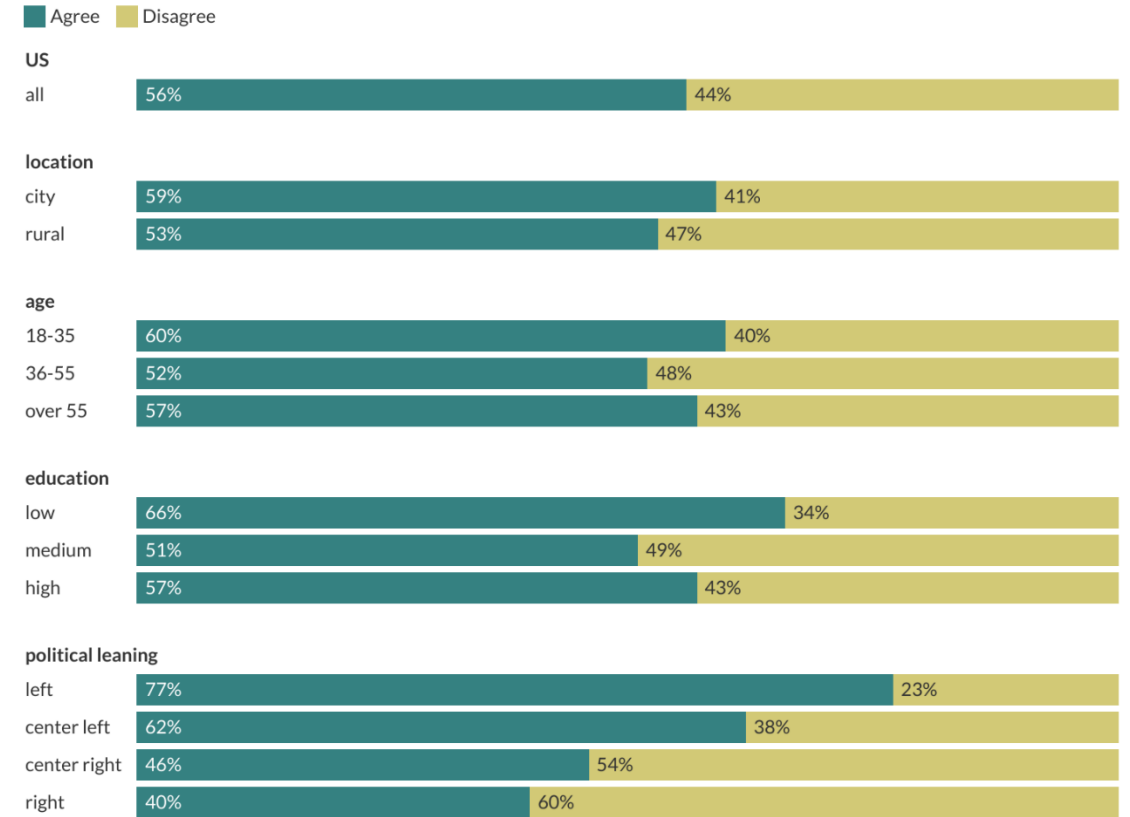
Results for the EU, and by location, age, education, and political leaning



September 2024

US: The United States should play a more active role in world affairs.

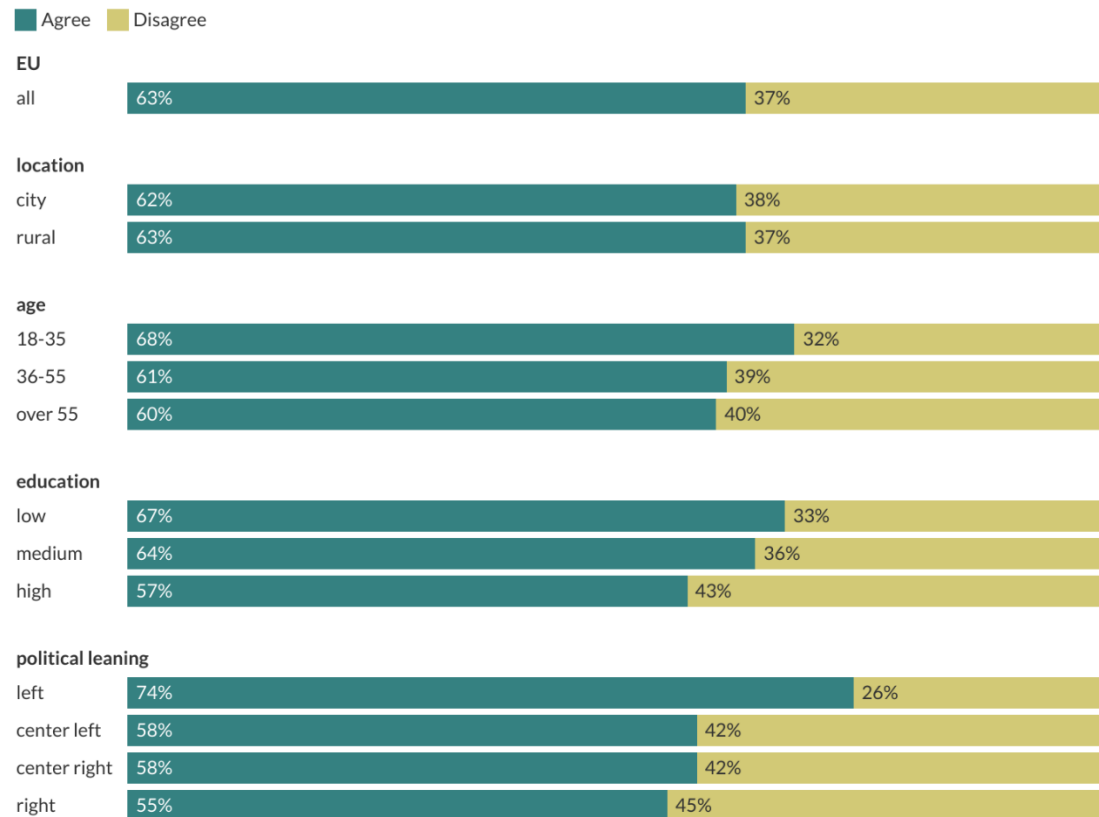
Results for the US, and by location, age, education, and political leaning



September 2024

EU: In the last half century, Europe and the United States have often cooperated closely. Do you think that it is time for the EU to go its own way?

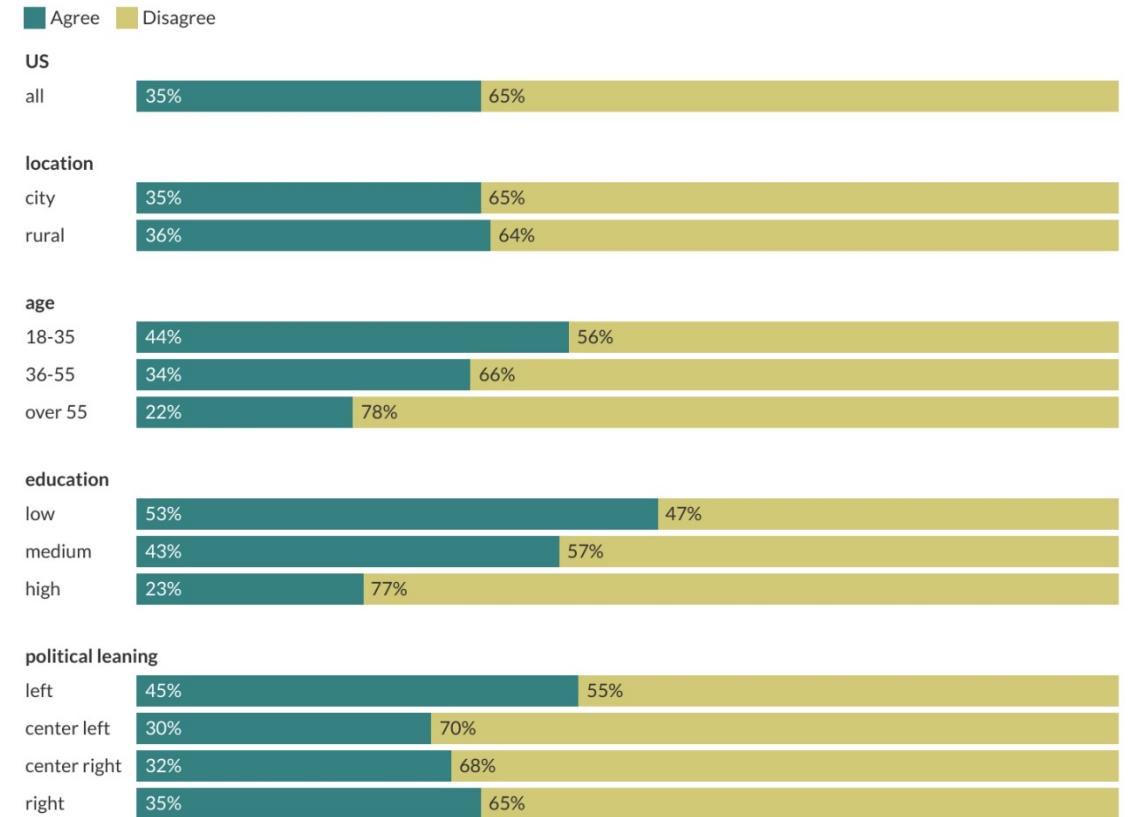
Results for the EU, and by location, age, education, and political leaning



September 2024

US: In the last half century, Europe and the United States have often cooperated closely. Do you think that it is time for the US to go its own way?

Results for the US, and by location, age, education, and political leaning



September 2024

Conclusion

The outcome of the 2024 presidential elections will likely put the transatlantic partnership between the European Union and the United States under strain. President-elect Donald Trump has in the past been open about his support for an America First agenda and his disdain for international cooperation. He is likely to follow the same course during his second stint in office. It is ironic that just as the Americans finally have an answer to the classical question of who to call in Europe, the newly re-elected Commission president Ursula von der Leyen who enjoys a high level of name recognition (De Vries, Hoffmann, Hix 2024), the communication between both partners is likely to become icy and infrequent.

Our analysis of public opinion shows that Europeans have understood the consequences of these developments for their own continent. 63% of Europeans think it is time for Europe to go its own way, up from 25% by the end of 2017 (De Vries and Hoffmann 2018). That said, at the same time, both the European and American public view NATO as a cornerstone of their security, and favor cooperation over competition in international politics.

What do these results mean for the European Union under a newly elected leadership of the Commission and Council?

European citizens seem to understand the need for more security and foreign affairs cooperation in Europe to deal with the growing geopolitical challenges. The question will be if national government leaders throughout member states feel the same and allow the European Union to meet this moment. So far, fragmentation rather than unity has been the name of the game when it comes to common foreign and security policy at the European level.

In 2017, leaders needed time to adjust to a new transatlantic reality and reacted reluctantly. By now, they will have understood that the old America is not coming back. They cannot hope for the best. They need to prepare for the worst: A United States that is hyper-transactional, sometimes antagonistic, and self-centered.

Given the political difficulties of coordinating security policies at the European level and the long-time horizon that will be required to build a European defense, in the short term different avenues to strengthen European security should be explored: Be it within the framework of the EU, be it within the framework of bi- or multilateral agreements.

Recently signed security agreements between France and the UK (Lancaster House), Germany and France (Aachen Treaty), and Germany and the UK (Trinity House) could be a step into the right direction if they lead to a security set-up equally benefitting smaller or economic weaker countries. Enhanced European security capacities could also serve to strengthen Europe's role within NATO. Finally, European aid for Ukraine should be ramped up to offset the expected loss of support from the United States and to show that Europeans know the stakes and are ready to step up.

Our results also lay bare uncomfortable truths about the nature of the EU-US relationship. No doubt the Europeans will have to chip in more to safeguard their own security, and the Americans will not be able to entirely pivot to the Asia-Pacific as wars continue to rage in Ukraine, Gaza and Lebanon, but how will the balance between assertiveness and cooperation be struck? The European and American public clearly value institutional cooperation initiatives that were built over the last century, primarily in the context of NATO. Simultaneously meeting the demands for stepping up capacities and partnering with others is a tall task.

This is especially difficult for politicians who wish to win in the court of public opinion and get re-elected. The responsibility to steer the transatlantic relationship through this difficult moment lies with the newly minted European and American leadership. If they fail, consequences will be felt for generations. History will be their judge.

References

De Vries, C. E. and Hoffmann, I. (2018). Cold Love: President Trump and the European Public. *eupinions brief 2018/1*, Bertelsmann Stiftung.

URL: <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/cold-love>

De Vries, C. E., Hoffmann, I. and Hix, S. (2024). The Von der Leyen Effect: High visibility, low accountability. *eupinions report 2024/1*, Bertelsmann Stiftung.

URL: <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/the-von-der-leyen-effect>

McGee, P. and Parker, G. (2017). Europe cannot rely on US and faces life without UK, says Merkel. *Financial Times*, May 28.

URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/51ed8b90-43b9-11e7-8519-9f94ee97d996>

United States National Security Council (2022): *National Security Strategy*.

URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>

About eupinions

eupinions is an independent platform for European public opinion. We collect and analyze data on European public opinion and comment on what Europeans think about current political issues and megatrends.

Every quarter, we collect samples from each EU member state in 22 languages.

Our data is representative with regard to age, gender, education and country/region.

eupinions is a Bertelsmann Stiftung project. The data is collected by Latana.

Visit www.eupinions.eu for further information!

Methodology note

The samples analyzed in this report were drawn by Latana in September 2024 across all 27 EU member states (with a size of $n=26,454$) and the United States of America (with a size of $n=2,543$). Our samples take into account current population distributions with regard to age (18–69 years), gender, education and country/region. In order to obtain census representative results, the data were weighted using the most recent Eurostat (EU) and Barro–Lee (US) statistics.

Given the sample size and design–effect considerations, the margin of error is 0.8% (EU) and 3% (US) at a confidence level of 95%.



Visit us

 eupinions.eu

Follow us

 @eupinions

Imprint

© November 2024
Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Responsible for content

Isabell Hoffmann
Daniela Schmidt
Phone: +49 30 275 788 126
isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de