



The U.S. Presidential Election

The View from China

By ZHANG Fan June 15, 2016

American presidential elections have an impact that goes far beyond U.S. national borders. People around the world follow the campaign for the U.S. presidency with great interest, and many feel that they have a stake in the outcome. People in China pay particularly close attention because China, almost more than any other nation, regularly becomes a key topic in U.S. presidential debates. During this particular campaign season, candidates of both major political parties have frequently mentioned China. However, what's more noteworthy in this election cycle is that the Chinese populous is not focusing solely on how their homeland is bandied about by the candidates, but even more so on the entire American electoral process as a whole. Certainly, some Chinese are tuning in primarily for entertainment value; but many others are trying to figure out exactly what this election will mean not only for the United States but for the entire world—including China. Regardless of what motivates individual Chinese election-watchers, the 2016 U.S. presidential election is popular in China.

Zhang Fan, a Visiting Fellow on a Ford Foundation Global Travel and Learning Fund Program exchange, has spent the past five months at the Center for American Progress, studying the U.S. presidential election and Chinese reactions to it. She recently shared her views during a question-and-answer session with Blaine Johnson, China and Asia Policy Research Associate at the Center.

Blaine Johnson: *What an interesting choice of research topic. What other issues did you consider exploring and how did you decide on this particular area of research?*

Zhang Fan: For me, the focus on Chinese views of U.S. election came about by chance. I am a researcher on American foreign policy. Knowing more about the domestic politics of a particular country—in this case the United States—is generally rather helpful for a better understanding of its national strategy and foreign policy. As my exchange visitor program coincides with the primary election season, I have a great opportunity to experience the U.S. presidential election and politics, and to learn about what American people are thinking about and trying to achieve.

At the same time, I noticed that people in China are paying particularly close attention to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. And in this campaign season, China is mentioned more frequently by candidates of both parties than before, according to my observations of the past three presidential elections. When I was considering what to focus my research on, I supposed it would be interesting to see how people in China view the election.

BJ: *Have you visited the United States before? And if so, what have been your impressions?*

Zhang Fan: This is my third time visiting the United States. Six years ago, I visited Washington, D.C., and several big northeastern cities as a tourist. Two years ago, I had a 10-day academic visit to D.C., Chicago, and Houston with my colleagues. This is my first time spending a relatively longer time in the United States.

What impressed me most during my earlier visits were the abundant natural resources, the modern and convenient city life, the openness and candidness of the people, and the cultural and ethnic diversity. But my understanding about ordinary American people was very limited before. Up until now, my impression about them has come from books, the media, and the personal views of other visiting Chinese scholars to the United States.

BJ: *Before you began research on this issue of presidential elections, did you have any preconceptions about the United States and its electoral process?*

Zhang Fan: As a Chinese researcher on American issues, I have had many opportunities to communicate with American scholars and officials at home and abroad. My preconceptions about the United States and its electoral process are mainly based on what I learned in college and my eight years of research work.

In fact, after spending five months here during my research, my earlier opinions and impressions about the United States have not changed much. However, what strikes me most is the willingness of ordinary American citizens to participate in the electoral process, to express their opinions about the current situation, and to try to find solutions for their own country.

BJ: *What are your views on the U.S. election thus far?*

Zhang Fan: Over the past few months, I have had the opportunity to watch the American electoral process up-close—not only through media, but also through interviewing American voters to better understand which candidate they support and why.

To some extent, America is greatly divided. Changes in demographics and new developments in technology and the economy have produced different opinions about economic and social issues among the American people. Candidates from both parties are providing different or even conflicting solutions to the same problems. However, the

American people are still united toward the same goal: to achieve a better life for themselves and to maintain U.S. world leadership. Most Americans feel passionately about the opportunities and challenges facing the United States, and many feel that there is a lot riding on this particular election cycle.

As a Chinese citizen, I cannot say for sure which presidential candidate is best for the United States. But I do believe the American people are able to make the right choice. Besides, this election reflects some realities in the United States' interactions with the outside world. For example, the fear and anger demonstrated in this electoral process reflect the impact of globalization on the U.S. economy and people's lives. The immigration issue reflects the complexity of U.S. relations with the Muslim world. There are so many uncertainties about American foreign policy in the future and that may explain why the election has drawn global attention.

BJ: *What do you think your friends back home find interesting about the election?*

Zhang Fan: I think my friends are fascinated by the unprecedented fierce competition among the candidates and by the fact that the so-called anti-establishment candidates have gained so much popularity.

BJ: *What do Chinese scholars following the presidential election find interesting?*

Zhang Fan: Chinese scholars, policy analysts, and journalists have been following the campaign closely. They tie campaign developments to their analyses of current U.S. politics, including the problems within each political party and the populist sentiment that appears to be rising in American society. They also highlight the significance of the election for the future U.S. policy trajectory. Fang Ning, a famous Chinese political scholar, said the election provides a great opportunity to observe the United States.¹ Historically, what a candidate has said during a campaign has never been equal to what he does after being elected president. However, presidential candidates' words probably reflect the interests behind their candidacies; these interests, rather than the letter of campaign promises, can be understood as the driving force behind certain of the economic and political policies they later enact. Therefore, scholars can read the so-called bottom line, or even make predictions of a candidate's policy, through his or her words.

Chinese observers also focus on the role of money in U.S. elections. They see a direct link between the interest groups who fund candidates and the policy decisions candidates make after they are elected. Yin Chengde, an expert and former counselor for the Chinese Embassy in the United States, pointed out that the U.S. election is a power-for-money deal.² Once elected, the president will speak for the sake of the rich instead of the poor, which will further widen the gap between the two.³

BJ: *What about Chinese government officials—what piques their interest?*

Zhang Fan: The Chinese government also follows the U.S. election in great detail. Its main concern is whether China-U.S. relations can maintain stability during the election year and afterwards. Chinese officials seldom make comments on the U.S. election, but they watch it closely and are eager to know what the next president's China policy will be. From years of observing U.S. presidential elections, Chinese officials have learned that U.S. candidates' harsh words on China can't be taken seriously because they are just intended to appeal to voters. According to the observations of many American and Chinese scholars, since the 1980s, every U.S. president reined in his previously critical statements about China and sought cooperation with China after he took office.⁴

At the same time, based on the emphasis of non-interference in other's internal affairs when dealing with other countries, Chinese officials try to maintain an entirely neutral stance and often stress that U.S. electoral decisions are made by U.S. voters and that the Americans themselves know their politics best.⁵ Chinese officials generally avoid sharing their personal or professional views on which candidates they think will be better for Americans or for China.

Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, said in a recent interview that most American people are interested in their own lives, their own economy, and their own opportunities.⁶ Therefore, he believes the election is a matter of American domestic politics and therefore should be decided by the American people.⁷

BJ: *What about average Chinese citizens—why are they following the election, and what elements do they find most interesting?*

Zhang Fan: For ordinary Chinese people, their number one concern is the next president's China policy and how that will impact their daily life. With an increasing number of Chinese people travelling to and doing business with the United States, the next U.S. president's policies on trade, currency, and immigration will impact many ordinary Chinese people.

Ordinary Chinese people are also fond of talking about interesting news pieces about the individual candidates, including their personalities and family life. For example, with the increasingly important role of first ladies on the world stage, the Chinese people are wondering what the next U.S. first lady will look like, or how a first gentleman will behave.

BJ: *At this point, do Chinese people prefer any individual candidates?*

Zhang Fan: No, it's not clear. We can see that many people are following the election, but figuring out exactly what they think about the individual candidates is more difficult. So far, there have not been any reliable polls about Chinese attitudes toward American

political candidates. Some American reporters and scholars based in China have done small-sample polls and interviews with ordinary Chinese people. The results seem interesting. According to a poll this February by an American geographer based in Beijing, ordinary Chinese people's attitudes toward certain candidates are somewhat ambiguous and vary from different perspectives.⁸ For example, when asked to vote "from China's perspective," 45 percent of interviewees preferred Donald Trump.⁹ Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders each received around 20 percent of support in response to the same question.¹⁰ When asked to vote "from your own perspective," 49 percent of the interviewees preferred Secretary Clinton, 21 percent preferred Sen. Sanders, and 19 percent preferred Trump.¹¹

BJ: *Where does each group get their information about the election?*

Zhang Fan: Most Chinese scholars, journalists, and officials are getting information about the election through American mainstream media, such as *The Washington Post* and CNN. They also learn about the election through face-to-face communications with their American counterparts. And Chinese scholars and journalists do a good job conveying the election's developments to Chinese people by writing reports and making comments on Chinese media.

Since the internet and social media is becoming more and more popular in China, ordinary people are not only getting the latest election news from Chinese TV and newspapers, but also turning to Chinese social media platforms to exchange views about the U.S. election.

BJ: *What are they talking about on the internet?*

Zhang Fan: Chinese netizens chat about each candidate's positions on different issues, the outlook of the primaries and general election, and even some fundamental issues, such as American democracy and the nature of capitalism.¹² Some follow the debates, showing great interest in candidates' speechmaking and debating skills. These social networks provide numerous opportunities for ordinary Chinese citizens to gain a better understanding of the U.S. election and the country as a whole.

It's worth noticing that some overseas Chinese citizens, who are studying or working in the United States, provide Chinese netizens with a large amount of information about election. An online question-and-answer website called Zhihu, for instance, is where some Chinese-speakers, both in China and overseas, discuss different types of primaries, the winner-take-all system, election fundraising, and how campaign teams organize and operate. I noticed that many of them are not political researchers; they are talking just out of their personal interest. And their way of talking is very easy for ordinary people to understand.

BJ: *What does the election mean for China and U.S.-China relations going forward?*

Zhang Fan: For me, it is important for Chinese observers to try to understand what campaigns are telling us about overall U.S. political trends and how those shifts are likely to impact U.S.-China relations.

Some Chinese scholars also pointed out that the U.S. process can provide lessons for Chinese governance. According to Fang Ning, the famous Chinese political scholar, as China continues on the path to modernization, it can learn and draw lessons from American election and politics—which could help improve China’s governance.¹³ In fact, currently the Chinese government is committed to governance capacity-building and is willing to draw experience from other countries, including the United States. China and the United States have different political systems, but they face some similar problems in terms of governance, for example: how to balance different interests and various demands to form a policy.

As for the U.S. presidential election’s implications for U.S.-China relations, I’m sure that people in China, especially Chinese officials, care about future China-U.S. relations. They really hope that the relations can maintain stability and even get better. Ambassador Cui Tiankai hopes that the election will not have a negative impact on China-U.S. relations and has called for the two countries to work together to deal with global challenges. In an interview by *The Wall Street Journal*, China Finance Minister Lou Jiwei called for American presidential candidates to recognize that the United States and China are mutually dependent on each other. Former Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei stressed that China needs to manage disagreements and possible frictions with the United States. He also suggested China have close contact with both American major political parties to engage in the formulation of their China policies.¹⁴ I think that the purpose of this engagement is so that, no matter which party wins the presidency, there will be no big surprises in the new U.S. administration’s China policy.

BJ: *What are your top takeaways from your research thus far?*

Zhang Fan: The most important thing I’ve learned thus far from my research is that watching U.S. elections is a good way for people in China to better understand the United States. We all recognize the significance of China-U.S. relations. And we all see that the two countries already have strong ties, with many channels of exchange and communication on different levels. But there is still a huge gap between the two in terms of their perceptions of each other, which makes it more difficult for the two to understand and deal with each other. When people in China watch and talk about the election, they are not only learning about U.S. presidential candidates and politics, but also helping to narrow their distance from their American counterparts. I hope my research can contribute to enhancing this mutual understanding.

Zhang Fan is a Visiting Fellow at the Center for American Progress on a Ford Foundation U.S.-China exchange program.

Endnotes

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- 2 Yin Chengde, "Hillary and Jeb Slapped the American Democracy in the Face," *Huanqiu*, June 18, 2015, available at http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2015-06/6719868.html.
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- 8 Matthew Hartzell, "What If Chinese People Could Vote for the President of the United States?," China-US Focus, February 18, 2016, available at <http://www.chinausfocus.com/culture-history/what-if-chinese-people-could-vote-for-the-president-of-the-united-states/>.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Based on a survey of three Chinese social media platforms: I am Election blog, available at <http://ipn.li/xuanmei/> (last accessed June 2016); Zhihu, available at <http://www.zhihu.com/question/20497537> (last accessed June 2016); Sina Weibo, available at http://weibo.com/p/100808bd1c459c9df1a715198577fb0d464c57?k=2016%E7%BE%8E%E5%9B%BD%E5%A4%A7%E9%80%89&from=526&from_=huati_topic (last accessed June 2016).
- 13 Fang, "The Presidential Election is a window of observing America."
- 14 He Yafei, "U.S. Election and Its Impact on China," China-US Focus, January 25, 2016, available at <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/u-s-election-and-its-impact-on-china/>.