

POLICY RETREAT: ON U.S. STUDENT VISAS

Trump must deliver on jobs, not engage in rhetoric on visas, to stay in office

Market forces and common sense appeared to triumph over narrow-minded economic protectionism in the U.S. on student visas. President Trump's administration had to walk back a recent immigration policy diktat, that it would no longer issue visas to university students in programmes involving a substantial online component, starting in the fall 2020 semester. Had this policy withstood the legal challenge that was immediately mounted by Harvard University, the MIT, and over 200 other universities, it might have led to large numbers of students enrolled in such courses facing the risk of deportation and those intending to enter the U.S. for higher studies stranded abroad without options. The universities joining the case against the decision of the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement argued in court that this policy, described as "cruel" and "illegal", undermined their efforts to create a safe, online-based learning system amidst the raging pandemic. However, their fight may be far from over. Both the universities and their prospective international enrollees would be wise to remain alert to the possibility of additional restrictions foisted onto the entry process at a future date. Already the administration has clarified that newly enrolling international students, possibly up to 200,000 across the U.S., will be barred from taking purely online courses while living in the country. Yet the battle will continue from the other side too — the judge in the legal case brought by the universities is keeping the case open, implying that arguments could be made against additional restrictions.

For Mr. Trump, his administration's immigration sagas will only ratchet up the pressure on him to perform and deliver during what he probably considers the hardest year, politically, of his first term. On the one hand, he is facing a sharp legal backlash in the realm of immigration policy, not only in the case of students taking online courses but also on his ban on the issuance of H-1B visas for skilled workers and several other worker visas. Second, his job approval ratings are on the decline in the face of his government's mismanagement of policy to contain the spread of COVID-19, the ineffective steps it has taken to bolster the economy, and a surge in racial tensions. Third, his Democratic rival, Joe Biden, is trying to capitalise on Mr. Trump's failings and find a path to victory in November's presidential election. Despite the embarrassment of retreating on his latest visa policy, Mr. Trump is unlikely to back down from his broader protectionist impulse for fear of alienating the core of his base — those whose jobs he claims to protect from foreigners and immigrants. However, he will have to proactively address the precarious state of the U.S. macroeconomy through fiscal measures, while also providing succour to tens of millions of workers who have lost their livelihoods through this crisis.

Meanings of Difficult Words

- ❖ **retreat** (noun) – withdrawal, pulling back, back down.
- ❖ **rhetoric** (noun) – the art of speaking or writing effectively & persuasively or impressively (but, often lacking substance); bombast, loftiness, hyperbole/extravagant language.
- ❖ **narrow-minded** (adjective) – illiberal, short-sighted, myopic, inward-looking, discriminatory.
- ❖ **protectionism** (noun) – the use of tariff and non-tariff restrictions on imports to protect domestic producers from foreign competition.
- ❖ **triumph over** (verb) – win, succeed, be successful, prevail, be victorious.
- ❖ **walk back** (phrasal verb) – reverse, change; retreat.
- ❖ **immigration** (noun) – the act of leaving one's countries and moving to another country of which they are not natives, nor citizens, to settle or reside there, especially as permanent residents or naturalized citizens, or to take-up employment as a migrant worker or temporarily as a foreign worker.
- ❖ **substantial** (adjective) – considerable, significant, large.

- ❖ **diktat** (noun) – order, regulation, decree.
- ❖ **fall** (noun) – autumn season. (the four seasons-spring, summer, fall/autumn, and winter).
- ❖ **fall semester** (noun) – most US universities have two admission intakes every year when they accept students into their respective classes and courses. Fall semester starts in late August and ends in late December or early January whereas the Spring semester begins in January and ends in early May.
- ❖ **withstand** (verb) – stand firm against, stand up to, fight; live through, endure, tolerate.
- ❖ **mount** (verb) – initiate, arrange, organize.
- ❖ **lead to** (verb) – cause, result in, effect.
- ❖ **deportation** (noun) – expulsion, expelling, banishment, expatriation, exile.
- ❖ **stranded** (adjective) – stuck (in difficulties), helpless, abandoned, deserted.
- ❖ **federal** (adjective) – relating to a system of government in which establishments such as states or provinces share power with a national government.
- ❖ **Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)** (noun) – ICE stands for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an agency within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. ICE was created in 2003, as a part of the government's reorganization after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. ICE's stated mission is to protect America from the cross-border crime and illegal immigration that threaten national security and public safety.
- ❖ **undermine** (verb) – reduce, diminish, weaken, damage, spoil.
- ❖ **amidst** (preposition) – amid, in the middle of; during.
- ❖ **raging** (adjective) – severe, very bad; intensifying, escalating.
- ❖ **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
- ❖ **far from** (phrase) – not, not at all, nowhere near.
- ❖ **prospective** (adjective) – potential, possible, aspiring.
- ❖ **enrollee** (noun) – a person enrolled in a course of study.
- ❖ **foist** (verb) – impose, force, thrust; burden someone with.
- ❖ **bar** (verb) – prevent, prohibit, forbid, ban.
- ❖ **imply** (verb) – say indirectly, suggest, hint.
- ❖ **saga** (noun) – a chain/series of events.
- ❖ **ratchet up** (phrasal verb) – to increase something by a series of small amounts.
- ❖ **probably** (adverb) – most likely, in all likelihood, all things considered, perhaps.
- ❖ **backlash** (noun) – a strong negative reaction; adverse response, counteraction.
- ❖ **realm** (noun) – area, field, domain (of activity).
- ❖ **H-1B visa** (noun) – it permits a foreign professional (with a (min. 4 years) university degree or its equivalent) to work in specialty occupations (or skilled employments) in the United States (issued for a max of 6 years in total).
- ❖ **approval rating** (noun) – a measure of people's approval of a political leader.
- ❖ **in the face of** (phrase) – when confronted/ faced with; despite, notwithstanding, regardless of.
- ❖ **bolster** (verb) – fortify, support, reinforce/ buttress.
- ❖ **surge** (noun) – sudden increase, rise, growth.
- ❖ **capitalise on** (verb) – take advantage of, exploit, benefit from.
- ❖ **embarrassment** (noun) – shame, humiliation, awkwardness, uneasiness, discomfort.
- ❖ **unlikely** (adjective) – not likely, improbable, questionable.
- ❖ **back down** (phrasal verb) – reconsider, withdraw, give in.
- ❖ **protectionist** (adjective) – relating to the use of tariff and non-tariff restrictions on imports to protect domestic producers from foreign competition.
- ❖ **impulse** (noun) – (strong & sudden) urge/instinct, compulsion, need.
- ❖ **alienate** (verb) – set apart, isolate, set against, separate, cut off, divide.
- ❖ **immigrant** (noun) – non-native, foreigner, migrant.
- ❖ **proactively** (adverb) – farsightedly/ shrewdly, energetically, motivatedly.
- ❖ **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- ❖ **precarious** (adjective) – uncertain/unsure, insecure, dangerous/risky.

- ❖ **macroeconomy** (noun) – the branch of economics concerned with large-scale factors (interest rates/national productivity).
- ❖ **livelihood** (noun) – means of making a living with the basic necessities (food, water, shelter and clothing); means of support, subsistence, source of income.
- ❖ **succour** (noun) – aid/ help/ support, assistance, relief (during difficulty).

PYRRHIC VICTORY: ON SINGAPORE ELECTIONS

The reduced majority is an opportunity for Singapore’s ruling party to initiate reforms

Can Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP) of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reinvent itself? That is the looming question in the city state, despite its winning a super majority in the general election on July 10, as the leadership has set in motion a succession plan. The PAP, which has been the face of Singapore’s managed democracy since 1965, secured but a pyrrhic victory in the snap ballot. The party polled 61% of the vote, which translates into 83 seats out of 93 contested. That is way below the 69.9% it obtained in 2015, during the commemoration of 50 years of Singapore’s independence and in the aftermath of the death of the country’s founder and first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister Lee’s father. The party’s record lowest performance was 60% in 2011. The PAP’s poor showing is all the more telling because the elections were called months ahead of schedule and the COVID-19 restrictions denied the Opposition even the normal, if highly limited, channels of outreach during the nine-day campaign period. Crucially, Mr. Lee has acknowledged the real meaning of the PAP’s reduced majority, which he described as a reflection of the desire of younger voters for greater diversity of voices in Parliament. In a concrete response, he has announced that Workers’ Party (WP) chief, Pritam Singh, would be formally recognised as the leader of the Opposition, an unprecedented development in Singapore’s unicameral legislature. The 10 seats the WP has won, up from six in 2015, is the highest ever by an Opposition party.

These are gains in what is in effect a one-party state, where the Workers Party opposition won its first parliamentary seat in 1981, 16 years after Singapore’s separation from Malaysia. Another dilemma for Mr. Lee is the slender margin of victory for the country’s Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, who is tipped to succeed as Premier in 2022. Whereas Mr. Lee has already hinted that he might stay on until the end of the pandemic, the election outcome could further alter the timetable. He has to fix an economy that is in recession, continue to fight the coronavirus outbreak, and adapt himself to the winds of political changes. It is conceivable that given the gradual democratisation of the polity, Singapore’s customary method of settling the leadership question behind closed doors would sooner rather than later become a subject of public debate. That is a sign of an evolving society where, besides the benefits of economic affluence, citizens recognise the value of greater political participation for its own sake and regard a respect for dissenting opinion as a necessary concomitant. Singapore’s political leadership should read the mandate correctly and fast-track the country’s democratisation process.

Meanings of Difficult Words

- ❖ **pyrrhic** (adjective) – (of a victory) meaningless, valueless/worthless, useless.
- ❖ **city state** (noun) – an independent country that exists completely within the borders of a single city. (e.g. present day Singapore, Vatican city, Monaco; ancient Rome, Athens & etc.,).
- ❖ **reinvent oneself** (verb) – start a new method of life completely.
- ❖ **looming** (adjective) – appearing, emerging (as a large/threatening one).
- ❖ **secure** (verb) – get, gain, obtain something (particularly with difficulty).
- ❖ **set in motion** (phrase) – start, begin, initiate.

- ❖ **succession planning** (noun) – a process for identifying and developing new leaders who can replace old leaders when they leave, retire or die.
- ❖ **managed democracy** (noun) – also called “guided democracy”; a formally democratic government that functions as a de facto autocracy. (“de facto” means actual, existing, effective; “autocracy” is a system of government in which supreme political power to direct all the activities of the state is concentrated in the hands of one person; absolute power, tyranny).
- ❖ **snap election/ballot** (noun) – an unexpected & sudden (early) election in a parliamentary system that is called before the due date by the ruling party for some political purpose.
- ❖ **translate into** (verb) – change, convert, transform.
- ❖ **commemoration** (noun) – a ceremony in which a person or event is remembered.
- ❖ **in the aftermath of** (phrase) – as a consequence of, as a result of.
- ❖ **all the more** (phrase) – even more, notably.
- ❖ **telling** (adjective) – striking, revealing; significant, important.
- ❖ **call** (verb) – announce or decide that an event (like election) is to occur.
- ❖ **channel** (noun) – method, medium, instrument, mechanism (for communication).
- ❖ **outreach** (noun) – the level of reaching out/activity/effort; involvement.
- ❖ **acknowledge** (verb) – admit, accept, realize.
- ❖ **reflection** (noun) – indication, display, demonstration, manifestation.
- ❖ **diversity** (noun) – variety, range, variation.
- ❖ **concrete** (adjective) – definite, specific, definitive; factual, actual/real.
- ❖ **unprecedented** (adjective) – not done or experienced before.
- ❖ **unicameral** (adjective) – consisting/having only one chamber ((in a legislative body).
- ❖ **dilemma** (noun) – quandary, predicament, difficulty.
- ❖ **slender** (adjective) – modest, slight, scant /little.
- ❖ **tip** (verb) – predict, expect, recommend, think of.
- ❖ **premier** (noun) – head of government, prime minister, president.
- ❖ **stay on** (phrasal verb) – continue to work.
- ❖ **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
- ❖ **further** (adverb/adjective) – additionally, furthermore, besides.
- ❖ **recession** (noun) – economic decline, downturn, slump.
- ❖ **outbreak** (noun) – sudden appearance/ occurrence, outburst, flare-up.
- ❖ **winds of change** (phrase) – influential events/actions that result in significant political/social changes.
- ❖ **conceivable** (adjective) – credible, possible, admissible.
- ❖ **democratisation** (noun) – the introduction of a democratic system.
- ❖ **polity** (noun) – a politically organized society.
- ❖ **customary** (adjective) – usual, normal, traditional/conventional.
- ❖ **behind closed doors** (phrase) – covertly, in secret, in private.
- ❖ **sooner rather than later** (phrase) – soon, immediately, without delay.
- ❖ **evolving** (adjective) – developing, unfolding, advancing.
- ❖ **affluence** (noun) – wealth, luxury, richness, fortune.
- ❖ **for one’s own sake** (phrase) – for the benefit/advantage oneself.
- ❖ **regard** (verb) – consider, look on, view, see.
- ❖ **dissenting** (adjective) – disagreeing, disapproving, opposing.
- ❖ **concomitant** (noun) – result, consequence, outcome, effect.
- ❖ **fast-track** (verb) – increase or step up the progress of a project.