

Report McCloy-Fellowship - Max Holscher

“One year before the presidential election - Insights into the American soul”. That was the headline for my project outline I was applying with for the McCloy-Fellowship in 2015. Back then I was not aware that the American soul had to choose between the "lesser of two evil" when it came to the candidates for the Presidency. At least those were the words I heard many times from various people with different backgrounds while talking about Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. It is one of the core sentences and insights I gathered during my trip through the country - from San Francisco to New York city. But let's start at the beginning.

My approach

My general approach was somewhat simple: Getting in touch with as many people as possible, collecting views and opinions from the man on the street, politicians, journalists, political experts. Basically I tried to do what most correspondents can not do - because of limited time and pressure to publish stories or simply a question of money: Going out for a longer time period, talk to people in all kind of areas and understand what their needs and issues are.

Moreover, I was focussing on some bigger issues such as homelessness, death penalty in San Francisco, gun laws in Denver (Colorado), and Immigration in Chicago (Illinois). Start of my journey was Frankfurt, Germany, on June 14th with a first stop in San Francisco. The trip ended 16 days later in New York city. I passed 3000 miles by plane, bus and amtrak to make it to New York City.

To reach different audiences, we set up a newsletter by mail. People received an email when I published a new article or video on www.maxholscher.com. We promoted this newsletter during the my three week trip constantly on Facebook and on www.hna.de. Additionally longer stories appeared in the newspaper "Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine Zeitung".

Trump versus Clinton

In the following I want to sum up a few of the most important insights and examinations I made through my trip from San Francisco to New York City. The following passages will include describing elements of my observations and meetings with people. Additionally, I added my opinion to some passages - so more or less the following is a mixture a reportage, dairy and essay.

Donald Trump

Although the national conventions of the republican and democratic party had not decided in June 2016, whether they would nominate Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the general opinion was that there would be no other candidates who could stop them - and so it happened.

I was not surprised that Donald Trump, the potential candidate for the Grand Old Party (GOP), was most times the person I was talking about with people I met during my trip. Since he is polarizing so much and getting attention from various media, basically everyone I have met had an opinion about him. Well, opinion changed the more I travelled from San Francisco into the more conservatives in the heart of America, or other people would say: the fly over states. Let me explain that with a examples from my trip. The people I picked for this text stand from my point of view always for a special type of an American citizen and voter.

The loyal supporters

Denver, Colorado - A visit in a gun store. My general approach was here to talk to the owner of the shop about gun laws - just one hour before I had met a parents who lost their daughter in a shooting in the theatre of Aurora. I wanted to connect those two parts of the story to get answers and insights from two perspectives about that topic. Shortly before a terrible shooting happened in a nightclub in Florida. So everybody was talking again about stricter gun laws. I will write about that later.

Sure, we talked about Donald Trump and how skeptical people outside the US are about him, his lack of political experience, his assumptions and polemics about immigrants and muslims. Dick Abramson, owner of the gun shop, explained that he is an early supporter of Donald Trump. He likes that Trump is not caring about political correctness. "If you criticize immigrants or muslims, you are directly islamophobe", Abramson said. Trump simply does not care, says what he wants to say. But what is about his program - he has

none, I asked Dick Abramson. "He has good advisors, he does not need a full program right now."

His employee, Guy Pizzulo, who trains customers in shooting at the ranch and also sells guns at the store, is supporter of Trump, too. "He does not care whether his words are political correct or not - he says what a lot of people think", Pizzulo said. Words I often heard during my trip. Actually it was one of the strongest, maybe the strongest argument, people made about Trump. Nevertheless Pizzulo was also afraid that Donald Trump could start a war in the middle east. Pizzulo was by himself a soldier stationed long time in Germany. In large part people were like Pizzulo along my trip. Supporter yes, but also skeptical about this political newcomer.

In the midwest of America, or being more precise, Holdrege Nebraska, I met several strong supporters of Donald Trump. I took Amtrak to reach this small town with its 5000 citizens. The train stops there once a day. Mayor Doug Young welcomed me in the morning at the mayor's office. Afterwards, we visited a meeting of the court board with local politicians - all republicans. Taking the chance of a short break I asked them about Trump, Immigration and muslims. During the conversation one thing became very clear: the fear of terrorism is enormous - and it is directly connected with a fear of muslims. Although one could think: Why should one be afraid of terrorism in such a small city where most people are white and strong believers in the christian religion. "We have to stop muslim immigration", was one key note. "Muslims pray five times a day - especially for the end of American society", one member of the court board said. The man who said this sentence even questioned, whether I am a real German. "You don't look German", he said. Everybody was laughing in this situation. Me too. Was it fun or maybe some real skepticism behind the question. I don't know.

The time with twelve members of the urban administration showed me: No doubt they would ever vote for Hillary Clinton. However, although they were strong supporters of the republican party especially the two women at the board meeting were skeptical about Trump. "Does he embody christian values? Is he aside from his strong words a good politician? Can we trust him?". That were the doubts the women had about Trump - but their loyalty is greater than their doubts. All of them assured me to vote for Trump.

The meeting was also interesting because of another aspect: First time on my trip people were blaming President Barack Obama directly for a negative development in the last ten years - it was a rare moment. Normally the conversation were more about the candidates

than about what Obama did or not did. In this case the two women from the community noted, that Obama's politics supported single household too much. Therefore, people would more often decide to live by themselves and were not founding a family. I did not research this special fact, but it one of few meetings where somebody really pointed at a problem of the Obama administration.

A loyal supporter of the Republicans is also Doug Young, mayor of Holdrege. Nevertheless the retired mechanic is missing real candidates as they had 20 years ago. He is skeptical about Donald Trump, if he is trustworthy. However, "I will vote for the lesser of two evil", he said. Like most traditional voters of the Grand Old Party. So does Dan Christensen, Director of the museum in Holdrege. But he made an interesting note: Trumps success is based on the anger of people. Personally, there is a lot of truth in this sentence - and it reminded me on the current developments in Germany. Let me explain that.

Why Trump voters remind me on the AfD in Germany

From my point of view Trump reaches a part of american society who might have not benefit from politics the last decades - different media analyzed the voters of Trump and showed that a high percentage is white, has no college degree, other examinations show that Trump attracts more over unemployed white people. Feeling neglected by politics in Washington D.C., one could argue, the anger of these parts of society was growing recently. And it became visible when it comes to certain topics, which Trump touched with his speeches - illegal immigration, terrorism and muslims. There is a great uncertainty in society about these developments - although there is a discussion about it for decades in the United States. However, in times of elections or crisis these crucial topics become more important in public.

What it means for a society being confronted with millions of refugees and immigrants one could see last year in Germany. The effects are now visible in the recent state elections. Last year was the raise of a new party in Germany - the AfD, which is characterized by a conservative to nationalistic approach - in state elections the AfD (alternative for Germany) reached in state elections up to 21 percent - with most time only one topic: how to deal with the refugees.

A part of German society feels uncertain of how that will affect society, the welfare state, the job market. Although voters might be a bit different in Germany and the United States - studies showed one third of AfD voters are well educated, have a higher income than

average - Trump and the AfD use kind of the same uncertainty of people to get voters. Experts say it is easier to get voters with a fear of something unknown than with logical arguments in politics - something which Trump as well as the AfD does.

GOP activists - and Clinton opponents

During my trip through America it was hard to find real Clinton supporters - many people were in favor Clinton, but not because they were convinced about her. It was just the "lesser of the two evil." Another reason might be: My appointment with activists from the Democratic Party did not take place. But also on the street, at train stations, or in the bus, the airport - there were no real fans of Hillary Clinton.

The easier it was to find Clinton opponents. I had for example a interesting meeting with Jeff Halm in Chicago, President of the young republicans in Illinois. We started our conversation talking about the Brexit who took place that day. "Have you heard about the Brexit, that is fantastic, don't you think?"

Actually, Great Britain, Germany and the rest of Europe was totally surprised by the ballot and the result. Nobody had really expected that the citizens of Great Britain would vote for leaving Europe. Therefore I was not in the mood either, being happy about that development.

For Jeff Halm, a 29 year old IT-Expert from Chicago, the European Union got too powerful in the last decades. Starting as a Union for economic growth the EU became more and more a state above the national states, cutting independence and strength of the national states - to make it simple: a bad thing for Jeff Halm. He was convinced more countries would follow and welcomed how nationalistic parties in Europe get stronger and stronger - an approach also the Republicans are favoring.

Generally Jeff Halm used similar arguments for Trump which we already heard in the text before. However I got the feeling Jeff Halm would not have been sad, if another candidate would have challenged Trump more. The other candidates made a great mistake Jeff Halm said - they did not take Trump as a serious concurrent. After they realized, he has a chance to become the candidate, they tried to attack as they attack other politicians. But: Trump is not a politician and so they verbal attacks blew off.

Interesting for me was also the fact how he more or less attacked Hillary Clinton. From a German perspective many people, I would guess, would support Hillary Clinton. She seems to be an experienced, trustworthy politician, who knows how to behave - the more when you compare Trump and Clinton directly. So people over here ask themselves: what is the problem of that Emailaffair. Although Jeff Halm might have been exaggerating in his elaborations about Hillary Clinton, I got a pretty good feeling for why the Emailaffair is that important and what it could mean - a more detailed view on thing, which you only get, when you talk to people who live in the country which is affected and think about those problems. Personally, it was an important insight for me to reevaluate this issue. Especially when one compares the case with General General David Patraeus who had to leave his position in 2012, because he hand over classified documents to his biographer.

What I figured in talks with other people and reading the news: Hillary Clinton has a problem when it comes to the topic of trust - not only but also because of the Emailaffair. Maybe bigger than we think in Europe - or maybe just than I thought.

The disillusioned Americans: Trump opponents, but not Clinton fans

The first person I had a longer conversation with at my first stop in San Francisco was Howard, 60 year old well educated man, who worked once in the tech-branch and is now driving uber in San Francisco. In general uber was one of my best opportunities to get in touch with people and make new contacts. From my point of view Howard is a good example of how one part of americans think these days. He told me how disillusioned he is about politics. "You know what, I simply hope, that a new President is not messing up too much."

From his point of view a lot of politicians start with a real goal, they try to improve situations and make a difference. However, getting more and more involved in politics, climbing the career ladder up in politics, they have to make more trade offs, losing their focus to keep power. And Howard made another very critical point about his fellow countrymen: "Most americans are ignorant, they just care what happens in their country, they have knowledge in pop culture as sports and celebrities - but not what really strikes the country". He concluded that this is one of the reasons why Trump is that successful - because he is giving simple answers to difficult topics. "

I had many of those talks during my trip - maybe not with that harsh notes and assumptions as Howard about his fellows. Anne was hosting me within Airbnb in

Washington D.C. - a young woman in her thirties who had just bought an apartment in the capital. "We are such a big country and those are the best candidates we can get in America?" She was the sort of American who felt kind of embarrassed that the whole world is looking at the presidential race and a possible future president Donald Trump. "What is Europe thinking about that", she wanted to know. The answer is pretty simple: Most people in Germany simply do not understand, that Trump even made it so far.

Summary

I did not expect to find totally new aspects about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton within my trip - my goal was to get a better feeling of what is striking America.

What is most important from my view? A short summary of what I described above.

For me there is no doubt after those three weeks: *American voters are mainly unhappy with choice of candidates.*

Aside from some ultimate Trump supporters like Dick Abramson from the Gun Store even the traditional republican voters are skeptical about their candidate. Yes, they do like his unconventional appearance in all manners. He is famous and maybe entertaining and the right choice for protest voters who mainly want to show the politician at the east coast: it cannot go on like that. But is a trustworthy as politician? A lot of people doubt that. Nevertheless he will get the votes from the supporters of republican party.

Same on the other side: Even for the few supporters of Hillary Clinton I have met she is not their favorite choice. Too professional, too distant, and skepticism partly due to her Emailaffair. A great disadvantage for her: She is lacking the charm of a President Barack Obama. A friend, who is worked for different news sites like politico and who followed her on her campaigns said, Clinton fears bad news - so she tries to avoid mistakes. The result: she seems to be too professionell and rarely relaxed. Some of the most important characteristics Barack Obama has for example. And then you have somebody like Donald Trump. "Trump is entertaining and famous as the Kardashians are", Jeff Halm, President of the young Republicans Illinois, told me.

I think, during my trip I had same problems as lot of voters in the US recently had or have: To find good arguments to vote for Hillary Clinton - the biggest argument to vote for her is the candidate of the Grand Old Party: Donald Trump. That is her greatest advantage right

now - Trump affronted a lot of groups so far with polemics about immigrants, afro-americans, and people with a muslim belief.

Who is going to make it? I asked that people a lot. "People vote normally always for the total opposite of the last president", said David Mendell, former Journalist at Chicago Tribune, who published in 2008 a biography about Obama. Thus, Donald Trump should be the favorite. "But I don't he is going to make it".

As I described in the introduction I focused during my journey not only on the presidential campaign but also on some special issues - issues, future President have to deal with. In the following I will sum up my finding about two issues: homelessness and gun laws.

Homelessness in San Francisco: no hope for improvement

As a tourist one is shocked driving or walking first time through San Francisco - it feels like homeless people are everywhere. In areas like Tenderloin, where a great percentage of homeless people is living, you have on many corners always a special smell in your nose: a mixture of weed and urine. For most Americans I talked to, this situation is already normal. "The sad part is, we don't notice them anymore", Howard, the Uber-driver from San Francisco said. I got that impression too. At bus stations people stepped over sleeping homeless people - as it was a sleeping dog in your living room. A normal thing, nothing to wonder.

Officially 6600 people without a home live right now in San Francisco. Assumingly there are a lot more living on the streets there. In the whole state of California officials count 90 000 homeless people. In whole Germany for example there were 24 000 in 2014.

An improvement is not likely. It could get worse, said Sam Dodge, Deputy Director at San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. Every two years a study gets with new numbers published. "The number of homeless people, that is what I expect, is growing again", Sam Dodge said.

Increasing rents make the situation worse - living in San Francisco gets more and more expansive - due people with high income working at big companies like google and facebook in Silicon Valley. Areas which were years ago affordable to live for people with average income are now for many people out of sight, because more people with a higher income compete against each other - for the advantage of renters. A single room apartment today costs 2200 dollar a month, Kelley Cuttler, who works for the coalition on homelessness in San Francisco - a non profit organization, supporting homeless people.

But this is not the only reason for the current situation, Kelly Cuttler explains - others like Sam Dodge agree. While president Ronald Reagan in the 1980ies was in charge of, government invested decreasingly in affordable housing. According to coalition on homelessness the amount of money each year spent on public housing dropped partly about 45 billion dollar a year. Additionally government cut spending for care of mentally ill people - more and more people landed on the street - one can easily see that.

According to coalition on homelessness 15 to 20 percent of homeless people are living there on a long term - hard to reintegrate in society. The coalition is criticising, that the town is not offering enough housing opportunities. There are 1300 beds in shelters - thus one bed for 5,5 homeless people. 700 men and women plus 200 families are on a waiting list for a shelter bed, Kelly Cuttler from the Coalition says.

The Coalition is moreover critical about what they call "criminalisation of homeless people". The homeless Phil Striegel, which I met handing out food to homeless people within the Salvation Army, confirmed that: "Sometimes it would be enough, if people would treat me like a human being."

In 2010 citizens of San Francisco decided in a sort of referendum about a regulation, which does not allow people anymore to sit or lie between 7am and 10pm on the sidewalk - otherwise one have to pay a fine. From time to time the town is additionally clearing areas, where homeless people living in tents or under bridges. "But instead of keeping the personal goods somewhere at city hall, they just throw it away", says Kelly Cuttler. Last year they threw away a walker of a sick homeless guy - media learned about that and published several stories.

So far, neither Donald Trump nor Hillary Clinton took a stand to this topic and explained, how they could improve situation of homeless people. "It is not on their agenda", Kelly Cuttler says. Average amount of money for a homeless person is 60 dollars a month plus coupons for free food, Kuttler says. Town is not confirming the exact amount, but Sam Dodge admits: "It is not a lot".

Stricter Gun Laws? Some things will never change

Not having changed gun laws in America will be something which will bother President Barack Obama most, says David Mendell, who published 2008 a biography about Barack Obama. I met Mendell during my stay in Washington D.C to analyze his presidency - but this is not the topic in this passage.

During my time in the USA a shooting in Orlando, Florida happened. 49 people died in this massacre. During his presidency Barack Obama had a dozen times standing in front of cameras, expressing his compassion towards the relatives of various shootings.

From a German perspective it is hard to understand the gun laws in the United States of America. Therefore, I tried to get different views and opinions about that topic. In advance I arranged an appointment with Sandy and Lonnie Philipps who lost their daughter Jessica four years ago in a shooting. It took place in Aurora, Colorado and is known as the theatre shooting.

The story of Jessica Ghawi, the 24 four year old daughter of Sandy and Lonnie Philipps, is tragical. Just a few month before the shooting in Aurora happened, Jessica nearly got killed in a mall in Canada while she visited her boyfriend. She had a burger in a restaurant and did not feel well, so she left the mall. Just one or two minutes after a guy entered the restaurant and shot somebody who was sitting at the place of Jessica Ghawi. She wrote about that experience in her blog.

Six weeks later, 20th July 2012, she and eleven other persons got murdered in the theatre. In Denver, Colorado, I met Sandy and Lonnie Phillips to talk about their daughter. After the death of their child, they sold the house in Texas and everything they possessed to start a new life: since then the couple drives around with a mobile home, supporting people who experienced similar tragedies.

Surprisingly for me: Sandy and Lonnie Philipps are not in favor of banning all kind of weapons. They prefer a different approach: improving background checks, which tend to be error-prone. "The technique is pretty antique", Lonnie Phillips said. They would use a programm which they used since the 80ies. Moreover, people who want to buy a weapon should wait at least 30 days - as a result people would not buy spontaneously a weapon for revenge. Both prefer furthermore a ban of so called assault rifles - "why do you need a heavy weapon, which is used in war?", says Lonnie Phillips. The popular assault rifle MR 15 was used in a shooting at the elementary school "Sandy Hook", just twenty miles aways from Aurora.

After the meeting I drove directly to a gun store in Denver - what a contrast. No doubt gun owner Dick Abramson (I mentioned him before), is not a fan of changing anything at the current gun laws. There are more weapons than people in the America, 60 000 people die a year because of shootings. Don't you think, something should be changed about gun laws? "No, more guns mean more security for people", Abramson said.

When you turn 18 years in Colorado, you can go into a gun store and walk out there an hour later with an assault rifle - in case you pass the background check and have enough money to buy one. For Dick Abramson there is no way to change the current laws - he quotes different studies which should prove, how owning a gun improves safeness. "To be honest: I avoid areas where guns are not allowed, like hospitals", he said. All shootings happened or got at least worse, also the one in the night club in Florida, because weapons were not allowed there. Abramson is also skeptical about a thirty day waiting period? "Why, if you pass the background check, why should you wait then?".

Personally it is hard to understand why government should keep the laws like that - too many shootings happen a year, too many people die. However I am aware: it is a German or european view. For me it was important to get in touch with people to understand better, why they are in favor or changing something or not. Sure, opinions change from state to state. My experience from Denver, Colorado showed me: You cannot change mind of people, who want to keep their guns - in is the genes of some parts of US-Citizens. Some are more liberal and could see a benefit of stricter gun laws.

In case Hillary Clinton becomes next President: She will face same problems as Barack Obama did. The gun lobby is enormous in the US - and even people who experienced such a tragedy are not in favor of banning weapons completely. Change will take decades, maybe will never take place.