Authoritarian Populism and the Rhetoric of Neo-racist Nativism in the United States: Implications for Higher Education Internationalization

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Abstract

The United States is a world leader in higher education and has long been the most sought out destination for international students due to its reputable institutions, high quality programming, and pathways to employment opportunities and immigration for international students following graduation. Over half (52%) of the 1.1 million international students enrolled at U.S. institutions during the 2019-20 academic year came from Asia, with the largest proportions of students coming from China (34%) and India (18%). While the COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges for international student recruitment, we do not know the full impact of the emergence of authoritarian populism, neo-racist nativism, and Trumpism on higher education internationalization generally, international students themselves, and efforts to recruit international students to the United States. This paper provides an overview of the rise of authoritarian populism, which is exemplified by the rise of Trumpism, in the United States and its associated xenophobic outlook on immigration and immigrants. It provides an overview of Trump-era restrictions on international students' study, work, and residency in the U.S., which pose important questions about how neo-racist political rhetoric may influence student choices of study destination countries and institutions. Grounded in models of higher education choice and student decision-making, this work explores the impacts of authoritarian populism and neo-racist nativism on higher education internationalization and institutions seeking to recruit students from abroad.

1. Introduction

International students are commonly defined as those who have chosen to travel from their home country to another in order to pursue tertiary or higher education studies. Over the decade preceding the COVID-19 global pandemic, the number of international students enrolled at colleges and universities in the United States was steadily on the rise. As a share of all students enrolled in U.S. higher education, the proportion of international students grew about 3.5% in 2009-10 to almost 6% in 2019-20. More than half (52%) of international students at U.S. institutions come from Asia, with the largest proportions of students coming from China (34%) and India (18%). Research has shown that students are attracted to study in the United States because of the perceived quality and reputation of U.S. colleges and universities and because multiple pathways exist for international students to enter the workforce in the U.S. following graduation [1]. In contrast to the historical growth of international student enrollments, there were close to 20,000 fewer international students in the U.S. for the 2019-20 academic year compared to the year previous. In addition, the number of new international students enrolling at U.S. institutions has declined each year since 2015-16.

2. Purposes and benefits of higher education internationalization

Internationalization of higher education policy and practice is frequently couched in terms of liberal-humanist objectives, including the promotion of mutual understanding, facilitation of cultural exchange, and advancement of diversity within receiving institutions and jurisdictions [2]. National governments, higher education institutions, and private sector interests have promoted internationalization in terms of its impact on innovation, international trade, foreign investment, and advancing the economic performance of the nation state [3]. Interest in internationalization is also motivated by the necessity for higher education institutions to generate revenues from beyond their domestic student market to make up for declining or stagnant public funding. As such, colleges and universities have become increasingly dependent on international students as a source of revenue to cover their growing operating costs.

In Western nations where reliance on international student fee revenue is high, post-COVID pandemic discourse on international students has not revealed much evidence of prioritizing the more liberal-humanist aims of internationalization. Instead, from Australia to Canada frenetic public-hand wringing over the operating revenues lost due to COVID-related travel restrictions has dominated the headlines in higher education trade publications and the popular news media. This has laid bare the profit-seeking objectives of Western higher education institutions which have spent years aggressively seeking to attract international students

to their campuses [4]. As Rizvi [5] has astutely observed "[w]hat has become abundantly clear is that much of the talk of recovery continues to valorize cross-border mobility for the purposes of commercial gain. The value of international students continues to be measured in terms of their contribution to the financial sustainability of universities, rather than in any transformative possibilities of international education" (p. 2).

Increasing number of institutions have been challenged to adapt to the COVID pandemic by providing study alternatives for international students, such as distance studies and online classes, students themselves have been forced to contend with disruptions in their academic, employment, and immigration status. Barring significant changes in public funding trends or domestic student enrollment, the resumption and growth of international student attendance at U.S. institutions will be important for post-pandemic recovery at colleges and universities across the country. However, COVID-related racist rhetoric, such as President Trump's use of the phrases "China virus" and "Kung Flu" have coincided with reports of rising Sinophobia and discrimination toward students from China and East Asian countries [6]. Since the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year, there have been a number of reports of reduced numbers of international students studying in the U.S. [7] [8]. Unsurprisingly perhaps, there is some indication that Chinese students' interest in studying at Western institutions may be waning in the face of the global pandemic and increased tensions between China and the U.S. [9] [10]. This is concerning in light of the significant risk posed by the reliance on international students for higher education institutions' financial stability, which has been put into much sharper relief with the COVID-crisis.

3. Theorizing student study-abroad decisions

A number of conceptual models have been developed to explain the sorts of social, economic, and cultural factors that influence students' higher education decision-making and choices, including student decisions to study in another country. This includes the choice model first proposed by Hossler and Gallagher [11] and then adapted by Chen [12] for her study of how East-Asian students decide to pursue international studies and select a host country, institution, program, and location for their studies. These models conceptualize decisions to participate in higher education as a three-stage process, consisting of predisposition, search, and choice stages. In the predisposition stage, students begin to see further education beyond secondary school as a path to achieving their goals and start to collect information accordingly. During the search stage,

students refine their study abroad program/institutional preferences and submit one or more applications for admission. For the choice stage, which is quite consequential to this discussion, students make an enrollment decision based on a number of economic and sociological factors. In this final step, students evaluate their "choice set" after receiving offers of admission, consider the available alternatives (i.e., program, institution, country, visa requirements, cost, etc.), and make a final decision.

Chen's approach integrates elements of Mazzarol and Soutar's [13] "push-pull" model. Grounded in theories of migration, Mazzarol and Soutar's model accounts for push and pull factors influencing international students' destination country, institution, and program choices. The push factors are associated with their home country and have a positive or negative affect on their decision-making, such as whether or not their preferred program is available in their home country or their intention to migrate to another country following graduation. The identified pull factors attract students to the choice set of study abroad options they must select amongst in making their final decisions. These include the reputation of potential host countries and institutions, cost factors, and the influence of family and friends. These conceptual approaches are central to the interrogation of how neo-racist nativist political rhetoric is perceived by students who are making study abroad decisions and whether this discourse affects or influences the complex process of deciding whether to study aboard and where to study abroad.

4. International students in the age of nativist neo-racism

As internationalization has become a key focus of institutions, higher education researchers have increasingly turned their attention to the social, cultural, and academic experiences of international students [14]. This research has regularly shown that safety and security is of primary concern for students who are studying abroad [15]. Studies of international student experiences have also frequently reported on student encounters with discrimination, racism, and hostility [16]. With isolation and homesickness challenging many students who choose to study abroad, such experiences are an obvious deterrent to those seeking a safe and secure environment in which to pursue higher learning.

While discrimination based on race, religion, culture, or country of origin has been a long-standing problem in Western societies, in recent years neo-racism has been normalized with the more prevalent use of populist, nativist political rhetoric. With its roots in white supremacist notions, Lee [17] has noted that "neo-racism, unlike old fashioned racism or even blanket xenophobia, is a national ordering,

used to justify the filtering and differential treatment of immigrants" (p. ii). Racist overtures in Western politics are not new; however, explicit, overt neo-racism has been mainstreamed with the rise of authoritarian populism in Western democracies. What began in the late-1970s as a cultural backlash against the successes of 1960s liberal social movements, the wave of authoritarian populism we are currently witnessing has been triggered by generational value changes and facilitated by rising economic inequality and financial insecurity [18] [19]. This has coincided with a decline in existential security, encouraging xenophobic reactions against immigrants and rejection of those seen as having different religious or ethnic backgrounds [19]. Authoritarian hardliners have steadily gained support in Europe since the 1980s, but the election of Donald Trump, an openly racist, sexist, xenophobic candidate, as U.S. President in 2016 plunged authoritarian populism onto the North American political and cultural stage [18].

5. Trumpism and nativist neo-racism

Prior to Donald Trump's nomination as the Republican Party candidate for the 2016 presidential election, Nipissing University political science professor David Tabachnick offered a summary of the following four defining characteristics of Trumpism: a) celebrity, b) the outsider, c) populism, and d) nativism [20]. Trump's personal celebrity helped in the establishment of his political image as a person who is primarily a successful dealmaker. The cultural capital of celebrity embodied by this carefully crafted image was successfully converted into political capital for his consequent electoral campaigns. Trump's persona as a billionaire, anti-establishment political figure aided in his portrayal of the unusually fused outsider-as-an-insider who was at once a 'too rich to be bought' outsider as well as capable of playing the part of an insider who knows the established political order and how they operate the systems of governance. As a populist figure, Trump presented himself as an anti-ideological defender of the 'ordinary people'. This brand of populism embraced both American patriotic sentiment and economic nationalism (e.g., America First) while rejecting elites, experts, and intellectuals. Finally, Trumpism is further defined by a dominating anti-immigrant sentiment that often incorporates far-right conspiracy theories about non-U.S. citizens as well as racialized minorities both inside and outside of the country. This theme pre-dates Trump's official entry into politics and was evident in his call for the death penalty for the teenagers in the 1989 Central Park Five case, his ill-treatment of racialized tenants of his rental properties, and his false claims about former President Barack Obama's citizenship (e.g., birtherism). Trumpism's neo-racist nativism was evident in many of Trump's policies during his time as president including his executive order banning travel from several predominantly Muslim countries (so-called 'Muslim ban').

From the very beginning of his candidacy, Trump made his xenophobic attitude toward immigrants clear. In his campaign launch in 2015, he stated the following: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime."

With divisive rhetoric towards perceived outsiders being one of the hallmarks of the Trump presidency, it has not been surprising that international students have been the target of nativist neo-racism. Other Republican Party politicians have followed Trump's example, with one nominee in the 2020 Senate elections baselessly accusing Chinese students studying in the U.S. of stealing American intellectual property and suggesting that they be limited in their choice of field of study or banned from attending institutions in the U.S. altogether [21].

6. Neo-racist nativism in U.S. immigration policy

Normalization of neo-racist nativism during Trump's term of office was seen in the formulation and operationalization of public policies intended to restrict the entry of non-U.S. citizens and curtail their freedoms while in the country. Many of the Trump era executive orders and government proposals affected international students in particular, especially during the global pandemic. For example, the administration sought to suspend some non-immigrant work visa programs for foreign nationals, such as the H-1B visa program, which allows companies to employ college-educated non-citizens in selected specialized occupations. They also sought to curtail opportunities to for visa routes for internships, work-terms, and other on-the-job training opportunities. The H-4 visa program, which enables entry to the country with consent to seek out employment for spouses and dependent children of visa holders, was similarly targeted for significant reduction. More controversially still, as higher education moved to online delivery in the early part of the pandemic, the Department of Homeland Security sought to ban non-immigrant students within the U.S. from taking a full program via distance learning. This proposal, since nullified by in court, would have seen some international students deported by the Department in the event that the programs they were enrolled in went entirely online [17].

New policies under consideration toward the end of Trump's presidency would have imposed 4-year visa limits on international students generally, with the exception of 2-year limits for students from a selection of African and Middle Eastern countries. Students from selected countries would have had their academic progress more closely monitored and would be prohibited from making certain academic program changes and from retaking courses they had already taken part in. For the most part, these orders and policy proposals have been either reversed or significantly modified since the Biden administration took office in January 2021 [22].

7. Rising anti-Asian violence

While observed correlation also is not sufficient to infer causality, there has been a dramatic increase in reported incidents of anti-Asian racism since the beginning of the pandemic and Trump's coinciding derogatory references to the COVID-19 as "China virus", "Kung Flu", "Wuhan Flu", etc. A recent report from the Pew Research Center notes that more than eight-in-ten Asian Americans believe that violence against them is increasing [23]. Forty-five percent of Asian adults surveyed said they had experienced an incident tied to their ethnicity, such as a threat, a slur, or a Sinophobic or xenophobic remark, since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Similarly, a 2021 national report issued by the organization Stop AAPI Hate, reports that approximately 65% of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders surveyed had witnessed racist verbal harassment in the year between March 2020 and March 2021 [24]. A further 18% had experienced shunning or deliberate avoidance and almost 13% reported incidents of physical violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

8. Shifting international student enrollments and perspectives

New undergraduate international student enrollments had been growing steadily at U.S. universities up until just prior to Trump's election. Between the 2015-16 and 2019-20 academic years, these enrollments declined by just over 3%. New non-degree international student enrollments dropped more sharply over the same period – declining by approximately 6% between the Fall of 2015 and the Fall of 2019 [25].

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on overall enrollments at U.S. higher education institutions. However, compared to a decline of 3% of overall higher education enrollments, undergraduate international student enrollments dropped by nearly 14% between the Fall of 2019 and the Fall of 2020. The drop in university graduate international student enrollments over the same period was less pronounced, but still substantial at almost 8% [26]. The decline in international students studying at community colleges between October 2019 and October 2020 was larger still at 27%. Overall, the numbers of new international students enrolled at U.S. institutions of higher learning over this period was down by 43%, compared to a decline of 18% in the United Kingdom and a drop of 34% in Canada.

On a more positive note, 76% of international students reported that their perception of the United States had improved since the 2020 Presidential election. Similarly, the perception of the U.S. as a safe, stable, and welcoming destination for international students has improved substantially compared to the Fall of 2020 [27].

9. Conclusion

It is unclear how policies developed in the spirit of neo-racist nativism impact international student enrollments and the progress made by individual jurisdictions in the area of higher education internationalization. There has been a lack of research systematically identifying how these policies, and the political rhetoric driving them, may be influencing international students' decision-making and choice of study destination. More study in this area is needed in order to provide a deeper understanding of how international students view neo-racist nativist discourse in the public sphere and to assess how this influences their choice of host country, if at all.

Some things are clear, however. Safety and security are among the foremost considerations of international students deciding on a host country destination. While the perception of the U.S. as a safe and welcoming host country is improving, the reported rising incidence of anti-Asian sentiment and violence may further influence prospective international students' decisions. Models of student choice also emphasize the desire of some international students to seek out employment and potentially take up permanent residence in their host country. Under Trump, the U.S. government made it much more difficult for international students to enter or remain in the country on a visa. The Trump administration also created significant new barriers for international students seeking employment opportunities. While the Biden administration has reversed some of these changes and committed to a more hospitable study and work environment for non-citizens, it remains to been seen if these initiatives will be sufficient to reverse declines in international student enrollments and expand their post-graduation opportunities in the country. Trump has left office, but Trumpism and neo-racist nativism remains. As Lee [17] has pointed out, neo-racism

and the "barriers to international migration, collaboration, and exchange" that come with it has, to some extent, already undermined the status of the U.S. as a world leader in higher education.

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