

Twenty-First Century Transatlantic Relations in Need of Reform to Adapt to Changing Societies

by Alina Burkholder



In a changing world,

transatlantic relations must

continue to evolve.

Transatlantic relations, especially those between Germany and the United States, which are characterized by shared history and common values, are typically described as positive and robust. Many German-American networks and forums, however, are outdated and stagnant. They do not adequately represent the young, emerging generations and the diverse societies of both countries, with whom these traditional narratives no longer resonate.

In 2023, Atlantik-Brücke commissioned YouGov to conduct two surveys, one in the United States and one in Germany, with representative samples of 3,000 respondents each, to investigate the current state of transatlantic relations and identify where there is a need for change. The results clearly show that, in both countries, socio-demographic characteristics determine who shapes the transatlantic dialogue. Access to transatlantic knowledge and international relations is strongly influenced by factors such as age, gender, education, standard of living, race, ethnicity, and membership of socially marginalized groups.

The following report reviews the key findings of the studies and highlights that the traditional modes of the transatlantic relationship must be reformed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. One thing is certain: In a changing world, transatlantic relations must continue to evolve.

The USA: Fewer Points of Contact and a Decline in Interest

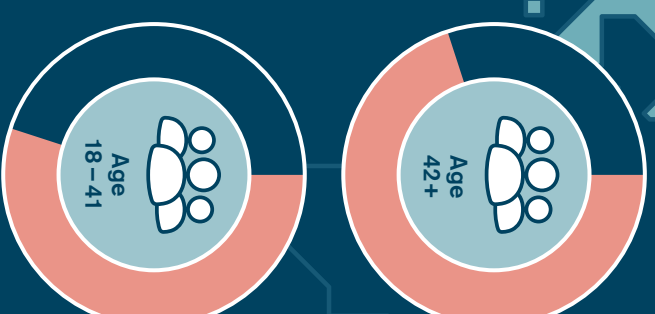
The United States is a diverse country — and it is becoming increasingly more so. Within 20 years, the population will no longer be majority White. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the number of Hispanics increased by 23 percent to approximately 62 million since 2010. By 2050, this number will increase to over 100 million — with an average age of under 31. So-called minority groups are changing the social structure of the U.S., and **younger generations are less likely to have European heritage or other personal ties to Europe.** This trend is confirmed by the study: 70 percent of respondents over the age of 41 identify as White, largely traced back to European ancestry, in comparison to only 55 percent of younger Americans between 18 and 41 years of age.

With a more diverse society and the associated decline in cultural and social ties, it is clear that interest in Europe, especially among younger generations, is in decline and that **transatlantic relations are no longer the core reference point in foreign policy.**

The results also reveal that **personal engagement with Europe, Germany, and transatlantic relations is significantly decreasing:** this is true for travel, participation in exchange programs, news consumption, and education.

Additionally, our study shows that **those who actively participate in the transatlantic dialogue predominantly belong to the White, educated middle class:**

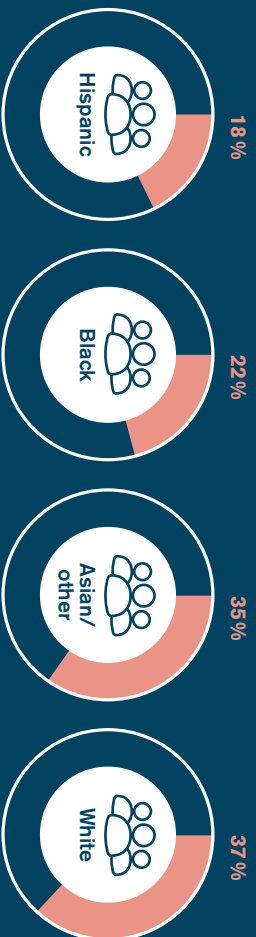
→ One-third of U.S. respondents have never been abroad, although there are strong **regional differences:** For example, only 40 percent of all people living in the southern states have ever been abroad. **One-third of respondents have traveled to Europe.** Among these, **the largest proportion are those who have a college degree, identify as White, and report a higher household income:** Fifty-six percent of respondents with a four-year college degree have traveled to Europe (compared to only 20 percent without a college degree). While 37 per-



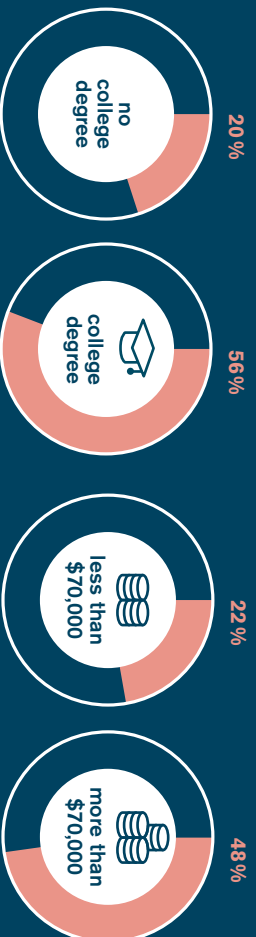
70 percent of respondents over the age of 41 identify as White, largely traced back to European ancestry.

Among younger generations, this only applies to 55 percent.

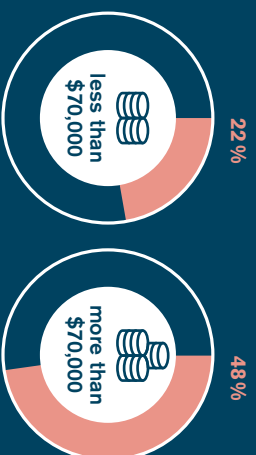
“Yes, I have been to Europe.”
(respondents by race and ethnicity)



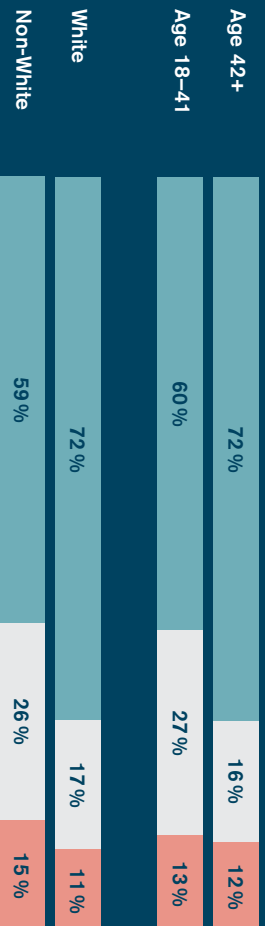
“Yes, I have been to Europe.”
(respondents by education)



“Yes, I have been to Europe.”
(respondents by household income)



Rating of U.S.-German relations
(respondents by age and race/ethnicity)



cent of White respondents have been to Europe, this is true for only 18 percent of Hispanics, 21 percent of Black people, and 35 percent of other people of color. Forty-eight percent of respondents with an annual household income of at least \$70,000 said they have been to Europe, compared with only 22 percent of those earning less. Especially among the younger generations who express more interest in traveling or participating in exchange programs to places outside Europe, **financial constraints are the biggest hurdle** (for almost one-third).

→ In addition, **people in the U.S. are more interested in national than international news. White respondents reported consuming international news more frequently than people of color** (70% vs. 60%) and also **concerned themselves with Europe more frequently during their education** (70% vs. 59%). Younger generations were also less likely to have intensively learned about Europe while at school (61% vs. 68%).

These developments come at a price. **Those less likely to engage with Europe through travel, participation in exchange programs, news, or school coursework, such as young people, people of color, and those without a college degree, attribute considerably less importance to transatlantic relations:**

- While 72 percent of respondents over the age of 41 rate German-American relations as good, only 60 percent of younger respondents do so.
- Seventy-two percent of White respondents rate U.S.-German relations as good, compared with only 64 percent of Hispanic, 59 percent of Asian, and 53 percent of Black respondents (who also have **much higher levels of uncertainty**).
- They are also more likely to name non-European countries such as Mexico (in the case of Hispanics) or Japan (in the case of Asian-Americans) when asked to name important global partners.

In Germany: Strong Interest despite Sociodemographic Barriers to Access

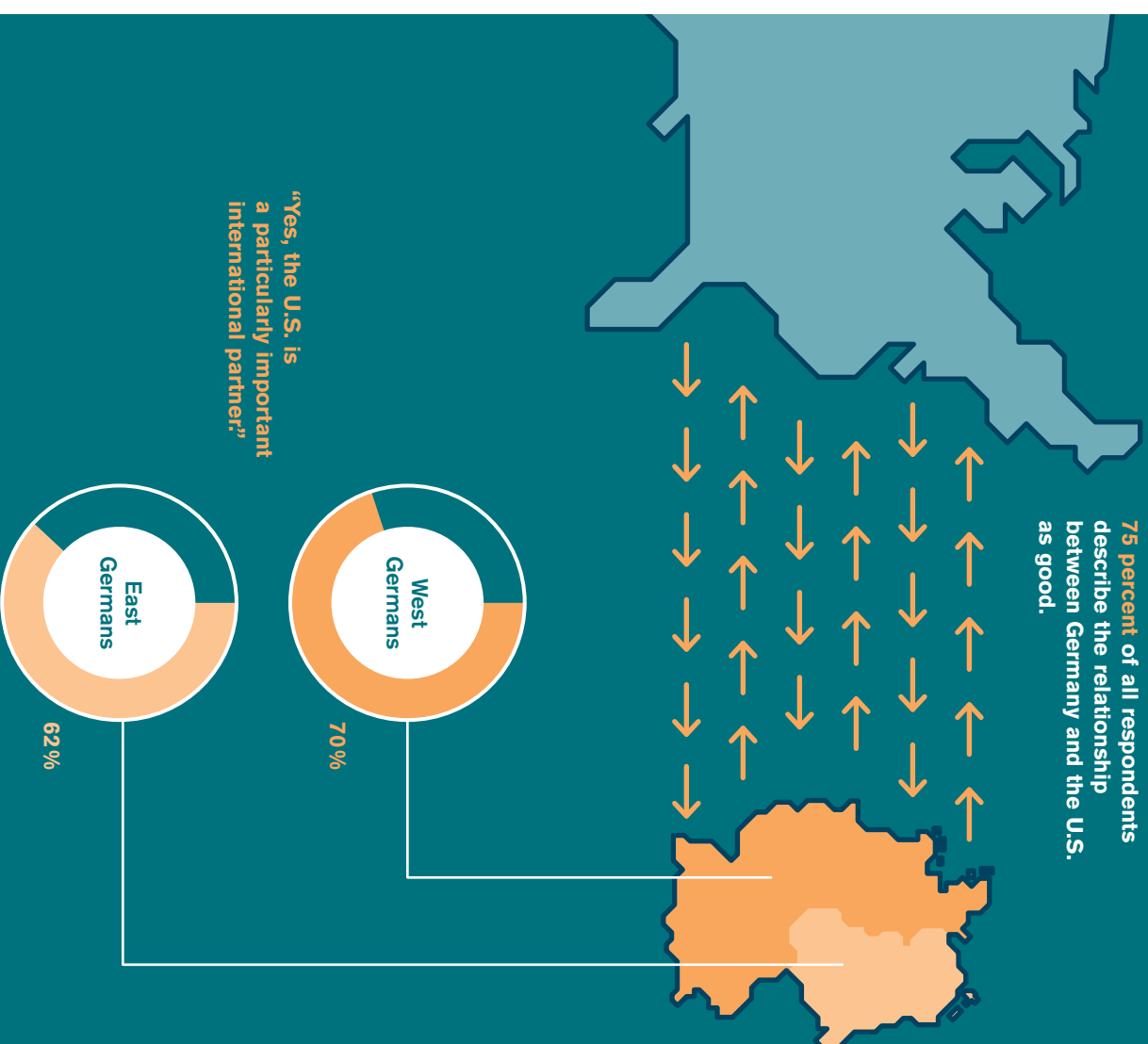
In Germany, the overwhelming majority sees the United States as a very important foreign policy partner, and transatlantic relations are considered highly relevant. However, for Germans, access to travel, international exchange programs, and transatlantic knowledge is also affected by sociodemographic factors.

Although it is primarily highly educated men that cite foreign policy as an area of personal interest, 75 percent of all respondents describe the relationship between Germany and the U.S. as good. The U.S. (68%) is also named as Germany's most important foreign partner more frequently than the EU (64%). However, there are small but notable regional differences: East Germans are slightly more likely to view transatlantic relations as "not very important" or "not at all important" for them personally (47%, West: 52%, East); this is in contrast to West Germans, who are significantly more likely to view the U.S. as a particularly important international partner (70%, West; 62%, East).

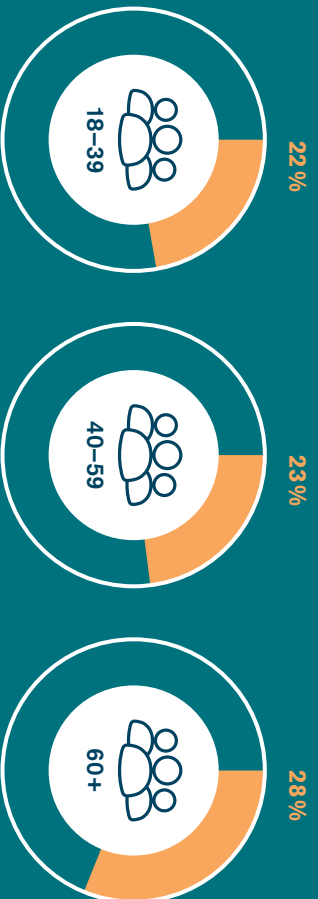
The trends observed in the U.S. are also seen in Germany: **People with higher levels of education, from urban areas, and in higher income brackets have better access to information on international relations than those in the respective comparison groups.**

→ Almost 90 percent of respondents in our German survey say they have traveled abroad—most frequently within Europe (82%). Almost a quarter have been to North America. Younger people, people with a higher level of education, people from urban areas, and people in higher income brackets travel much more frequently than those in the respective comparison groups. North America is a destination chosen more often by men (27% vs. 22%); older people (18–39: 22%; 40–59: 23%; 60+: 28%); people with a higher level of education (holding no high school certificate: 16%; secondary school certificate or intermediate high school certificate: 22%; high school diploma or technical college entrance qualification: 37%); and

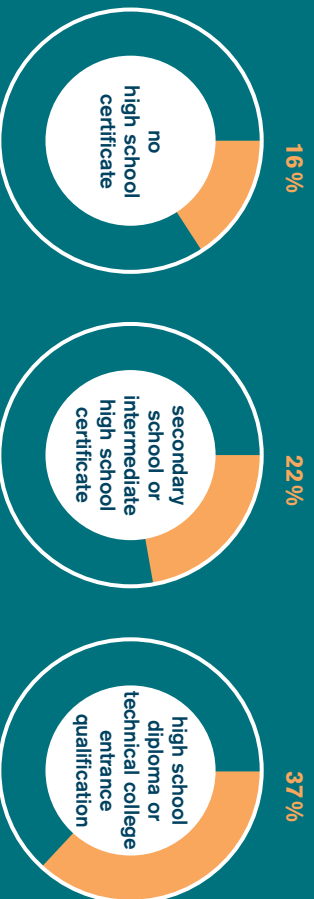
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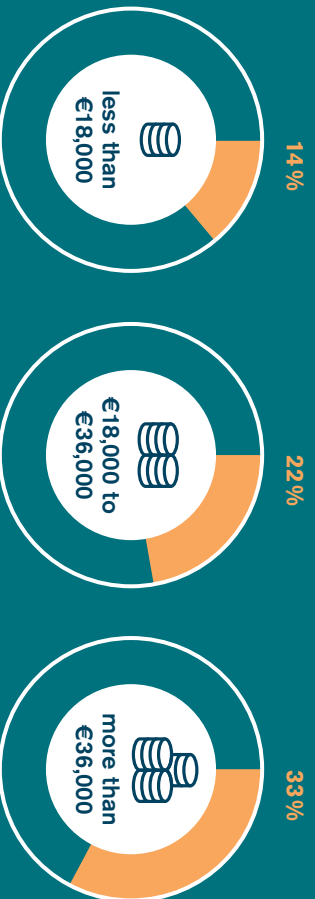
“Yes, I have been to North America.” (respondents by age)



“Yes, I have been to North America.” (respondents by education)



“Yes, I have been to North America.” (respondents by annual household income)



people with a higher household income (up to €18,000: 14%; between €18,000 and €36,000: 22%; €36,000 and above: 33%).

→ While interest in national news, measured by daily consumption, is slightly greater among all respondents than interest in international news (63% vs. 55%), **people with a “migration background” and people of color (POC) are significantly less likely to consume international news on a daily basis** (44% of people with a migration background, 60% without a migration background; 45% POC, 58% non-POC). The same is true for national news (48% of people with a migration background; 69% without a migration background; 50% POC, 65% non-POC).

→ **Unsurprisingly, Germans with lower levels of education report having learned less about other countries** and more specifically about the United States and transatlantic relations (23% vs. 18% vs. 10%).

However, people with a lower level of education do not consider transatlantic relations to be less important, but rather to be “very” or “fairly” important for them personally at a significantly higher rate than people in the comparison groups (57% without a high school certificate, 46% with a secondary school certificate or intermediate school certificate, 52% with a high school certificate or technical college entrance qualification). Additionally, **education is not independent of other social and demographic factors**. For example, whether a person lives in an urban or a rural area, their family’s standard of living, or physical and mental disabilities also have an influence on their educational path (identity characteristics that people themselves often cannot influence).

Conclusion: The Way Forward

In the U.S., interest in Europe is steadily declining, especially among younger generations who have fewer and fewer family ties to Europe as a result of their ever-growing ethnic and racial diversity. Financial limitations are a common barrier to traveling to Europe or participating in exchange programs. Lower consumption of international news and less exposure to transatlantic content at school also causes some groups to value transatlantic relations less. This is particularly true for young people, people of color, and those without a college degree.

In Germany, in contrast, there is widespread recognition of the importance of transatlantic relations, especially the relationship with the U.S., which is seen as very important by an overwhelming majority. Nevertheless, access to information on international relations is also influenced by sociodemographic factors. Similar to the U.S., in Germany, it is evident that people with higher levels of education, from urban areas, and with higher income are more likely to engage with these issues.

These findings raise multiple questions: How can marginalized groups, which are increasingly shaping society, be involved more fully in foreign policy decision-making processes? How can access to transatlantic relations be expanded for people from diverse backgrounds? What structural changes need to be made in foreign policy?

Equally, the findings of our studies underscore the **need to more fully engage populations that have so far been underrepresented in transatlantic relations**. In both surveys, respondents agree that diverse voices, life experiences, and perspectives should be heard in international dialogue. This is not only necessary from a social justice perspective but is also imperative to revitalize the exchange. To remain relevant and impactful, the character of transatlantic engagement needs to adapt with the changing societies in both the United States and Europe. Only with new voices and partners will the German-American relationship be able to adequately address the challenges of the 21st century.

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Comprehensive and innovative initiatives are needed to improve access to knowledge on foreign policy and international relations. On this premise, Atlantik-Brücke created its **NEW BRIDGE PROGRAM: a fully funded fellowship program that seeks to reflect the diversity of society, balance underrepresentation, and enrich German-American relations through multifaceted perspectives.** The program offers American and German young professionals from previously underrepresented groups the opportunity to engage in a participatory, interdisciplinary, and sustained exchange about transatlantic relations during 10-day study tours to each other's countries followed by alumni activities. Through meetings with political, business, and academic decision-makers, as well as visits to institutions, civil society organizations, and companies, the program strengthens **interest in German-American relations; creates starting points for future cooperation; and builds a new, resilient, and contemporary transatlantic network.**

Although society as a whole needs to find solutions to ensure equal opportunities and inclusion across the board, the NEW BRIDGE PROGRAM is making a key contribution **to renewing the transatlantic dialogue, ensuring it is more accessible, and making it fit for now and the future.**

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www.atlantik-bruecke.org/en/events-overview/new-bridge-program-2/

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Editor

Atlantik-Brücke e.V.,
Am Kupfergraben 7
10117 Berlin
Germany

Project Manager

Alina Burkholder
Program Director
New Bridge Program
Atlantik-Brücke e.V.

Design

fountainstudio.de



ATLANTIK-BRÜCKE