



ASIA-READY EXPOSURE PROGRAMME (AEP)

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1. POST-WEBINAR

POST-WEBINAR

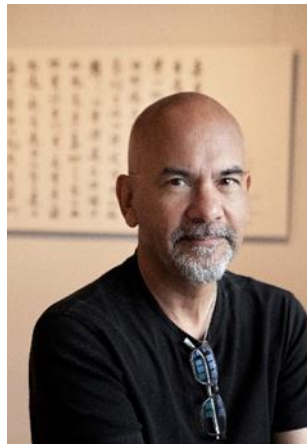
Webinar Topic:	Populism and Polarisation: What America's Politics Mean for Asia's Democracies
Date / Time:	Saturday, 12 October 2024, 10:30 – 11:30 AM
Synopsis:	<p>Over the past few years, the political landscape in the US has become increasingly polarised. As the US heads into elections on 5th November, the country seems more divided than ever. While disagreements on current policies between the candidates are highlighted occasionally, the race between Mr Trump and incumbent Vice-President Kamala Harris seems to revolve around the discourse of 'Identity Politics' and labels – with Republicans denouncing the liberal “woke” agenda, and Democrats dismissing their opponents as “weird” and out-of-touch. Recent surveys have also found that more and more Americans are losing their faith in traditional American democratic institutions, with some citing doubts around the credibility and legitimacy of the electoral process. Similar trends are also playing out in elections around the world.</p> <p>In this webinar, we will look at the divides in contemporary US politics and the factors driving these fissures, as well as delve into the parallels that can be drawn between trends in US politics and those in ASEAN and Asia, including how young voters in our region are responding to these shifts.</p>
Video(s):	<p>USA 2024: A look at the electoral college and how it works https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0wrYw0ZPEM</p> <p>Trump vs Harris: Who Do Southeast Asians Want As US President? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfH4m9qL_FU</p>

Speaker(s):



Dr. Adrian Ang U-Jin

Dr. Adrian Ang is a Research Fellow and Coordinator of the US Programme within the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science from the University of Missouri-Columbia and Master of Arts in International Relations from the University of Calgary. Prior to joining RSIS, he was Assistant Professor at Florida International University and also worked in the private sector as a research consultant. His research interests include American public opinion; political parties; elections, campaigns, and voting behaviour; and congressional politics.



Mr. Nirmal Ghosh

Born in India of an Indian (Bengali) father and German mother, Nirmal Ghosh, 64, has had a 30-year career as a foreign correspondent for The

	<p>Straits Times, Southeast Asia's #1 English paper – in Manila, New Delhi, Bangkok and Washington DC – covering politics, conflict, disasters, international relations, and social and environmental issues across Asia and north America.</p> <p>Most recently he was US Bureau Chief for The Straits Times from October 2016 to December 2023, based in Washington, DC. Currently based in Thailand, Nirmal hosts The Straits Times' Asian Insider podcast and is focusing on longer form writing and creative projects - including his sixth book, on the United States. He is a past President of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (FCCT) and Foreign Correspondents' Association of the Philippines (Focap). He is on the Board of the Vienna-based Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GITOC) and is a Trustee of The Corbett Foundation (TCF) working in wildlife conservation in India.</p>
Social Media / Media:	N/A

What you have learnt

The upcoming US elections on 5th November is happening at a time when the country is facing growing polarisation. Former President Donald Trump, representing the Republican Party, and Vice President Kamala Harris, running for the Democrats, are set to face off in what promises to be a pivotal moment for the country.

Kamala Harris, who was a former California senator, was brought into the presidential race at a crucial time, after President Joe Biden withdrew his candidacy due to public concerns of his age and capability.

Trump is widely viewed as an authoritarian leader. He had no political experience prior to his first presidency term, with being a reality television host and a real estate developer. Mr. Ghosh drew a comparison between Trump and former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Like Trump, Thaksin was an outsider to the political establishment as he was a telecom billionaire and a technocrat. For years, a significant portion of the population in Thailand was neglected by the political elites. Despite his non-political background, Thaksin managed to win the votes of the people and take on the position as Thailand's leader.

Both Trump and Harris stand on opposite poles in issues concerning voters, particularly on policies concerning immigration, reproductive rights, and taxes on the corporations. But they also share a commonality- both the Democratic and Republican parties are in the process of realignment, in terms of the shifting demographics of supporters for each party.

Background on US elections

The US follows the "electoral college" voting system, where the electoral college score takes precedence over the popular vote count as the basis for winning the US presidency. The electoral college has 538 votes, with the number of electoral votes per state being equal to its

representation in congress. Larger states have more electoral votes while smaller states will have a minimum of three votes.

American voters are largely anchored by their partisanship, whether they are Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. The election is primarily dependent on the seven battleground states of Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, which have a total of 93 electoral college votes. Both Trump and Harris have their eyes on the path to 270, the key number which determines winning a majority in electoral college votes.

Polarisation and Populism in America's politics

Polarisation in American politics operates on two levels: the political elite level and within the general public. Political scientists find the American public to be increasingly divided into hostile "political tribes". This produces a zero-sum view of politics. The concern with increased polarisation is that it creates declined social trust in politicians and institutions. This also has severe consequences such as eroded civic engagement and voters being less inclined to vote.

Populism is more of a political style rather than an ideology. The US is often considered as the birthplace of populism, which pits the virtuous people against the corrupt elite. When Americans are divided and polarised, it is the populist politicians who claim that they have the solutions, often offering oversimplified solutions to very complex problems.

Populism serves as a threat to democracy as it plays on the fear and paranoia of polarised societies. Social media is one platform which fuels it, providing the power to not just governments but to individuals as well to manipulate masses of people simultaneously. It creates and inflates threats and amplifies propaganda. It also erodes trust in experts and thrives on human tendency to be irrational.

There is growing consensus among the young American voters that there is an increasing disconnect between their concerns and the interest of the political class. Housing, financial stability, climate change, reproductive rights, and gun violence stand out as some of the major issues to the young population. This calls for institutions to focus on these concerns and harness them for voter mobilisation, giving them a better chance to be accepted by the youth.

Your questions answered:

- 1. How much influence does the US President hold over American foreign policy? How will this affect Singapore, and what approaches should Singapore take in dealing with changes in US leadership?**

Mr. Ghosh said that the US Congress holds a significant role in America's foreign policy. It acts as a check on the country's foreign policy ventures. He said that the US might undergo some internal conflict under the next President, but the US will still stand as a huge engine of production and innovation, due to its openness to immigration. Mr. Ghosh added that the American economic engine is going to continue for a long time. Regardless of who becomes the next US President, Singapore and the other nations will have to learn to adapt to it.

2. If Donald Trump wins, will this mean the US will become more protectionist and there will be more trade wars with China? If Kamala Harris is elected, will she adopt a more multilateral approach to international diplomacy? What does this mean for Singapore's relations with China and Singapore's role as a trade hub?

Dr Ang said that we can expect to see more economic upheaval under the Trump administration as compared to a potential Harris administration, due to Trump's inclination to impose additional tariffs on China. He noted that both the Democratic and Republican parties are now in the grips of economic populism. When Trump withdrew the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement and the rest of the nations regrouped as the CPTPP, there was initial hope that Biden would bring the US back into the partnership, but that did not happen. Dr Ang further added that there is little political will in the US to pursue new free trade agreements, as globalisation is viewed as harmful to the working and middle classes. He said that both Trump and Biden have tried to restore America's economic base while ironically attempting to adopt Chinese methods, which are largely protectionist industrial policies. Given that, he argued that labelling Trump as "protectionist" and Harris as "multilateralist" would be too much of an exaggeration.

3. How might the new US president and countries in the region navigate a scenario where tensions continue to rise in the South China Sea? How might US-China competition and the US role in Asia play out in the long-term?

Mr. Ghosh highlighted that the US holds treaty allies within Asia such as with Japan, South Korea, and Thailand, as well as a mutual defence treaty with the Philippines. He explained that a reason the US has refrained from sending ships to escort Philippine vessels in the South China Sea is to avoid escalating tensions into a war with China. However, the US still believes in the foreign policy concept of liberal hegemony and that it is the superpower. It wants to maintain its deterrence capacity, while simultaneously aiming to restrict China's influence. Mr. Ghosh said that this overall strategy will remain status quo for both Trump and Harris and as a result, competition between the US and China is likely to remain tense.

4. How does America's stance on Israel and the Middle East affect Singapore-US relations or Singapore's relations with our neighbours?

Mr. Ghosh emphasised that the Israel-Gaza tensions did not actually start on 7 October 2023, but in fact has been ongoing since the events of 1948. He pointed out that news consumption via social media distorts the accuracy of information, due to the lack of context and history. He said that it is important to acknowledge and respect the history behind these ongoing geopolitical tensions. Mr. Ghosh also pointed out that it is difficult for the US to withdraw support for Israel and is unlikely to compromise on this position.

Dr. Ang shared that America's actions in the Middle East have resonance outside of the region. He said that America holds a myopic view that the Muslim world lies only within the Middle East, when in fact it spans across the world. Indonesia, which stands as the world's largest Muslim-majority country, as well as Malaysia share concerns over the crisis in the Middle East. He said that the US should not be surprised that their actions have resonance in other countries outside of the Middle East region.

5. Do you think democratic backsliding is a natural outcome of liberal democracies, given the expansive freedoms they allow?

Dr. Ang defined democratic backsliding as a point in which institutions and politicians are perceived as no longer being receptive to the care and concern of ordinary citizens. He said that democracies exist as a feedback mechanism and that he does not believe in a natural cycle of democracies devolving into populist anarchies. He said that democracies, however, require politicians to take voters seriously, given that in recent times there has been negligence over voter concerns. This has also contributed to the prominence of Donald Trump among the American public. Dr. Ang explained that Trump represents a political entrepreneur, who sees opportunity in the failure of political parties in addressing voter concerns. He highlighted that Trump had been successful in seizing control over the Republican party, which was already in the process of realignment, steering it towards populism.

6. Should independent commissions be established to draw electoral districts to prevent partisan gerrymandering? Would the use of alternative voting systems, like ranked-choice voting, achieve better outcomes? Should campaign finance laws be reformed to reduce the influence of money in politics?

Dr. Ang pointed out that the US electoral system is a constitutional republic, with electoral rules mostly being established at the state level. In some states, there are non-partisan or bi-partisan commissions that draw congressional districts, but that is up to the jurisdiction of each state and not a federal responsibility. He gave the example of the state of Alaska using ranked choice voting as an alternate voting system.

In the case of campaign finance reforms, Dr. Ang explained that these laws were established to weaken the influence of political parties over these campaign funds. These reforms have led parties to turn to external links which provide more control in campaign financing and less transparency. He said that it is almost impossible to revert the US back to holding publicly funded campaigns.

7. How significant is the role of social media in amplifying populism and polarization in Asia compared to the US? Are there differences in how social media is used in different regions? How should we avoid echo chambers and approach activism and advocacy in Singapore?

Mr. Ghosh referred to India as an example, where the role of social media in amplifying populism and polarisation between the Hindu and Muslim populations is very strong. He also highlighted the case of Myanmar, where social media was used as a tool to drive a wedge against the Rohingya minority. He said that the amplification aspect in social media exists as a common theme across the various regions in the world.

Dr. Ang stressed that individuals have a responsibility to do their own research on information consumed from social media. He said that it is important to evaluate information received, not just from social media but from all other forms of media as well.

Answered by Dr. Adrian Ang U-Jin, Research Fellow, Coordinator of United States Programme, IDSS and Mr. Nirmal Ghosh, former Washington, DC Bureau Chief, The Straits Times. They were the speakers at the “Populism and Polarisation: What America's Politics Mean for Asia's Democracies” webinar held on 12 October 2024.