



Abroad Perspectives: Election Year Overseas

SJIR asked Stanford students studying abroad to write about their experiences with the 2008 US election. Three students from around the world describe the impact of the election on their study abroad experiences.

Samantha Astudillo, Class of 2010

This past fall, I had the privilege of studying abroad in Florence, Italy. Although Italians were vocal in their hopes for the election's outcome, a large portion of this strident support was largely limited to media outlets and daily news feeds, not from word of mouth. Throughout our interactions with the Italian students, we were surprised to discover their overwhelmingly pro-Obama stance—surprising, especially considering the repeated electoral success of Silvio Berlusconi, a center right and pro-Bush politician. Students, and Italians in general, viewed a potential Obama victory the same way most Americans did; that is to say, as a gateway toward renewed transatlantic rapport and positive relationships, which most Italians considered damaged by the Bush administration's largely unilateralist and near-sighted foreign policy blunders following 9/11.

Some of the more significant policy areas of interest for Italians are the contemporaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—the former viewed with utter contempt and the latter as a necessary continuation that will require sustained NATO cooperation and support. Due in part to their own stake in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the American-Italian relationship presents an invaluable asset to future potential for success as well as serving as a significant foundation for pursuing continued international support and cooperation. One of the current European contentions with NATO's ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom efforts in Afghanistan is with the increasing call for combat troop deployments from NATO's European members, a call that most nations have largely been unwilling to heed.

In light of Obama's definitive mission statements and what Italians perceive as his clear-sighted and peaceful diplomatic intentions for restoring peace to the currently deteriorating region, every Italian with whom I spoke associated his victory in November with a renewed hope for the future and for a multilateral and cooperative world order.

Like Americans, the Italians with whom I spoke expressed idealistic predispositions in the tide of post-election exuberance. One Italian student expressed hope that an Obama presidency would lead to an American political, social, and economic system that more closely resembles that of Europe—that is, one characterized by what she described as greater "socialist" tendencies. As much as this election and its outcome have changed European expectations for the future, it has undoubtedly impacted my life and experiences as an American student in Italy during such a momentous time. Immediately following the election, I traveled to Sicily. Caught up in my own wave of overwhelming emotion, I decided to wear my Obama shirt, depicting his face in a Warhol-esque image. I will never forget the responses I received from local Sicilians, many of whom could hardly speak a word of English. As I bought fruit from the local vendor, sat down to drink a cup of coffee, or took my lunch, people everywhere would stop and smile, uttering a simple, yet unapologetic "Obama" followed immediately by a 'thumbs up.' To be an American abroad during and following this historic election can purely be described as an honor, one marked by the renewal of hope for the future and for the belief in the American dream. I have never been prouder of my nation than at this moment. §

Daniel Greer, Class of 2009

I am currently studying at the Stanford Center in Paris, but I lived in Singapore throughout the primary season. In both countries, coverage of the American elections has been extensive. In Singapore, there was daily coverage of the American political scene, especially the Obama-Clinton race, during the primaries. At least once every two weeks, the primary contest was featured on the front page of the paper. In France, coverage has been extremely intense as well. In the final two weeks leading up the election, the French papers had Obama and McCain somewhere on the front page almost every other day. Being an American abroad brought increased attention and questioning. Since the election, however, people have been looking less at Americans and more inwards, at least in France.

In June 2007, I began living abroad in Vietnam, where people would question me about Barack Obama. In Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia, the questions usually revolved around what I thought about him or whether I thought he could win. People across the region generally disliked George Bush and were mostly happy to see that Obama had support in the US. By the beginning of 2008, people in Singapore and across Southeast Asia would ask about my opinions regarding the elections. Whenever I mentioned my support for Barack Obama, I would usually get one of two reactions: (1) Hillary Clinton is a better choice, Obama has no experience, (2) Good! He'll make a good president. I never once encountered a person who preferred a Republican candidate.

In France, as would be expected, people are strongly anti-Bush. Most people I have met in Paris were strongly in support of Barack Obama, but highly cynical about his chances for winning. When he did win, they were very happy, but not as much because of his policies as for what he represents. The French students I met love Barack Obama, but seemed to know very little of his actual policies. They like the idea that he's a very visible and obvious change from President Bush.

Since the election of President Obama, the questions have been less – "Is America too racist to elect a black?" – and more about what race relations are like in France. Earlier this evening, I was listening to a program on the radio in which the discussion was whether or not affirmative action for companies or government is relevant in France and how it should be implemented. The racial divides in France are made even more complex due to the fact that the government itself cannot conduct surveys, censuses, or compile reports on the basis of race or religion. Since the election, the French have been self-reflective, as they feel to some extent that the United States has re-captured the moral high ground. Even if the French wanted to elect a minority president, no politician from a minority group serves at a comparably high level of government. Only a handful of elected minorities serve in

the government (among the national government, town halls, etc. in metropolitan France), and while Nicolas Sarkozy nominated several minorities to cabinet-level positions, the election of a minority on the national level is still years away. The night of the election, I spoke to an African-French man who was watching the election at 1 AM from a McDonald's. He told me that Obama's election would change things for France and the entire world. Though I think people are waking up to that reality, it will take years, in some cases, for those changes to be fully realized. §

Josh Fouse, Class of 2010

I am presently staying in a Tibetan monastery in Bir, Himachal Pradesh, India (south of Dharamsala). I am completing my independent studies project for a Buddhist Studies program. During the election race, I was in Bodhi Gaya, Bihar. There were not many Western tourists there during my time because it was the hot season. The program I was with has been running for about 30 years and is fairly well known by the locals, especially by the small-time restaurant owners across the street from our guest housing. In fact, the director of our program has such a good relationship with them that he had a TV brought to one of the restaurants for the day of the election results and Obama's speech.

However, there was not much local passion or hype regarding the elections. The area was quite destitute, and though there were a number of educated younger people, they did not have time or energy to devote to our elections. Despite this, there was some talk here and there. Little kids and even adults in passing vehicles would shout "Obama" at students in the program. Some of the local kids would use Obama as a begging tactic to attract attention by saying "Hey, Obama!" It worked most of the time—we would turn our heads in surprise, and they would follow up by shouting "Hey, Money!" It was really quite clever.

Overall, the locals didn't really treat the elections as a partisan issue. In fact, many thought highly of America and Americans because of President Bush. His policies, while internationally unpopular, have generally been considered beneficial to India, especially with regards to the recent nuclear deal. It is not uncommon to encounter positive images of Bush in the country: in fact, in one newspaper, I was surprised to see a heroic, grandfatherly picture of Bush on the front page.

I was not aware of any specific policy debates in the election that were of concern to this community, perhaps because it was a low-income area with little practical use for involvement in international politics. The local population was content to live life as usual and maintain that the US should remain supportive of India and less supportive of Pakistan. §