

UWF Viewpoint: Election 2016: Nationalism or nah?

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Our foreign policy debate is no longer about conservatives and liberals, or about hawks and doves. It is about internationalism and nationalism.

And our two leading presidential candidates represent clear poles on this issue.

Hillary Clinton stands on the more familiar position. She is an internationalist. She favors American leadership, international economic integration, a strong stand on human rights, and U.S. military interventions to support U.S. interests. American internationalists value sovereignty, but they believe the United States has a leadership role in the world that extends back to the 1940s.

Starting in the 1990s, Clinton has focused particularly on human rights, especially women's issues. Historically, presidents have used this approach to achieve two goals: criticize nondemocratic regimes and promote reforms that many Americans believe is good for democracy.

On American leadership, Clinton has developed something of a "realist" reputation. She consistently supports military interventions and seems ready to maintain American alliances and support military spending and investments. In leaked audio, she also stakes out clear American opposition to Chinese claims in the South China Sea.

On trade, Clinton offers a mixed record. On balance, she has supported global trade and financial integration. Over the last decade, though, she has opposed several large trade deals, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Donald Trump, by contrast, is a nationalist. He favors a limited international role for the United States. For this "America first" approach, the world is a menacing place. Protecting borders and jobs are fundamental. International economics and security threats like ISIS are important, but only if they directly affect average Americans. In fact, U.S. international leadership and military commitments have undermined American well-being. Trump's own spin on American nationalism treats international relations as business-like negotiations rather than power politics.

Trump's signature issue is "the wall." Practically, it would help control Latin American immigration. Symbolically, it would lay blame on loosely controlled migration for certain U.S. problems. Trump also argues that internationalism hurts sovereignty through open borders and trade. A wall signifies a major break with this approach.

China also raises particular concern. In Trump's view, it is stealing American wealth and intellectual property. Rather than power politics, though, Trump focuses on demanding a better deal from Beijing. Toward Moscow, by contrast, Trump has little to say, which is likely tied to his focus on trade over geopolitical issues.

Arguably, Clinton's philosophy is far more developed. She has worked it out over 25 years, and it is broadly consistent with what we have seen across administrations since World War II. To be frank, though, she may have triangulated a "mainstream" position to be electable.

In fact, this helps explain Trump's position: an outsider who wants to shake things up, he must reject the familiar. If Americans believe that U.S. foreign policy is not going well, he argues, we need to scrap it. Or, at least, we need to renegotiate it on better terms.

Despite this, I believe a careful internationalism is best for American interests. This approach has weathered many storms and served Americans well by elevating their wealth and access to the world. It can also be good for the world. American leadership is imperfect, but it is our privilege and responsibility.

The challenge, though, is implementation. Even a perfect guiding philosophy or grand strategy is insufficient without strong leaders and effective statesmanship.

That type of leadership remains the challenge for our next president.

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