



## DEBATE

**Virginie Robert, Foreign Desk Editor at *Les Échos*, Vice President of the European-American Press Club in Paris**

It is interesting to see that as in Russia, somehow the elections are going to be a survey on what people think, especially about foreign affairs and the United States, which is something we have not really had a good grasp of up until now.

Are there any questions in the room?

**Michel Foucher, member of the Center for Higher European Studies, Senior Advisor to the Compagnie Jacques Cœur**

I have a short question for Jean-Claude. Do you see an alternative candidate on the Democratic party side who would be the equivalent of Nikki Halley for the Republican party.

**Jean-Claude Gruffat, member of United Way Leadership Council, board member of Atlas Network, Managing Director of Weild and Co LLC New York**

The short answer is the Governor of California or the Governor of Michigan.

**Virginie Robert**

That is Gavin Newsom, the Governor of California.

**Daniel Andler, Professor Emeritus at Sorbonne University, member of the Académie des sciences morales et politiques, philosopher**

I am dumbfounded that none of you ever mentioned the role of social media and the role of artificial intelligence in the amplification of well-known propaganda tricks. The journalist from Japan said that people are immune to rational arguments but I am not so convinced, they are not immune to propaganda when it is done in a certain industrial way. Whatever your opinion on this well-known topic, what do you think about it and what do you think the role will be of these AI-powered propaganda systems for the coming elections?

**Virginie Robert**

This is the perfect timing because this is actually one of my questions, so I am very glad you brought it up. The power of generative AI, do you think that politicians should have some kind of transparency during the elections where they say they have a roadmap, they are not going to use AI or if we do we will do it in a particular way? Is this something that should come up now in the political discourse in campaigning?

**Hiroyuki Akita, Commentator of *Nikkei*, Japan**

I think it is a very serious problem and that there should be some restrictions. The situation is that the political landscape is polarized but especially in the US, and I feel there is huge



polarization of the media. I can watch some news programs on CNN and then turn to a parallel world on Fox News, and then I switch to another one. I think that even objective TV programs provide different angles but without any restrictions on the free flow of information in unrestricted cyberspace it will amplify a very chaotic situation and it can be easily disrupted or manipulated by some state actors.

**Virginie Robert**

Igor, I would like your take on this because there have been a lot of accusations against Russian trolls during elections, especially in the States in 2016. What is your answer because there is a real fear?

**Igor Yurgens, Chairman of the Management board of the Institute of Contemporary Development in Moscow**

The official election is overly organized and fully controlled, in the mass of social media you have a lot of different opinions, some of them very exotic and some of them that go beyond reason. The only attempt I know of was during the last election when the opposition called for votes for anybody, communist, socialist or extreme-right, as long as they were against the ruling party. This experiment ended up with 1.5% of the result, so from this point of view when the country is organized as we are and controlled as we are, then the social media effort creates a lot of noise but no efficient electoral result.

**Virginie Robert**

What about outside?

**Igor Yurgens**

Second, a lot of people left our country after the beginning of the conflict with Ukraine, especially the young, productive and creative. We were discussing it with some of them today and they are completely split with no unity, they keep accusing each other of all kind of mistakes rather than mobilizing for one candidate who would represent real opposition.

**Virginie Robert**

Isabelle, maybe you could address this as a journalist covering foreign elections, the fact that we now have to be aware of so much fake news going around, that elections and freedom of speech are really manipulated so it makes it very complicated for journalists to work. What do you think of it?

**Isabelle Lasserre, Diplomatic Correspondent for *Le Figaro***

It is one more argument to be on the ground and not to cover elections through social media. I think it is one of the weaknesses of democracy, countries like Russia and China have been investing for years in cyber warfare and initiatives. The elections in Europe and the States have been hacked for years and Europe only realized two or three years ago but the changes come very slowly. For years we have considered that our purpose as democratic countries was not to have an attack department in the cyber field, just one for defense so we have not invested in this for moral reasons and today, it is very difficult to be effectively protected.

I have just come back from Taiwan and it is very interesting because Taiwan is subjected to cyberattacks from China during every election, influences through Kuomintang media paid for by China. This year they succeeded in lowering the level of fake news. The system was that China was influencing the Taiwanese people by investing in religious institutions. This year Taiwan managed to cut the money coming from China so there has been a decrease of 40%



or 50% in the Chinese influence directly on Taiwan. This is an example but we are a long way from what needs to be done.

**Virginie Robert**

I know that we are just starting in France and we have a very defensive position right now not an offensive one.

**Isabelle Lasserre**

It is taboo.

**John Andrews, Author, journalist and contributing editor to *The Economist***

I have a question for Jean-Claude. Is it plausible that Joe Biden can somehow persuade Kamala Harris not to be his running mate with a good job offer and if so, does he need to find a black woman as her replacement? Clearly Gavin Newsom would not be that. On the Republican side, do you think that Nikki Haley is basically running to be Trump's running mate?

**Jean-Claude Gruffat**

I think it is too late for Biden to replace Kamala Harris. He has made the announcement, Kamala Harris will be running with Biden if Biden is the nominee, which is likely to happen, for the Democratic party. If Biden wanted to replace Kamala Harris it could have been done, essentially when he announced his candidacy, so she is the candidate for Vice President. Frankly speaking one of the arguments the Republicans will be and should be using, when you look at Biden, how he behaves, what he says, the way he expresses himself, people have to think that Kamala Harris is likely to be the next President. I wish him well but Kamala Harris is likely to be the President that the Democratic party will elect if they vote for Biden.

I had the privilege of meeting Nikki Haley at fundraising events in New York when she started her campaign and I had one-to-one conversations with her and she said very publicly that she was running for President not to be Vice president; I believe her. To be frank, she is 53 or 54, if she does not make it this time she has a very good chance of being the nominee for the next election when she will be 57 or 58. Trump is likely to be the Republican party nominee and he will obviously choose someone to be Vice President, and good luck to them because this election is a toss-up. Forget about the primaries, if you look at the polls it is really close and so many things can happen between now and the election, particularly for Trump too, who is facing so many issues and Biden too with inflation, the southern border, and the family. The fact of the matter is that Trump only thinks about himself and he does not care. He will have a Vice President candidate but it is very unlikely to be Nikki Haley or Ron DeSantis for that matter. I will be somebody else and it could be the Governor of North or South Dakota, a white woman not an African-American, but she is very popular in some conservative circles. I have forgotten her name but I am sure you can find it, I think she is the Governor of South Dakota.

**Virginie Robert**

We have to look for Nikki Haley but four more years.

**Axel Gyldén, journalist of *L'Express***

Is there a scenario where Joe Biden steps down before summer and it happens the old way with a convention this time for a new candidate? Or what happens if Biden is sick, or is impeached?

**Virginie Robert**

Another scenario for Biden.

**Jean-Claude Gruffat**

I do not believe there would be impeachment, it is not for sickness. If the Democrats are able to make a link his family's fundraising and two cheques have been produced where he received 10% from money received by his brother and son, but they were marked loan repayments. Biden is not going to be impeached, there is not going to be enough evidence and I am not sure if he is really corrupt. The family has been trying to benefit from his name by getting money from shady characters in Romania, Russia, China, etc., and everyone does that in the political scene in the United States and even if they have done it to an unprecedented extent but that is not going to be enough. The only thing that could prevent him from being the nominee would be his health, if he had a major health issue he might have to step down. Otherwise, I just learned yesterday that he is not even registered for primary in New Hampshire, and you have to register for the primary in every state. He is taking for granted that he will be the nominee of the party and only a significant health issue would prevent that being the case.

**Virginie Robert**

That is what happens when you have an incumbent President, they do not go through the primary process.

**Axel Gyldén**

Just to clarify, I meant impeached by his health not for judicial reasons.

**Jean-Claude Gruffat**

I understand. My answer is that a major health issue is the only reason he would not stand.

**Nicolas Piau, Co-Founder & CEO of Tilt Capital**

Thank you very much, it has been very insightful. Maybe a question drawing on Ms. Lasserre's point on continuity. Is it correct to read what is happening right now in 2024 being a step in the direction of continuity towards a big move globally to far-right extremism fueled by social media and fake news, etc.? How do we get out of that? To be frank, as a European citizen I am extremely concerned by the fact that every time we move and see a scandal in terms of manipulation, it goes in the direction of far-right extremism and it is very hard to fight the arguments of this trend on a rational basis.

**Virginie Robert**

The fact is that there are more and more votes for populist candidates in general and each time there is a scandal it brings out more nationalism and populism. It is often but not always true, as we saw in Poland after some years the opposition was able to find another path. We have to have confidence in the people who are voting and are able to choose differently. However, it is true and if you look at Europe, for example, a lot of nationalistic countries have been building up and we have a lot of governments and coalitions now with the far-right and that has never happened before. If I understand you correctly, you are concerned about this movement towards more nationalism in elections.

**Hiroyuki Akita**



I worry more about the fragmentation of the global world order rather than rising nationalism. Rising nationalism in individual states is a very serious problem but I worry more about the deep fragmentation of the international system through the series of elections over the coming year. Maybe people talk about a multipolar world but that means you have a poles, the US, Europe, and maybe China or hopefully, Japan, India and Poland. However, maybe the world will be more like a multi-universe without a strong pole and co-existing together without any order. That is more dangerous.

**Virginie Robert**

That was the big concern of the two round tables we had this morning, which were really interesting and said that those elections are an attempt to pull together and discover our common objectives and the world objectives you need to define on the economic side but also the political side.

**Isabelle Lasserre**

On the question of disinformation, I really agree with you, it is very frightening. What we see today is that every time you have two sides, the disinformation is overwhelming and today the facts are less important than the perception, emotion and ideology. The most recent example is absolutely obvious between Israel and Hamas. Depending on where you are in the world, you simply do not see the same images. It is very hard to counter disinformation but also to counter the speed it is distributed and the emotion driven by social networks and the Internet. It is not audible anymore and of course, this leads to more extremism everywhere in the world and on every subject.

**Virginie Robert**

Thank you. We have covered a lot of ground and touched on a lot of different topics and it was very interesting. Thank you very much all for being here this afternoon and thanks to our panelists.