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The Impact of Politics and COVID-19 on Graduate STEM International Students of Color

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ABSTRACT

Political factors and the COVID-19 pandemic have had profound impacts on international students in the U.S. These factors include anti-immigration rhetoric, the policies of the executive branch, and the additional COVID-19 restrictions placed on international students in 2020. In this study, we interviewed international students in graduate STEM programs and asked them about their political opinions and experiences during the pandemic. This article also provides a brief historical overview of immigration policy and how these policies relate to and impact international students. Many of our participants expressed negative emotions regarding President Trump for reasons ranging from his racist rhetoric to his administration's policies before and during the pandemic. Many of our participants discussed having difficulties with obtaining and maintaining a visa to live in the U.S. during this time. Several students mentioned desire to relocate to a more immigrant-friendly country. It is important to study and understand these issues, which had a significant impact on the emotional and mental wellbeing of our participants.

Keywords: International Students, Student Visa, Pandemic, Immigration Policies, Visa Policies, Graduate STEM Program

Over the years, the population of international students pursuing degrees in the U.S. has increased dramatically, reaching a peak from 2018-2019, then declining under the Trump administration, and declining even further due to the

COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of International Education, 2021). International students enrolled in U.S. universities prior to the Trump administration saw a shift in policies after his election. The pandemic greatly impacted all the immigrants since borders were shut down, travel became more difficult, and many of the immigration services offered by the U.S. government were paused. Other federal policies pertaining specifically to international students were passed in the fall of 2020, requiring these students to take at least one university class in person to maintain their visa status (Zhang & Stucka, 2020). Some of these measures are still in place at the time of this writing (Spring 2022). It is important to hear and analyze international students' experiences of enduring changing political factors and COVID-19 restrictions so that we can better influence future education policy.

International students make positive contributions to US society. Recruiting international students is one way of bringing global talent, boosting research initiatives, and increasing academic innovation in the U.S. (Adnett, 2010). There is also evidence that hosting more international students at a university may increase domestic participation in STEM studies (Zavodny, 2021), thus potentially increasing domestic talent in STEM disciplines. International students who are recruited and retained contribute to research and development in the U.S., helping the U.S. maintain its technological advantage. Maintaining international talent in the U.S. also provides economic advantages since many immigrants innovate or start businesses while living in the U.S. (Borjas, 1995). For universities, international students provide financial support, diversify their campuses, and boost geopolitical relations with other countries (Hegarty, 2014). Unfortunately, international students face many challenges while studying and staying in the U.S., leading more of them to ultimately take their knowledge and expertise elsewhere. Moreover, international US rivals such as China and India recognize the political and economic advantages of creating and maintaining a knowledgeable workforce and thus have created policies that provide incentives to repatriate expats who have attended top universities around the world (Brown & Tannock, 2009).

Despite international students' significant contributions to the U.S. and U.S. universities, students often face hardships as a result of being immigrants and people of color (PoC). They encounter these difficulties while simultaneously facing the challenges associated with pursuing a graduate STEM degree in the U.S. The pandemic and recent immigration policies have made it more challenging to reach the U.S. and may have contributed to the decline in international students coming to the U.S., despite an increasing population of international students worldwide.

This study examines the racialized experiences of 22 international student participants in graduate STEM programs. The students we interviewed answered the following questions:

- 1. How did international students perceive the political situation in the U.S. before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall of 2020?*

2. What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic and politics have on international students, as shared from their own perspective?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brief history of modern immigration in the US

Modern immigration to the US, like most things, is shaped by the history of the migration of people to the Americas and the policies toward immigrants that were established since the inception of the US. We intend to cover a breadth of topics briefly, encouraging the readers to read more on these topics for further understanding. Importantly, the first known people to inhabit the American continent were indigenous people who migrated to the Americas from Northeast Asia during the Ice Age at least 20,000 years ago (Montaigne & Gerszak, 2020). Strong evidence suggests that the Chinese and Vikings reached the Americas long before Columbus arrived in 1492 (Freedman, 2007). Owing to significant technological advantages, Columbus and his men went on to set a trend of western European conquistadors traveling to other continents to massacre, displace, and enslave indigenous groups across the Americas. While Spanish and Portuguese colonized most of Central and South America, English and French colonized North America. The Portuguese were the first to transport enslaved people from western Africa to the Americas in 1526, and soon other Europeans followed. This was the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, which lasted until the early 19th century (Klein, 2010). During this period, millions of enslaved people were taken to the Americas for labor, where they faced horrific conditions, including being chained in closed spaces and forced to eat, sleep and defecate while remaining constrained.

At the time of the signing of the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776, most free and legal US settlers consisted of white people. The Naturalization Act of 1790 provided white immigrants with a direct path to citizenship but excluded all other nonwhite ethnic groups. Laws based on racial distinctions were unique to the U.S. and uncommon in the rest of the world. Until the invention of steam ships, immigrants arrived mostly from Europe on large sailing ships since the voyage was much longer and more expensive (Cohn, 2005). Steam ships and other technological advances have led to a considerable increase in the number of immigrants, opening the possibility for more groups of people from other continents to immigrate to the US. This led to a growth in anti-immigration sentiments by the mostly white European-descent population and led to the passing of the first immigration policy, namely, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This act prohibited Asian immigration, especially from China (Soennichsen, 2011).

By the late 1910s, many affluent, white, native-born Americans had begun to see immigration as a threat, and hence, a political shift had ensued. In 1917, the Immigration Act of 1917 was passed, which imposed a literacy test and barred all people of Asian descent and those who were found “mentally defective” or had “constitutional psychopathic inferiority” from immigrating to the U.S. (Longley,

2021). The Emergency Quota Law of 1921 restricted the number of immigrants allowed for the first time in U.S. history, with the Immigration Act of 1924 furthering these restrictions (Ngai, 2017). Immigration policies are often influenced by public sentiment but also depend on what is perceived to benefit the country. For example, when the US entered WWII, there was a demand for migrant workers, which led to the development of the Bracero Program in 1942. Under this program, Mexican migrants were allowed to work in the U.S. and even remain in the U.S. legally, often without proper paperwork. This led to an enormous increase in the number of Mexican immigrants (Calavita, 2010). After negotiations between the US and Mexican governments over the Bracero program fell short in 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower launched Operation Wetback, where federal officials led thousands of local police officers on sweeps, causing the deportation of over a million Mexican migrants and resulting in the division and displacement of thousands of families (Garcia, 1981).

As a result of the civil rights movement, immigration policies would soon be reformed and made more racially equitable. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, signed into law by Lyndon B. Johnson, abolished the racist quota system and established a category system that prioritized the relatives of US citizens and professionals with specialized skills (Chin, 1996). This would lead to a drastic increase in the number of nonwhite immigrants, since the number of immigrants from Europe increased from 60% in 1970 to 15% by 2000 (Zong & Batalova, 2015). To address the rising immigration of undocumented immigrants from Latin America, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was passed and signed into law by Ronald Reagan, granting legality to millions of undocumented immigrants (Calavita, 1989). However, this law failed to curb the hiring and flow of undocumented immigrants into the country. The Immigration Act of 1990 signed by George H.W. Bush increased the number of legal immigrants by 40% (Leiden & Neal, 1990).

Through 1996, undocumented immigrants had avenues for attaining legal status, including marriage, family relations, and being sponsored by an employer. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, signed by Bill Clinton, blocked those avenues while reducing the number of legal immigrants allowed in the country (Fragomen Jr, 1997). This led to a steep increase in the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., as seen in the past two decades. The George W. Bush administration experienced an influx of 8 million undocumented immigrants, the most ever in a five-year period. This administration supported the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007, which would have given every undocumented immigrant a path to citizenship; however, the Act was ultimately blocked by conservative senators (Olivas, 2009). The Obama administration, on paper, was tough on undocumented immigrants, deporting more of them than any other president since. On the other hand, this administration also attempted to promote immigration-friendly programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) but had little success in improving the immigration system overall (Gonzales et al., 2014).

The immigration policy experienced some changes under the Trump administration, as he promised significant reform. This administration wanted to build a wall to stop the flow of migrants from the southern border, placed a ban on several Muslim countries, attempted to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and imposed a zero-tolerance policy toward families crossing the border illegally (Pierce & Selee, 2017). Furthermore, President Trump used his political power to put pressure on Latin American countries to ramp up their efforts to stop undocumented immigrants to the U.S. The Trump administration's political decisions were surprisingly not radically different from those of prior administrations. Most of these immigration policies have had, and continue to have, bipartisan support. However, what was different during the Trump administration was the strong vocal opposition regarding immigration, which may have deterred some people from immigrating to the US, including many international students who preferred to visit other countries that are more immigrant friendly.

Brief history of international students and policies in the U.S.

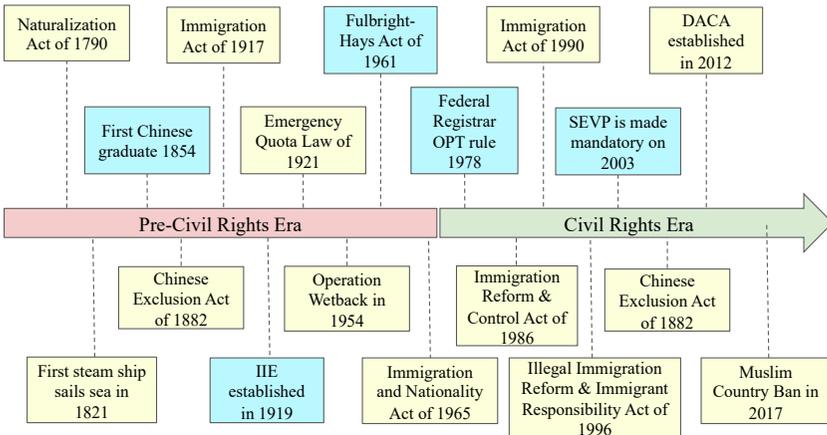
The rich history of international students in the U.S. began in 1854 when Yung Wing, a Chinese student, graduated from Yale. Yung Wing helped establish the first education exchange program in the U.S. and eventually became a Chinese diplomat (Zong & Batalova, 2018). By 1921, approximately 8,000 international students had enrolled in US institutions, many of whom were from China, Canada, or the Philippines. United States Cultural Exchange Programs, such as the Fulbright Program, were established in the 1940s to promote the intercultural relations, cultural diplomacy, and intercultural competence of American scholars (Lebovic, 2013). Trends in the attendance of international students have been well documented since 1949 and sharply increased from 26,400 in 1949 to its peak of 1,075,000 in 2019 (Institute of International Education, 2021). The demographics of these students have varied over the years, but the top countries of origin from 2020–2020 were China (35%) and India (18%) (Institute of International Education, 2021). Furthermore, many of these students pursue graduate STEM studies in the U.S., accounting for 57% of doctoral recipients in engineering, 56% in mathematics and computer science, and 39% in the physical and earth sciences (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2020).

As mentioned, international students have existed in the U.S. since 1854, with as many as 4,222 international students residing in the U.S. in 1913. Many of these scholars were sent to study in the U.S. by their governments to bring important knowledge back home. The Institute of International Education (IIE) was created in 1919 to protect international students and visiting scholars in the U.S. Lobbying by the IIE led to international students being given nonimmigrant visas, allowing them to circumvent restrictive immigration policies passed in the 20 s (Ngai, 2017). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 led to the classification of visas using the alphabet, with nonimmigrant student visas being assigned the letter F (Chin, 1996). Finally, the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 led to the creation of the J-1 visa class for students and visiting scholars. In 1978, a new

rule in Federal Registrar allowed students to visit and work in the U.S., forming the first articulation of Optional Practical Training (OPT). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1981 led to the creation of a new M-1 visa for vocational students. After a person on a student visa was involved in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, a review of the F, J, and M visa processes was conducted, leading to the development of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) and the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Initially, these programs faced much opposition; however, after a person on a student visa was involved in the September 11, 2001 attacks, these programs were eventually made mandatory by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Wong, 2006). SEVP is used to manage visiting students and scholars through SEVIS, requiring them to register and pay SEVIS fees, in addition to normal visa fees.

Figure 1: Timeline of immigration policies and history

Here is a figure to summarize the literature review on immigration policies. The yellow boxes refer to federal policies for all immigrants and blue boxes are policies or events related to international students.



International student experiences in the US

As previously mentioned, international students face issues related to emigrating to another country. Some of these challenges include adapting to the English language (Martirosyan et al., 2015), the US’s popular culture, different social norms, and various cultural barriers (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007), among other factors (Sherry et al., 2010). These factors can lead students toward social isolation or prompt them to find friends with similar cultural backgrounds. The experiences of international students also depend on their country’s representation in their academic programs. Students from highly represented countries such as China and India may be able to find peers from similar cultural backgrounds, whereas students from less represented countries may face more social isolation.

Students who want to stay in the U.S. after graduating must apply for OPTs or a nonimmigrant work visa.

International students also face issues related to discrimination in the U.S. because they are immigrants and PoC. The racial and ethnic discrimination that international students face at predominantly white institutions is well documented (Ee, 2019; Gomez et al., 2011; Hanassab, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2010; J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007). In addition to race, international students face discrimination based on other issues, including their English accent (Harwood et al., 2012), nationality (J. Lee, 2006), or religion (Dimandja, 2017). For many international students, these experiences are new because they come from more homogenous societies where these factors are not an issue.

METHOD

Data collection and analysis

Participants were recruited from two predominantly white institutions in the Mountain West region of the U.S. The two institutions selected were similar in size and research funding, and both had medical schools. The researchers recruited participants through graduate student organizations that were STEM related, leading to 22 international students being recruited across various STEM programs. Anonymized details about our participants are provided in Table 1 and Figure 3. In this study, we report the political opinions and concerns of the 22 international students recruited. All the 30-- to 90-minute interviews were recorded online via a semistructured interview protocol. The audio from the interviews was then professionally transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were initially coded in R via R-based quality data analysis (RQDA) (Huang, 2016) and then organized via a thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998) with additional influences from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Table 1: Participant Information

Major		Race		Year		Gender		Degree Level	
Computer Science	16	Asian	19	1st	6	Male	13	M.S.	9
Math	3	Black	1	2nd	7	Female	9	Ph.D.	13
Physics	1	Hispanic	2	3rd	3				
Chemistry	1			4th	2				
Biology	1			5th or more	4				

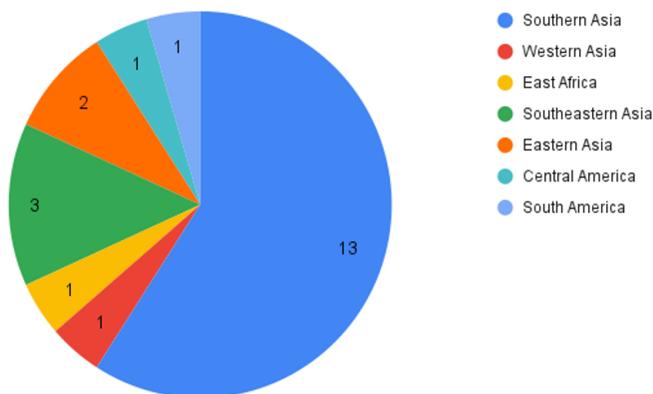


Figure 2: Geographical origin of all 22 participants

For the initial analysis, a random subset of 9 students was made and coded independently by the first and third authors. Once both researchers finished coding the same 9 participants, the codes were discussed and agreed upon by both researchers, leading to a final set of codes. The final codes were also operationalized, meaning that both researchers agreed upon how the codes would be employed. Both researchers then collaboratively coded all 22 participant transcripts one by one, allowing the analysis to be grounded in the experiences of the participants. Both researchers wrote memo notes for each participant, allowing the researchers to make further meaningful comparisons regarding the participants. The codes and memo notes were reviewed and discussed among the first two authors. Once coded, the authors found themes across the participants among various topics. The themes reflect the experiences the participants shared and were discussed among the researchers to check and confirm their thought processes and ideas. The themes of this paper focus on our participants' experiences with the bureaucratic processes involved in becoming international students in the U.S. and the opinions of our participants about the political rhetoric they faced during their graduate STEM studies.

Author Positionality

The first author of the paper identifies as an Afro Hispanic Puerto Rican Agnostic cishet man who grew up and lived in South Florida around communities from many cultural backgrounds and identities. The second author identifies as an Egyptian Muslim cishet woman who grew up in Alexandria, Egypt, and has been at a predominantly white institution in the United States since 2019. The third author identifies as a Hispanic Atheist queer man who grew up in Michigan and currently works at a predominantly white institution but who participates in multicultural communities. Our mixed identities allowed us some insight into the unique and varied participants; however, we had to continually reflect and discuss our unique perspectives to ensure a robust and thoughtful research process.

Protection of Vulnerable Populations

Throughout this study, the confidentiality of each participant was paramount. All the names of the participants were anonymized throughout the data collection process, and all the interviews were conducted via private video conferencing programs. Each participant was given a pseudonym, and the only time their identity was revealed was to receive their payment for participation. However, the accounting office has no access to data or other information about their interviews. The only people allowed access to the interview data were the three authors of this paper and an additional postdoctoral scholar working on the larger project from which this paper was written.

RESULTS

All 22 participants expressed opinions about the political climate and/or the visa process, along with how these issues have impacted their experiences. The results are structured into three main themes: Politics & Trump Policies, Visa Challenges, and Impact on Students. The first theme, Trump & Politics, includes issues that students voiced related to the Trump administration's rhetoric on immigrants, executive orders, immigration policy shifts, and COVID-19 policies enforced on international students. The second theme, Visa Challenges, relates to the hurdles international students overcome to obtain their student visas and other restrictions they have experienced while on their visas. The third theme, Impact on Students, is related to the stress our participants reported from worrying and thinking about their future in the U.S. due to political and visa-related concerns.

Politics & Trump Administration Policies

In this context, our international participants expressed their opinions on the political climate they lived through, with many individuals explicitly mentioning Trump. Our participants discussed the Trump administration's policies on immigration and international students, along with the trickle-down effects of his disconcerting rhetoric. Some students also mentioned how they perceived the US to be divided and how they felt about the presidential elections. Since international students are inherently from abroad, immigration policies have a direct effect on them. One participant, Deepika, discussed how these policies have impacted her personally:

Trump does not seem to be a big fan of immigrants, even legal immigrants. That was quite a worry for me because I'm mostly dependent on visas for me to stay and work, and I truly would like to stay here, work and improve my knowledge and experience. I tend to look at the news a lot, and I get affected by the news a lot, so seeing Trump put bans on, restricting certain visas and everything has affected me a little bit. It is one of the main reasons why I did not want to go back to India because I did not want to risk getting stuck there and not being able to come back. (Deepika)

Deepika made it clear that she did not visit home owing to uncertainty in not being allowed back into the country owing to executive orders banning entrants from certain countries. Deepika's country was never banned, yet she was afraid. International students from banned countries were not able to visit their homes. Nick, a fourth-year CS PhD student from India, mentioned how his "friends are from Iran and Iraq, cannot go back, cannot bring their parents in." International students from banned countries were greatly impacted by these policies.

Many of our international participants commented on the Trump administration's anti-immigration policies, including making changes to visa restrictions and how long visas last. Many explained how these policies had impacted them in one way or another. For this reason, many of our participants wanted to see a change in the presidency. Blue comments:

I think for international people, like for visas, there were many visa restrictions imposed on people under the Trump administration, which was not the case when Obama was the president. Biden is looking forward to making the visa situation better for international students. (Blue)

From Blue's perspective, the Trump administration truly changed the visa landscape, so she hoped that visa policies would improve under the Biden administration. Unfortunately, until the writing of this article (Spring 2022), many of the Trump administration's immigration policies remained unchanged by the Biden administration and continue to adversely impact international students.

Owing to the Trump administration's policies and verbal rhetoric, many of our participants did not like President Trump personally. Teresa expresses her frustration with the Trump administration:

This is for me not about Republican, Democrats. It is more about Trump than anything else. He's a very toxic person. It is not on my mind how so many people want to elect him again. I feel alone here because I live in a conservative state. (Teresa)

For Teresa and many other international participants, the Trump administration's immigration stance was deemed problematic and concerning to them. Teresa's remark also reflects that our participants attend predominantly white institutions and live in conservative states where there are many Trump supporters. Nick goes on to say:

I think no matter what immigration policies exist, they do not disturb the students. We are students, so please do not disturb us, because most of us pay enormous tons of money, so we should be treated well and not keep confused or stressed. (Nick)

Nick's request that international students not be used as political pawns is shared by all our participants. Most international students come to the U.S. to pursue their studies and already face all the challenges associated with graduate school. They should be able to pursue their studies without this additional pressure and stress.

A few of our international participants who had been in their programs longer than four years explained how the transition to the Trump administration increased their fears of discrimination due to his racist rhetoric and beliefs. Faith explains:

To be 100% honest, Trump is not helping with it. He's certainly putting fuel into the fire. After the Trump election, sometimes I feel like I am afraid of going out into places that are mainly white. No, specific incidents, but sometimes you look when you go into restaurants or in the movies, especially when you walk in wearing a scarf or look different. I feel like racist people are more empowered and they feel empowered that they can try to do anything to you if they want to. (Faith)

Faith has experienced a shift in how people see her because of President Trump's empowerment of racism. Faith's use of a hijab and her dark skin complexion intersect in such a way that she experiences discrimination for both her race and religion. She later mentioned how she tries to avoid going to places with a majority of white people so that she can reduce the probability of being discriminated against. Another participant, Hope, who also wore a hijab, expressed the same feelings and cautions about being in public. Adding to Faith's experiences, Rodrigo has experienced more discrimination since President Trump's 2016 election:

Some things happened in the last four years, such as some people putting stickers at the university saying, "Get the fuck out of the country." Someone even told me that [my country] is a shithole country. This is the top-down effect. Unfortunately, whatever's coming from the top like I mentioned is giving a voice to some people to reproduce that. Definitely not nice. You feel threatened, and you feel like it is a truly weird feeling when you feel that the message of hate is addressed to you. (Rodrigo)

Rodrigo had first-hand experience with the top-down effect. Someone had told him that his country was a "shithole" country that was in line with President Trump's rhetoric. Rodrigo was the only Latin person in his cohort and faced considerable discrimination from his white peers, who were conservative Trump supporters. Rodrigo and Faith's experiences reflect what it is like for international PoC to live in conservative areas with predominantly white populations.

In addition to his racist rhetoric, President Trump also promoted nationalist ideologies with his 'America First' agenda. This caused further political division in the U.S., as described by our participants. Raj describes this:

I think the politics around the world is a little bit self-orientated and individualistic, like "My country, my nation, my people, my race, my..." Everything is like "my". In addition, this is not true just in the US; it is also true in India. (Raj)

Raj noted that the expansion of nationalism has occurred not only in the U.S. but also in other parts of the world, including India, which is a country. Raj does not agree with nationalism and later explained how nationalism is propagated by capitalism, classism, and racism. The political division in the U.S. was also duly noted, as Faiz explained:

It is so divided on the two sides of the political aisle that it is unhealthy. Again, for me, it does not matter on which side of the political aisle you are, if you can talk about it. I feel that no matter where you are in the political aisle, you should be able to say whatever you want without causing any violence to anyone, in a manner that you do not have to worry about

consequences. That is not something we see on college campuses or in this country in general. (Faiz)

Faiz sees the US as very divided politically and believes that people should be able to talk peacefully about politics but does not see this happening. In other words, college campuses, along with the entire country, have become political battlefields where one cannot debate political issues with colleagues and friends. Ngo, a second-year math PhD student from Vietnam, also acknowledged that "America is a very divided country and racism is definitely a problem," which reflects both Raj and Faiz's comments.

The Trump administration's COVID-19 policies for international students were also highly discussed among our participants. Michael recalls the event:

Just before fall 2020, some laws passed that required international students to leave if they were not taking any in-person class, which is something that we cannot control; it is the school that decides what courses are in person and which one. Therefore, I mean, there was lots of panic within me, but for a few days, there was some confirmation that if I get some number of dissertation credits that I'm enrolled in, that is in class and I could stay in. (Michael)

Michael's panic was also experienced and reported by other participants. Luckily, Michael was enrolled in dissertation credits, and the university ultimately counted them as in class credits. Alice puts it in another context:

I think the difference was that people of color had to go to university, while the others did not. International students had to go to university to comply with the law that is put in that you have to have a couple of credits in university in-person classes. (Alice)

From Alice's perspective, during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the students on campus were PoC since international students were the only students required to take class courses. These COVID-19 policies aimed at international students truly affected them, with negative physical and emotional consequences, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Given the issues discussed thus far, it is not surprising that many of our participants were happy about the 2020 election results. Smith put it best:

I was happy about the change in government, from Republican to Democratic. I truly want America to be one nation again. When I was in elementary school, I heard America is the model of a diverse country, so I was truly eager to come here and see how they do it. I think America is the number one country. because of their diversity. Now that the government has changed, I truly want to see the power of diversity. (Smith)

Smith grew up hearing about the US and its diversity, and from his opinion, the Republicans are against diversity, whereas the Democrats embrace diversity. Smith's happiness in the 2020 elections broadly reflected the views of most of our participants. Sartaj, a fourth-year Physics PhD student from India, said this about the elections:

I'm relieved; the whole world was watching the US elections. When Biden won, you can see the firecrackers in London and Paris. In India, people were also tense about it. (Sartaj)

Sartaj acknowledges how tense many people were with the 2020 elections and how happy many people in the world were when President Trump lost. Similarly, Ananya expressed, "I think it is good now. I mean, after the elections," which again is reflective of our participants' attitudes about the current state of politics in the U.S.

Visas challenges and limitations

One of the greatest challenges for our international participants was the issues and restrictions that accompany being on a student visa. Amin reported challenges due to visa:

In my first semester, it was challenging mostly because I could not get my visa two weeks into the semester. In addition, when I came here, I had to buy things for my home and register my daughter for school. I was very busy, so I could not study for one month at the start of the semester. (Amin)

Owing to the political situation between his country and the U.S., Amin did not receive his visa on time to be in the U.S. at the start of his first semester. Amin is a father and a husband and was not given his visa in time to establish his home in the U.S., which caused him to fall behind in his studies even more. Amin went on to explain the restrictions of his family's visas:

I'm here on an F-1 visa. My dependents, my wife and daughter, are on F-2 visas. The thing that is very bad and disappointing is that they cannot even open a bank account. They only gave a social security number to me, and they do not have them for F-2 visas. People on F-2 visas can only breathe here, just breathing. (Amin)

Amin's wife cannot open a bank account or find work, and while his daughter can go to school, she is also very limited by her visa. Amin was our only student participant who brought his family to the US, but his experiences may be typical for international students with families, as these issues stemmed from current federal visa policies.

Our participants discussed their limitations regarding staying in the U.S., such as finding jobs or fellowships and a lack of funding as international students. Blue mentions that:

I think one of the reasons why I would not want to settle in the US if I had to be the visa issue, about the green card. It is very, very difficult to get the green card here. (Blue)

Blue prefers to stay in the U.S. but believes it is difficult to obtain a green card. She later says that she is hoping to visit Canada after her studies since it seems easier to gain residency there. Adding to what Blue said, Deepika discussed the challenges of being hired as an international student in the US:

Being an international student, it is kind of hard to get hired here because of all the visa issues and everything. (Deepika)

In addition to being restricted when applying for jobs, Raj adds the following:

For example, fellowships and funding. I feel like most of them are not open to all; international students are not allowed to apply. (Raj)

Most fellowships and funding are for U.S. citizens only and are therefore not options for international students. For these reasons, Rodrigo recognized the disadvantage that international students have compared with American students:

There's already one step that we are behind; in the sense of, you cannot apply for most of the grants because you're not a U.S. citizen. Therefore, we're behind because of that, at least I am. (Rodrigo)

Rodrigo feels like he is behind his American peers because of these disadvantages. Simply put, owing to visa policies, there are more limitations and challenges that international students must endure than their American counterparts do.

Impact on students

The impact of politics on students' lives was evident from their stories. One of their greatest concerns was President Trump and his effect on people. Abe describes his general feelings toward politics:

I try not to put too much of my time into thinking about politics because it frustrates me. In general, I feel that there was a lot of hate and that kind of stuff because of Trump. (Abe)

Thinking about politics caused Abe, and most of our participants, a lot of frustration. From Abe's perspective, hatred and racism in his environment grew under the Trump administration. In line with Abe's quote, Nick had to say:

I remember when Trump won the election in 2016, I was very, very concerned because I kind of felt that Trump promoted division and white dominance. I think he promotes that by getting into people's minds, which becomes very hard, especially for international students. (Nick)

Nick's number one concern about Trump's election was that he promoted division and white supremacy. Nick mentions how Trump gets into the minds of people, including international students. Our participants were constantly concerned with what President Trump was going to do next and how it would affect them. Sartaj, recalls this:

A section of my brain was constantly working on Trump. Now I can use that section to concentrate on something else. Some of my brain power was taken by him for four years. It should not be political. We should not be concentrating on any president or prime minister. We should have our own things; politics should be in the background. (Sartaj)

Sartaj was constantly thinking about Trump and noted that our political leaders should function in the background to allow people to focus on their own life. Sartaj was the only participant to explicitly say just how much Trump affected his daily psyche, but his statements resonated with many of our participants.

The unpredictable nature of politics in the U.S. and how it can change every two to four years also concerns international students. Raj talks about how the landscape for international students can shift depending on politics:

That is also another factor which, as an international student, puts you under pressure. You never know how it is going to be like three years down the line. Everything could change a lot at all. Therefore, I do not know. (Raj)

Sartaj acknowledged how fast policy can change, depending on the people in power. This unpredictability was exacerbated by the pandemic, as COVID-19 policies for international students involved them having to be in class or even being kicked out of the country. These COVID-19 policies concerned many of the participants. Rachel, a second-year MS student from India, explained:

There was a rule that was posted that international students should return to India when they are not registered for any in-person courses; I mean, COVID-19 was still present, and we were not truly hoping to go to the classes and attend. There were many colleges that took care of this issue, but when that issue was posted, I was a little bit scared that I might have to go back to India because of not taking an in-person course. (Rachel)

Rachel was concerned about having to return to India abruptly because of the in-class policy for international students, but she was also worried about having to attend class during a pandemic.

For students who came to the U.S. during the pandemic, the uncertainties surrounding visa restrictions were especially concerning. Peter, a first-year chemistry PhD student from the Philippines, recalled his concerns prior to coming to the U.S. during the pandemic in Fall 2020:

One of the thoughts I had was that I would not be able to come to the US because they were restricting F1 visas from going to the US. That was mostly what I was concerned about before starting my graduate school. (Peter)

Peter was concerned about not being able to come to the US for his first semester due to restrictions on F1 visas. Luckily, he was able to meet the restrictions to arrive in time for the semester. Darlene, a first-year MS CS student from India, talks about her worries about extending her visa after graduation in the US:

Therefore, I was a little bit worried about how it was going to be because Trump had suspended the H-1B visa until December. I was more worried about the OPT and the CPT, that Trump might reduce the OPT to just one year. That would have been very tough for us. (Darlene)

Darlene mentioned how H-1B visas were suspended due to the pandemic and how she feared that the length of OPT (optional practical training, which allowed international students to work in the USA after graduating) would be reduced from 29 months to one year. Luckily, Darlene's concerns did not come true, allowing her enough time to work and stay in the U.S.

The universities did resolve these issues for international students, but much concern was raised by the students. Even though universities defended international students against problematic COVID-19 policies, from the perspective of international students, there was still no certainty in terms of outcomes. Michael discusses how this concerns him and other international friends:

Therefore, that caused some panic, and even now, there's some panic about what's going to happen next semester. It is something unpredictable, something that I have to keep getting concerned about everyone. In addition, I have a few Chinese friends who are even more concerned given the political tensions between countries. (Michael)

Michael and other international students expressed concern over how political factors would impact their futures. These issues bogged down international students and impacted their ability to focus on their studies. Instead, much of their time was invested in discussing these issues with other international students. Sartaj gave us a numerical estimate of how much time he spends talking about political issues with his friends:

I will say 30% of my time is spent talking to my friends about these issues only. What will happen to us, how will the rule change, and how will it affect us? What we should do, so that stays as a primary concern for us, how it is even going to work. (Sartaj)

Thirty percent spend a significant amount of time talking about politics, especially given that PhD students have many other responsibilities. Ideally, international participants should be able to pursue their studies without these types of concerns.

DISCUSSION

Overall, our participants held negative views of the Trump administration due to the unprecedented public rhetoric he expressed against immigrants. While the Trump administration's immigration policies toward international students fell in line with those of prior administrations, his rhetoric greatly impacted the experiences of international students in the U.S. Our participants perceived the rise of nationalism and racism that flourished under the Trump administration (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). Some students were actually insulted by others, mimicking President Trump's rhetoric. Since all our participants had negative views of Donald Trump due to his attitude toward immigrants, it may be possible that President Trump's rhetoric and immigration policies also contributed to a slower growth of international students in the U.S. On the other hand, many of our participants held favorable views of now President Biden, although, until the time of this writing, many policies remained largely the same. The Biden administration made several small policy changes in early 2022 and plans to attract and retain more international students in STEM fields (Associated Press, 2022). These changes, including extending J-1 visas and adding 22 fields of study to the OPT program, will allow international students to stay and work in the U.S. for three years.

Our participants explained that visa restrictions make it harder for them both to adapt to the US and to stay in the US following their graduate studies. Many of our participants were unable to obtain internships, fellowships, or other types of funding available to domestic students. Participants closer to graduation expressed how the job options after graduation were also limited because they needed a company sponsor. International students who have families, such as Amin, face the challenge of bringing them to the U.S. and supporting them in poor funding and limited healthcare. Many of our participants' parents were also unable to visit them in the U.S. because they did not have proper visas. Additionally, international students from Muslim-majority countries were not able to visit their homes because travel bans were in place from 2017--2021

(Awaad, 2017). Other presidents have also used international students as political pawns (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020), which is equally problematic. International students should be provided the support necessary for them to thrive (Arthur, 2017). US policy makers should reconsider some of these restrictions and make the visa process easier to continue attracting the brightest minds to US universities (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018).

The impact of politics and visa restrictions on international students' mental well-being emerged in the data. Many participants felt anxious, afraid, concerned, frustrated, and even panicked due to issues associated with politics and student visa policies. Several students plan to visit more visibly friendly countries after their studies. In addition to these issues, international students often face challenges with the English language, financial pressure, cultural barriers, and discrimination, which can all contribute to poorer mental health (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2019). These concerns are not new (Mori, 2000) and may be worse than ever due to the general decay of mental health among college students due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of this study include the demographics of our sample and the fact that two of the three authors lack experience as international students. In our sample, we had a large representation of students from southern Asia, which may have added some bias toward experiences that may be unique to this demographic. Most of our participants were computer science majors, which again may have added some bias. Three of the authors were born in the U.S., which may have impacted the study, although the third author was born in Egypt and played a major role in the analysis and review of this article (Rodriguez et al. 2024).

Future directions of this work could include conducting follow-up interviews with our participants to ask them further questions about their intersectional experiences. To this end, we devised a research protocol to expand on the uniqueness of the participants' individual experiences. We plan to ask more questions regarding the racialized experiences of our participants, including how the university might have impacted those experiences. Finally, we are interested in learning about how participants' social networks, peers, and mentors play a role in both their adjustment to the US and their overall success in STEM graduate programs.

Conclusion

This article summarizes some of the perspectives that international students may have on the U.S. political climate, visa restrictions, and how these issues have impacted their lives as graduate STEM students. The purpose of sharing these experiences is to illuminate two key problems international students face: (1) the political climate they are in, in this case, under the Trump administration, and (2) the restrictions they continue to face. While our participants were strongly against the Trump administration, it is important to highlight that they continue to face

the same issues under the Biden administration. Reflecting on the first Trump presidency is critical for mitigating the negative impacts that international students may face in a second Trump administration starting in 2025. Hopefully, this research can help build better policy that provides international students with an easier path for coming to and staying in the U.S. while having less concern about politics.

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APPENDIX Interview

Protocol (55-90 min)

I. Build more Rapport (10 min)

1. Introductions
2. Catch up with them + How have you been?
3. Remind them a bit of the purpose of the study in a general way.

II. Main Protocol Questions Baseline Questions (5 min)

1. What are your current career plans?
+ Why do you want to go into _____?
+ How are things going at work? (for people at work) + How are classes going? (for those in classes)
+ How is graduate school going?

Mentorship and Social Relationships (10-20 min)

2. Who has helped you throughout your graduate education and how?
+ peers
2a. (Anti-deficit) How did you get connected to them?
2b. (Systemic Negative) What (was there anything that) made it hard to get connected to them?
2c. (Systemic Positive) In what (were there any) ways did the department support/hinder those connections?
3. Who do you consider to be your mentors and why?
+ How have they impacted your XP in graduate school?
- 3.5. (w/ previous grad XP) How do these mentorship experiences contrast to past experiences?

Intersectional experiences (prompt before asking) (10-15 min)

Prompt: Intersectionality is also important to us. It's not just about studying People of Color, but also taking into account other possible inequities that may exist due to identities along with race including [tailored list].. In the first interviews we saw there were some of those differences and we think it's important to talk about these differences to promote more well-rounded

supports for students of color.

4. With that in mind, how do you think your experiences as a student have been unique from other people of color due to some of the identities? (for people that don't know) due to identities such as:

Gender

*Sexual orientation Disabilities Language Nationality / Religion Parenthood
Economic class*

4a. (Anti-deficit)

IF Negative XP: Considering those differences, what did/do you do to overcome the challenges? ----

IF Positive XP: How do you think those differences help you maintain your progress through graduate school?

4b. (Systemic Positive) How do you think the department/school facilitate/help you through having those differences?

4c. (Systemic Negative)

IF Negative XP: (were there anyways you think that) How do you think the department/school make those differences worse? ----

What do you think the department/school can do to better support those differences (or challenges)?

Themes from Interview 1 Experiences (10-20 min)

6. We identified the following five themes, which of these can you relate to and share some experiences you've had?

1. Barriers to interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds
2. Feeling isolated in the department or during graduate school
3. Forming social circles with people from similar backgrounds.
4. Experiencing discrimination in the University or outside of campus
5. Experiencing features of whiteness (ex. privilege, fragility, saviorism, etc.)
- 6a. (Anti-deficit) Considering those experiences, what did/do you do to overcome those challenges?
- 6b. (Systemic Negative) How do you think the department/school made those experiences worse?
- 6c. (Systemic Positive) How do you think the department/school helped you

through that experience?

6d. (Systemic Negative) What do you think the department/school can do to better support people through those experiences?

III. Closing Questions (5-10 min)

1. What are your favorite memories of your graduate school experience so far?
2. What do you think you will remember the most in 10 years?
3. Anything else you want to say before ending the recording?

***** End recording *****

IV. Post interview (5-10 min)

Is it okay to edit your interview transcripts for clarity and brevity?

1. With which races or ethnic GROUPS do you identify with?
2. How do you describe your gender and what pronouns should we use for you? Which of the following are relevant to you and how do you identify:
 - a. *Sexual orientation*
 - b. *Disabilities*
 - c. *Nationality*
 - d. *Religion*
 - e. *Do you have children or a family?*
 - f. *Economic class*
5. Tell them the longitudinal plan and ask them if they would be willing to be contacted again in 9-10 years?
6. Collect an email they'll still use in 9-10 years
- freedom of industry
7. Thank one last time and wrap up interview