

Final report Kellen Fellow Jörg Ratzsch, Fellowship Oct 19, 2016 - Nov 10 2016

I had it all planned. A detailed schedule in my pocket I got on the plane to Los Angeles on this rainy October 19. When I got back to Berlin three weeks later this schedule had proved to be a good map but many things I learned that I brought back home came from off schedule events that just happened and from opportunities to talk to people that suddenly opened up.

This Kellen Fellowship was a most valuable experience which I am deeply thankful for. Three weeks full of input and reflection. And it was not just the expected fact gathering and soaking up of information. Because it happened at this very special time the fellowship built up an intensity than I would not have expected when I planned it. These were not just Presidential elections - these were elections that in many aspects pointed directly at the changes and challenges that our western democracies face right now: A rising distrust in democratic institutions and a growing scepticism towards the political process, a struggle of journalism against constant questioning of its credibility, a shift in news and information consumption away from traditional media to online and social media bubbles, a growing problem of fake news, deliberate disinformation, a failing of polls and classic campaign strategies plus a diffuse sense of disenfranchisement among (obviously quite large) parts of the population.

I didn't travel as a newbie. I have known the United States since I went on a high school exchange year in 1993. I completed my master in American studies. I have many friends in the U.S. and I have travelled there several times for recreation or professional reasons. For the Kellen Fellowship I had worked out a very detailed plan: For three weeks I would interview pollsters, data scientists, political scientists, journalist colleagues, volunteers etc. to see how campaigning in a Presidential election works today, to find out about what's different from Germany, see how people participate and look at measures of direct democracy.

POLLS

When I met sociologist Michael Pollard of RAND Corporation in Santa Monica almost three weeks before the election he was quite sure - as was the majority of pollsters at that time - who would be the winner of this race: "According to the PEPS-poll [RAND poll] before the

first presidential debate Clinton was up significantly. That close to the election a difference of that magnitude would be very difficult to make up, so I'm expecting Clinton to win." Since polling has been a real industry in the U.S. with decades of experience there seemed to be no reason not to believe what the polls showed. And compared to Germany journalists in the U.S. also have a very comfortable tool at hand: Just like checking trade charts you can do your daily check of the poll aggregator at RealClearPolitics.com that shows you the the latest polls of news organizations, tv stations, think tanks, business networks and even shows an average of all the data. That aggregator gave a picture so clear that I - and I assume many other colleagues in the news business too - wouldn't even consider the thought of Trump winning. [ALL polls](#) except the one by the L.A. Times saw Clinton in a lead, some by 5 or 6 points. The L.A. Times poll with Trump in the lead seemed so off that I have to to admit I just neglected it. And still Donald Trumps campaign manager Kellyanne Conway seemed not worried at all which I found very interesting. In interviews she kept on insisting that there is a "hidden" or "undercover Trump vote", a "silent majority" that doesn't show in the polls. This theory as I learned states that many people who wanted to vote for Trump either didn't admit this when called by pollsters or didn't even talk to pollsters at all because they regard them as biased anyway just like "the media". In retrospective this theory seems very plausible to me and this should be taken well into consideration before the upcoming elections in Germany this year, where Chancellor Merkel might be facing her Donald-Trump- or brexit-effect, with the AfD-party - which is confronting Merkels open border and refugee policies in a harsh voice.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

The AfD is also trying to win voter support with the promise to give more power directly to the people by introducing more referendums on important issues on a national level. Polls show a strong support for this call. I took a closer look at California with its long history of direct democracy being the leading state in America when it comes to referendums to learn about the pros and cons. In this election there were 17 propositions on the California ballot - measures for the people to directly vote on. These came on top of the presidential vote and other national, statewide and local races. Voters were confronted with extremely long ballot cards and for instance could decide on whether or not Marijuana should supposed to be

legalized, if they wanted stricter gun control or if the tobacco tax should be increased. When I talked about California's tradition of direct democracy with Mark Baldassare, president of the Public Policy Institute of California, he told me that Californians like the option of the referendum to push for certain issues when they feel their elected leaders let them down. Direct democracy initiatives can also "energize voters", says Baldassare, which is a positive thing when it comes to participation in the political process. On the other hand referendums also put a burden onto the voters, because they have to stay informed if they instead of the legislature have to make a wise decision on a specific measure. In this election Californians had a 224 pages voter guide to read through the pro and cons of every initiative on the ballot. People I talked to told me that this is just too much. Who could find the time to work through such a book? Direct democracy as Baldassare points out also has the potential to be misused: By the executive for instance if an elected official wants to push something through without having to deal with the legislature. And with referendums elected officials and legislators could be inclined to shift responsibilities to the public if they do not want to take the burden of a pressing issue on their shoulders. The California experience further suggests, that direct democracy can become a game of big money. Initiatives often touch the interests of whole industries and cause an inpour of cash for ads and campaigning in favor or against the measure. According to the [L.A. Times](#) almost half a billion dollars in total have been spent to either support or fight the ballot measures in California during the 2016 election.

CAMPAIGNING AND PEOPLES VIEWS

One major focus of my Fellowship was to take a look at how local supporters of the two candidates organize campaigning, how they connect with voters to draw support for Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. One difference pretty soon became clear to me: The Hillary people had a machine of grassroots campaigning running throughout the country, with regional offices and lots of volunteers. Donald Trump mostly relied on himself traveling around giving speeches and using twitter as his favorite campaign tool. I can therefore mainly speak about what I found with the Clinton campaign. First of all I was impressed by the participation. In Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and Cincinnati I saw volunteers spending their afternoons or evening hours meeting in campaign offices for so called phone banks - for hours

they called up voters preferably in so called battleground states to convince them to go vote. The main focus of the Clinton campaigners was not to reach out to Donald Trump voters but rather mobilize voters who already leaned towards Hillary Clinton. Since California was a sure win for Clinton her supporters there concentrated on the neighboring state Nevada. While I was in Los Angeles volunteers were gathering for joint canvass trips by busses to go knock on doors in the neighbor state. The enthusiasm impressed me. There is no such thing in Germany where campaigning is solely in the hands of the parties. In San Francisco visiting the Clinton campaign office I found a place buzzing with people volunteering and later having dinner with the hosts of my bed and breakfast and their friends one of them - a lawyer also supporting the Clinton campaign - told me she was scheduled to fly to North Carolina to assist people there from being infringed on their right to vote based on formal reasons (NC voter ID law). "I can't just sit here in California and do nothing", she said. To her and everybody else around the table and in fact anybody I met in the metropolitan areas of the west coast a President Donald Trump was just unthinkable. Coming to the midwest I got a different picture. Driving through the suburbs of Cincinnati I saw far more Trump than Clinton yardsigns in front of people's houses and with just a couple of days to go before the election the Clinton campaign put a lot of effort in this area to mobilize voters: Bernie Sanders rallying for Hillary Clinton at the University of Cincinnati asking his millennial fans to please give their vote to her so Trump might not win. Hollywood actor Justin Bartha (The Hangover) driving college students downtown Cincinnati to cast an early vote for Clinton. Riding along in the van he told me why he is campaigning for Clinton: "I don't want my two daughters to grow up with a leader who is a divisive person, who spreads hate". *Divisiveness* is a word I often heard during this time when people talk about the situation in the United States and the harsh tone in this presidential campaign. Driving 60 miles north of Cincinnati to Wilmington, Ohio the world looked different. This was Trump country. He was scheduled to hold one of his daily rallies at Wilmington airport - four days to the election and Trump was flying across the country giving speeches in three or four different states a day. The hangar was packed, people cheered as the plane with the big TRUMP sign landed, taxied to a close position and the candidate stepped out of the door. His speech was nothing new: Short messages easy to comprehend from "We will built that wall to Mexiko!" to "We will make America great again!". While talking about his opponent Hillary Clinton, people started the "lock her up"-chant and as I was watching on the stand in the back I had the "privilege" to being booed

at as Trump pointed his finger to us speaking of the “dishonest media”. But I didn’t see hostility in peoples eyes. I saw normal, friendly country people. And later as everybody walked out together it was a quiet and peaceful atmosphere. Asking them why they would go for Trump some told me they just didn’t want Hillary Clinton to be President. Others said, they voted Republican because they were from the Midwest and I heard people say: Donald Trump might be a loose cannon, but no reason to worry, he cannot act like he is alone, we have checks and balances. An old friend I met a couple of days later in Washington D.C. who is not conservative, told me he would vote for Trump because he believes it’s better for his business if a Republican is in charge.

What struck me when I discussed the election with many “normal” people was that to me they did not seem as wound up and full of resentment towards the supporters of the opposite candidate as the campaigns, their coverage and social media content suggested. Maybe that is a coincidence and I just didn’t get the full picture or maybe it has something to do with what RAND-sociologist Michael Pollard told me at the beginning of my stay when we also talked about long-term surveys on values and beliefs of the American people: “As a whole the people in the country haven’t really changed all that much over time (...) You have a much more partisan atmosphere today and the rhetoric of the campaigns has been inflammatory to some groups. (...) The differences among the people aren’t greater than they were in the past but they seem like they are”. Pollard says social media could play a role in this keeping people in some sort of echo-chamber, where their own views and beliefs are constantly being mirrored and amplified.

OHIO ALWAYS PICKS THE PRESIDENT

Ohio has been one of the big battleground states in presidential elections in the past decades. Some scholars consider it THE battleground state. So I expected to see some campaigning. Compared to California where the outcome was clear and none of the candidates spent any money on ads I could see and hear one ad after another pouring out of Ohio tv and radio. People told me they wouldn’t even pick up their phones anymore because there were so many robocalls. I met with political scientist David Niven at the University of Cincinnati. He invited me to his class where students watched and then discussed political ads aired this

election season on tv in Ohio and how they might effect voters. The ads were very personal portraying Hillary Clinton as a corrupt and lying person and on the other hand warning people of Donald Trump as a discriminating and divisive man. “Ohio is so competitive it is a testing ground for the campaigns”, said David Niven. He put up a chart on the wall showing that out of the last 30 presidential elections 28 times Ohio picked the candidate that later became President. No state comes closer. “Ohio votes for winners”, said Niven (it did again in 2016) and that’s why candidates put as much effort in campaigning in Ohio as possible. “We had more presidential campaign visits in the last week than any other state.” But what makes this state such a battleground state? Niven explains, that it’s because Ohio is a state without one dominant influence. “It’s a farming state and it’s a manufacturing state. It’s a state where the influences include the northeast of America, the south of America, the midwest of America. It’s a state without one dominant city. There no *one thing* that defines Ohio and what that adds up to is: competitive elections.”

THE DEBATE ON VOTER ID

I have seen many differences in how the voting process is organized in the United States compared to Germany. I learned during my stay that there actually is no such thing as “a” voting system in the U.S.. It is a system of 50 different systems with every state setting up its own rules. One interesting difference between the U.S. and Germany is how authorities determine who actually is eligible to vote and what voters have to do to cast their ballot. Whereas this is basically a pure formality in Germany I learned that it is a very political and controversial issue in the United States. In Germany everybody is automatically registered in a nationwide population register. Wherever people move, they are obliged to tell their local authorities their new address which is then fed into this register. On the base of this data election boards automatically inform everybody in their vicinity before an election where and when they can cast their vote. On election day you show up at your polling station, present your national photo ID - which is an obligatory ID for everybody 16 and older - and cast your vote. I learned that in the U.S. this process is organized differently in each state sometimes leading to very controversial debates. First of all people have to register to vote. Some states require only very simple proofs of residence such as an electricity bill or a tax bill or a

paycheck. That seemed amazing to me picturing the indignant look of a German official if he or she were being presented a document like this as proof of residence. Now I learned that other states in the U.S. do require a photo ID to register to vote. What would seem normal to me is highly controversial in the U.S. mostly among liberals and democrats. Their argument: Having to show a photo ID to register to vote can discourage or even exclude certain parts of the population like older or poor people from voting, when they have no drivers license or passport. The argument of the voter ID proponents on the other side is that without picture proof anybody could register to vote which could lead to fraudulent elections. This is a very interesting discussion which will probably resurface everytime America votes just like the discussion about the pro and cons of the electoral college.

JOURNALISM

Traveling the U.S. watching the election the campaigns and their coverage I also learned some things about the challenges we face as journalists today. Media-bashing has reached new heights with Donald Trump loudly chiming in and making talk of “the dishonest media” one of his main campaign claims. Discussing this with people across the country I noticed quite some sympathy for these claims especially among Trump voters. Trump constantly attacked CNN or the New York Times as being biased. At the same time more people seemed to turn to Fox News, which itself has been accused of being biased in favor of conservative positions. According to adweek.com and the New York Times Fox News has been the most watched “basic cable network in prime time and total day” with its highest ratings ever in 2016.

As I said before I didn’t even consider the thought of Donald Trump winning. Maybe this too was some sort of bias. I let my own reception of him and my personal judgement of who would be right and who would be more fit for the office take control. That also impacted the way I planned my fellowship. I wanted to research a story about the childhood days of the future President and I went to Chicago and Park Ridge, Illinois, talked to Hillary Clinton’s friends, visited her old High School, met with the mayor, went by her childhood house. We published a well run feature in [text](#), [video](#) and audio. But I did not put effort in such a story on Trump because I felt he was just not going to be President. Looking back that was a mistake.

What happened in the U.S. presidential election, along with the Brexit vote and the debate in Germany about its migration and refugee policies have stirred up a big discussion about the role of journalism and its credibility and work ethics. In my opinion it is a good thing that this discussion has come up. I think it is really important and could be very fruitful.

ELECTION NIGHT AND AFTERMATH

Election day I spent in the nations capital, which did not seem to reflect at all that this was going to be a historic moment in American history. Instead I found the city in a weird mix both of a normal work day and a lazy sunday. Not much going on. Tourists strolling by the White House taking pictures, people playing ball in the parks, foreign tv stations taking their time to find the right spot for night reporting on Lafayette Square in front of the White House. People casting their votes, going to work, getting lunch at the numerous food trucks around Farragut Square, sitting on the grass chatting. And carpentors at the Capitol already hammering and working on the stage for inauguration day January 20. A pretty amazing display of democratic normalcy. And everybody waiting for the hours to pass. I decided to spend election night at the headquarters of the Woman's National Democratic Club. If there was going to be some ecstatic cheering about the first female President of the United States it was going to be there. When I entered around 7.30 in the evening members and guests were in a cheerful mood. There was joyous talking, a formal dinner, champagne on ice ready to be opened. "We have been waiting for this for so long", was what I heard and that there was going to be a real party once the results were in and Hillary Clinton was called President elect. But the evening took a different turn. And I soon saw faces turn pale, heads shaking, hands held before mouths as John King of CNN desperately tried to math it out and find those missing Hillary-votes in different counties of Pennsylvania and New Hampshire. There was not going to be a party. I filed a quick radio story to Berlin, left for my hotel to file more and waited for Donald Trumps victory speech, in which he – as is expected - promised to heal the divide and be the President for all Americans. In the next 48 hours I saw Hillary Clinton concede and ask to give Trump “a chance to lead”, I saw President Obama promise to do everything for a smooth transition of power. I saw him and Trump meet at the White House shaking hands and exchanging kind words - Clinton and Obama trying to reassure the country that things would go their normal way after this election. By ostensibly doing so and

mentioning this the incumbents in my view actually signalled that they were very worried. Why else would they feel the need to reassure everyone of something that had been a good democratic tradition for such a long time. The New Yorker later in November cited Obama in an Article saying. “I think that if Hillary Clinton had won the election then I’d just turn over the keys,” he said. “We’d make sure the briefing books were in order and out we go. I think now I have some responsibility to at least offer my counsel to those who will continue to be elected officials about how the D.N.C. can help rebuild, how state parties and progressive organizations can work together.”

I left the United States after the election with a feeling of “who knows what’s next”. Like many of my colleagues in Germany and in the U.S. I had been sure there was never going to be a President Donald Trump because he just seemed to lack the basic qualifications for President of the United States and because his whole bearing in various situations before and throughout the campaign just seemed way off the main road of accepted political conduct to even be considered to be voted for. It turned out that a large part of the American public did not think that way. In fact it seems like Trump got even more support the more he was being criticized by media organizations and renowned commentators, comedians, scholars and politicians. His anti-establishment stance made him appeal to many as a “one of us”-candidate. Being a billionaire and therefore actually himself somehow being part of “the establishment” didn’t even matter anymore. The Trump vote was most likely not a vote FOR Trump but a vote AGAINST everything else that people relate to as “establishment”. A voting pattern that many western democracies seem to face at the moment.

I am deeply thankful to the American Council on Germany to be able to witness all this at such unusual times in the United States. The Kellen Fellowship helped me understand more deeply and sharpen my views on what the current challenges are for our democracies: Journalists and people holding public office are under constant scrutiny today. Their trustworthiness is increasingly being questioned. At the same time social media are flooded with disinformation, rumors and conspiracy theories. Journalists in my opinion must acknowledge and assume their responsibility to help stop people from turning their backs and leaving common grounds of political discourse in a sense of disenfranchisement. We have to put an effort in showing professional integrity and transparency and always reflect on the way

how we cover stories. We have to get back to covering what really matters to people to regain trustworthiness. Journalists in my view should take a step back or rather take a step down from an assumed pedestal. Do what we can do best: Find out and understand what's going on, fact check, hand that knowledge to the audience, explaining what happens as unbiased as possible and let them judge for themselves.