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THE ELECTION

International Students Can't Vote. But the Stakes Are Personal.

By *Karin Fischer*

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When Yi Xuen Tay opens up her social-media accounts, she is hit with notifications: *Don't forget to vote! Are you registered to vote?*

Yi Xuen, who is studying for a master's degree in student affairs at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, cares passionately about many of the issues in this year's election. She would like to vote.

But as an international student, Yi Xuen, who grew up in Malaysia, is on the sidelines.

Getting to see American democracy up close often fascinates international students, many of whom come from countries where citizens have little or no say in how they are governed.

The current presidential election, however, has personal stakes for the one million students from overseas on American campuses. The Trump presidency has been a challenging one: More-restrictive student-visa policies have made it tougher to come to study in this country. The prevailing America First political environment can make students feel unwelcome when they do.

While Yi Xuen can't vote, she encourages her American friends and classmates to get to the polls. "Even if I don't have the power to vote," she said, "I still have a voice."

Unexpected Activists

From the first days of the Trump administration, international-student issues have been front and center. Less than a week after he took office, the president enacted an [executive order](#) barring travelers, including students and scholars, from a half-dozen predominantly Muslim countries. Some were stranded midflight.

Since that time, the administration has increased vetting of international students, stopped some at the [border](#) and revoked their visas, and threatened to [ban](#) all Chinese students. With just days to go before the election, federal officials proposed a significant rule change that would place strict limits on the amount of time international students could stay in country. More than 32,000 individuals and groups have weighed in on the rule, with the majority of [comments](#) in opposition.

The policy changes have made unexpected activists of international students. When the Trump administration in July abruptly announced a [measure](#) that would have forced international students to enroll in face-to-face courses during the pandemic or leave the country, Yi Xuen rallied her sorority sisters to draft a statement supporting international students. (The policy guidance was quickly rescinded.)

Marjon Saulon, a graduate student in social innovation at the University of San Diego, initially hesitated to identify himself as an international student after the 2016 election, fearful that he “might be targeted as a foreigner.” But he came to realize that his talent for writing could help classmates, professors, and others better understand the issues facing international students, and he began to publish [opinion columns](#) in campus and local newspapers. Hearing international students’ perspectives can make a difference, said Saulon, who was born in the Philippines and grew up in Taiwan.

While Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate, hasn’t made visa and immigration issues a central theme of his campaign, most students said they believed the former vice president would be more sympathetic to their concerns. Biden criticized the Trump administration’s July policy and said he would repeal the travel ban. He has also [supported](#) efforts to make it easier for foreign graduates to stay in the United States and work, especially those in critical science and technology fields.

Frank, a graduate student in engineering at the University of Pennsylvania who asked to be identified by his first name only because of the sensitivity of discussing politics

both in the United States and back home in China, worries about his future in this country under President Trump. He has a job lined up in Silicon Valley after he graduates, but he is unsure if he'll be approved for optional practical training, the international-student work program. And what then? When he first came to America, he imagined that he might build a life here, but now he is not so sure. "In this election, I have so much at stake," he said.

Still, visa policy is far from international students' sole concern in the election. They care about issues like reproductive rights, racism, and access to health care. Saulon became so passionate about issues of inequality that he spent a year as a community organizer in the local Filipino-American community after he finished his undergraduate degree at San Diego State University.

As a scientist, Ankita Arora, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Campus, said she has been alarmed by the Trump administration's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, in particular the president's spreading of misinformation. Likewise, she is disturbed by the administration's attitude toward climate change, which the president has called a "hoax." "This is American politics," Arora, who is from India, said, "but it affects the whole world."

Some students said that beyond particular issues, they saw the election as a referendum on presidential leadership. Frank said President Trump reminded him of the authoritarian government he experienced back in China. "It's heartbreaking to see America become more like Xi," he said, referring to China's leader, Xi Jinping.

Wanting to Feel Welcome

Students said the outcome of the election matters to them not just from a policy perspective but because of a social climate under Trump that has felt inhospitable — and at times even hostile — to outsiders.

On the day after the election, Saulon recalls walking near the San Diego State campus when he was approached by a carful of men with a “Make American Great” flag. “Take that!” he said one of them yelled at him.

Yi Xuen was in the process of applying to come to the United States as an undergraduate exchange student in 2016, and some of her friends and family worried about her going to red-state America. She’s always felt welcome and included in Nebraska, but occasionally she has experienced microaggressions, like the guys in her apartment elevator who scoot to the side when she enters.

For many international students, those concerns have become more acute in recent months, as Covid-19 has led to a rise in xenophobia and anti-Asian sentiment. Trump has repeatedly called the infectious disease the “China virus.”

Earlier this year, as the coronavirus was just beginning to spread in the United States, Yi Xuen was supposed to travel out-of-state for grad-school interviews, and she searched for days for a protective face mask. Although she found one, she ended up not wearing it on her trip. Her fear that she could be singled out for discrimination overrode her concern for her safety.

Arora, the postdoc from India, said she has never experienced xenophobia first hand but sees that international perceptions of America have changed since she first came here five years ago. It is now viewed as less welcoming, she said. If Biden is elected, not only will he have to change Trump-administration policies, she said, “he will have to undo the damage to America’s image that has been done.”

As the election approaches, Arora said she feels anxious. Four years ago, when her American friends and colleagues were upset — some to the point of tears — about Trump’s victory, she didn’t fully grasp the stakes. “Fast forward four years, and if he wins again, I’d probably be one of those in the crying bucket,” she said.

Although the election is contentious, international students said they are excited to have a front-row seat to see democracy in action.

Some colleges have developed election-related programming for international students, even during the pandemic. The University of Kentucky held a student-led hangout, featuring presentations comparing the American election with those in students' home countries and trivia; it also gave students a safe space to talk about their concerns and share resources, said Seth Hall, an international academic coordinator. At Arizona State University, international-student advisers organized a workshop on voting in America and plan to share the [video](#) again on social media on Election Day.

Frank, the student from China, said he appreciates American-style democracy. "It's a unique experience; it's a beautiful experience," he said. As he spoke with a reporter Tuesday night, protests were going on in his Philadelphia neighborhood following the police shooting of a Black man. "This is part of the way Americans solve their issues, by going on the street," he said. "China has a very silent way of doing things, but America is a passionate country."

Saulon hopes his activism and advocacy have helped some of his American classmates see the power they have with their vote. A longtime friend recently texted him a photo of his completed ballot. "It makes me hopeful," he said. "That's why I feel optimistic."

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STUDENT LIFE

POLITICS

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