



# To the point!

Cross-Asset- and Strategy-Research

## Has the U.S. ever been so divided? Yes!

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Today's toxic political atmosphere echoes the political turmoil of 1968

Next week, the Democratic Party in the U.S. will convene for the formal coronation of Vice President Kamala Harris as their candidate for the presidential election. Since Joe Biden's withdrawal, polls suggest the race is wide open. The Trump-O-Meter by LBBW Research, which calculates the likelihood of a Republican victory for candidate Donald Trump, vividly illustrates this (see figure 1).

### The division within American society is stark

During Bill Clinton's presidency, while living and working in Washington, I was taken aback by the increasingly hostile interactions between the two political parties. The Democrats begrudged the Republicans the bread they eat – and vice versa. But compared to today, those times seem almost cordial. Back in the nineties, no one would have dared to question the integrity of the electoral process. The idea of calling a political opponent "vermin" – as Trump has done – would have been unthinkable. From a German perspective, this type of degrading rhetoric sends shivers down my spine.

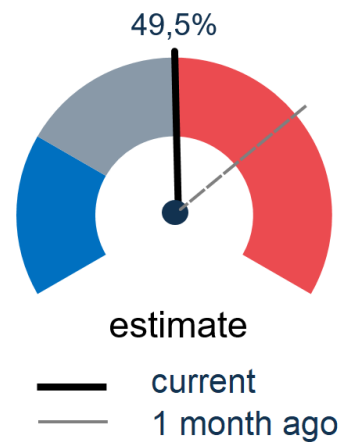
On the contrary, a wonderful example of respectful political conduct from that era is the [letter](#) Republican George H. Bush left on his Oval Office desk after losing the election for his former rival and successor, Democrat Bill Clinton,.

### The US has bridged divides in the past

Today, even perceptions of one's own economic situation are tainted by politics (see fig. 2). It's commonly said that American society has never been more divided than it is now. That's not true. The venue for next week's Democratic crowning convention will be Chicago, the same city that hosted it in August 1968. Back

## America faces its deepest polarization in decades

Fig. 1: Trump-O-Meter



Source: LBBW Research

then, the country was on the brink, torn apart by the Vietnam War and violent racial unrest. In March, Democratic incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson announced he would not seek re-election. His steadfast commitment to pursuing the Vietnam War to its bitter end had increasingly made his position within the party untenable. In April, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. In June, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was fatally wounded in an attack and died shortly thereafter from his injuries.

As delegates gathered in 1968 at the Chicago Hilton to officially nominate Vice President Hubert Humphrey as the Democratic candidate, the city outside was engulfed in [nearly civil war-like conditions](#) for days. Nearly 12,000 Chicago police officers, 7,500 soldiers, and over 5,000 heavily armed National Guardsmen were mobilized to secure the conference building.

In 1968, Republican Richard Nixon was elected president. He resigned in connection with the Watergate scandal in 1974 to avoid impeachment. Turmoil and scandal wherever you look.

### Can the US repeat its post-1968 healing?

Why have I taken you down this dispiriting historical memory lane? To show that the division and coarsening of the U.S. today, so powerfully symbolized by Donald Trump, is not irreversible. One might despair at his populist excesses and dread what might happen should Trump narrowly lose and not concede in November. But history teaches us: A society can sometimes teeter on the brink of the abyss, yet reflect and find its way back to the center.

This is not a prediction. It's a hope. And as the saying goes, hope springs eternal.

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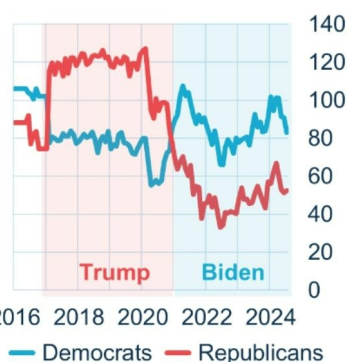
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## 1968 was even worse

Fig. 2: US index of consumer sentiment by political party



Source: University of Michigan, LBBW Research

## The risks around the presidential election are high, but so is the hope