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Democrats Abroad: What Motivates Core Activists to Engage in Political Transnationalism?

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Democrats Abroad: What Motivates Core Activists to Engage in Political Transnationalism?
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Abstract:

Research into transnational political engagement of non-resident citizens has largely focused on the Global South, and less on the Global North. This article focuses on non-resident United States citizens, or overseas Americans, asking what motivates them to become politically engaged. This article contributes insights to an insufficiently explored case. Drawing from 14 semi-structured interviews with strongly politically engaged US citizens living abroad, this article shows that they engage in political activism for many of the same reasons as individuals from other countries, as well as ones which may be unique to the US case. Key factors include mobilising to change things at home, the role of the US in the world, civic duty, fulfilling work, and reactive transnationalism. The article concludes with policy recommendations and sets the scene for future comparative research, both within the Global North and between Global North and Global South non-resident citizen groups.

Keywords: transnationalism; US citizen migrants; overseas Americans; Democrats Abroad; overseas voting; civic duty; geopolitical position.

INTRODUCTION

This article interrogates the motivations of politically active non-resident US citizens in a broader context of political transnationalism. This has long been a rich field of research, with scholars examining ways in which non-resident citizens engage politically in their countries of origin, the implications of that engagement, and explorations of why some engage and others do not. There has, however, been comparatively little written on motivations for political transnationalism among those from the Global North, including US non-resident citizens; this article addresses that gap. Non-resident US citizens have had the right to vote in federal elections since 1975, and are credited with tipping elections in 2012 and 2020 (DA 2018, 2020, 2022; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020). The overseas presence of the US Democratic Party, the only formal arm of a United States political party abroad, is a strong presence, albeit understudied (although see Dark 2003a, 2003b; Klekowski von

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Koppenfels 2014; 2020). With 51 country committees as of 2023, Democrats Abroad (DA, or, formally: Democratic Party Committee Abroad (DPCA)), has a worldwide presence. With strong social media activity, DA members are a visible grassroots presence worldwide, focusing on registering voters and engaging in outreach to facilitate registration, as well as advocacy work around special issues and around non-resident US citizen concerns. A US political party is, in short, present worldwide and is the vehicle for significant political transnational activity among non-resident US citizens. In exploring the motivations of those who are most involved, this paper asks the following research questions: What motivates non-resident US citizens living abroad to become engaged at the core level of Democrats Abroad, the mobilized diaspora? Are their motivations similar to politically active non-resident citizens from other countries? Or do non-resident citizens from the United States occupy a unique space among non-resident citizen political activists?

This article contributes to the political transnationalism literature through its analysis of the political engagement of non-resident US political activists. Future research might compare the US to other Global North countries. Through the lens of external voting, this paper examines the personal motivations of what Shain and Barth call "core members" of the "mobilized diaspora", or non-resident citizens engaged in political transnational activities. These are individuals who contribute a significant amount of time (Portes et al. 1999) to political engagement, being involved at levels which far outstrip the political engagement of most domestic citizens. What motivates them?

To address these questions, this article draws on interviews with 14 politically engaged non-resident US citizen activists living abroad, examining their motivations for activism. The article first provides a theoretical contextualization, before shifting to relevant background. Interview data and analysis are then presented together, before policy recommendations. This article uses the terminology of "non-resident US citzens" for

consistency, although scholars also refer to “overseas US citizens”, “US citizens living abroad”, “Americans abroad”or “overseas Americans.”

Non-Resident Citizen Transnational Political Engagement

Political transnationalism, or the engagement of non-resident citizens in the politics of their origin country – often through voting, lobbying/ advocacy work or protest activity – has been an increasing practice among non-resident citizens globally over the last 30 years. It includes so-called transnationalism from below, including grassroots advocacy (Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Tedeschi *et al.* 2022), and transnationalism from above, or government initiatives supporting enfranchisement (Boccagni et al. 2016; Turcu and Urbatsch 2020). The bulk of this research focuses on those from the Global South, with less on the motivations of those from the Global North.

Those engaging in origin country political activism remain a minority – setting the scene for a rich area for research. Some studies have shown that non-resident citizens become involved in politics to improve things “at home” for family or friends (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, Boccagni et al. 2015). In other cases, non-resident citizens react to a negative context of reception and turn to fellow nationals rather than to the society of the residence country, in reactive transnationalism (Portes 1999, Snel et al. 2016). Social remittances, another motivation, may be a by-product of visits to the origin country (Levitt 1998) or an intentional effort to bring values and socio-cultural practices to the origin country (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017).

In looking at the role of political parties, Burgess and Tyburski (2020) find that party mobilization increases voter turnout among non-resident citizens. McCann and Rapoport (2023) corroborate this for DA Canada (2023) – they found that attending three or more DA events significantly increased likelihood of activism. Collyer (2014) notes that each origin country has specific features which play a role in shaping transnational action. For instance, it

is known that higher education is positively correlated with political engagement (Boccagni et al. 2016; Brady et al. 1985; Jang 2022). Along these lines, a human capital analysis would predict that US citizens abroad – the majority of whom have tertiary education – would be politically engaged at far higher levels than they are.

Initial engagement by non-resident Americans seeking enfranchisement in the 1970s was sparked by the 1962 *Revenue Act*, with "no taxation without representation" the rallying cry. An additional factor was a sense of inequality – those in the military or employed by the US government could vote, but those working for private employers could not (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014; Rhodes and Harutyunyan 2010). This historical moment played a key role in shaping their transnational activism.

Many of those lobbying in the early 1970s lived in Paris and in London, and were solidly upper-middle class. Political transnationalism in this case may well be resource-dependent (Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002; Tamaki 2011), yet neither human nor financial capital explanations seem sufficient to explain the variation in levels of engagement.

Previous work among overseas Americans (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014) found that a wish to change things at home, a sense of civic duty and elements of reactive transnationalism all play a role in the political engagement of US citizens abroad. Other work shows that there can be variation across locations of residence (Castañeda et al. 2014). This article draws on interviews with core members of what Shain and Barth would call the political diaspora, and in a political context after a Trump presidency, to suggest that factors linked to both the origin and residence country are key in explaining non-resident citizen political engagement.

Focusing primarily on foreign policy, Shain and Barth argued that the motivating interests of non-resident citizens for political activism could either be "over-there" (i.e. in a residence country) or "over-here" (i.e. in a origin country) (2003, 457). Shain and Barth

(2003) further developed a three-part typology of mobilised non-resident citizens: silent members, passive members and core members (452). Silent members are considered those who "are a larger pool of people […] generally uninvolved in diasporic affairs […] but who may mobilize in times of crisis". Passive members are those "likely to be available for mobilization when the active leadership calls upon them", whereas core members "are the organizing elites". In the DA context, silent members could be understood to be those who are reminded time and time again to request their absentee ballots in every calendar year; the passive members those who volunteer at peak times – such as in the last weeks or few months prior to an election; and the core members those elected or appointed to international or national office or position, such as member of an Executive Committee, a person in charge of social media or a particular issue or population group caucus. Many of these individuals also participate in the annual "Door knock" to Washington, which features meetings with Congressional and other government representatives, lobbying for attention to be paid to key issues affecting Americans living abroad (DA 2017). Shain and Barth's typology is useful in distinguishing among the rank and file members of DA and core activists.

The classic explanations for political transnationalism, supplemented by more specific political party explanations, help us move forward in the case of US citizens living abroad.

Profile of overseas US citizens

Dashefsky and Woodrow-Lafield (2020) note that despite the "elusiveness of American emigrants", coming as they do from a known country of immigration, "there has been a surprisingly substantial amount of emigration" from the US (5). They point to the "difficulties of studying Americans living abroad" given the great diversity of this population – ranging from those who born abroad, naturalised in the US and having left again; to those born abroad to US citizen parents; to US citizens born in the US who have moved abroad.

The latter are believed to make up the majority of US citizens abroad, but data are based on estimates, drawn from a variety of partial sources, with no one definitive and complete data source (Costanzo and Klekowski von Koppenfels 2013; Van Dam 2022). The US State Department estimates 9 million US citizens living overseas (2020) and FVAP estimates 4.8 million (2018), of whom 2.9 million are voting age (2021b). Regardless of the exact number, it is a substantial population – larger than the populations of at least half of the states in the US – and their political activity has become increasingly noticeable.

Although they are often stereotyped as wealthy (Snyder 2019), research on overseas Americans indicates that "wealthy expats" are only a very small minority of the US overseas population (American expats 2019). As with many understudied groups, the most visible of a group, even if a minority, have often erroneously been held to be the majority of the group (see, e.g., Sargin 2023). Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data on tax returns filed[2] show that less than 1% of 780,000 overseas filers in 2020 filed a return with an adjusted gross income of more than 1 million US dollars (IRS 2021). Numerous sources concur, indicating that well over half have an income below $75,000, while at least three-quarters of overseas US citizens have college degrees. They are broadly middle-class (FVAP 2020, Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014, OVF 2012, IRS 2023).

Well more than half of overseas Americans are female (ranging from 56% in FVAP data to 67% in OVF data), 10-20% are over the age of 65 and well over half have lived overseas for more than ten years (FVAP 2020, OVF 2012, Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014).

[2] Unique among countries of the Global North, the United States requires that US citizens resident abroad file tax returns on global income. The majority of overseas tax filers, particularly those in Europe or Canada, do not owe taxes to the US, due either to the Foreign Earned Income Exclusion or a foreign tax credit.

Sources agree that at least 80% of overseas Americans are white (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014; FVAP 2020, OVF 2013).

In terms of where US citizens live overseas, there is broad agreement (i.e., FVAP, OVF and the World Bank) that Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Israel have the largest populations. The primary reason for migration overseas is to be with a partner, followed by employment (FVAP 2008; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014). Klekowski von Koppenfels (2014) and FVAP (2018) asked respondents for spouse's nationality, and both found that over 70% of those who were married had a spouse without US nationality. Overall, the picture that emerges is of lower- to upper-middle-class, college-educated US citizens living abroad for lengthy periods of time.

US Political Parties Abroad

Democrats Abroad (DA) established chapters in London and in Paris in 1964, more than ten years before the widespread enfranchisement of non-resident US citizens in 1975 (Dark 2003b, Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014). The Democratic Party voted for DA to become a formal part – a state party – of the Democratic Party in 1976 (Dark 2003b, Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014). As of 2023, DA had 51 country committees, "from Argentina to Vietnam", with members in more than 200 countries (DA 2023). Their goal is to "provide Americans abroad a Democratic voice in our government and elect Democratic candidates by mobilising the overseas vote" (DA 2023). As an official "state" party, DA has 8 representatives at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and an Executive Director funded by the DNC. With DNC members, DA plays a role in determining Democratic Party policies, casting votes in party processes, participating in caucuses and more.

Republicans Abroad (RA) established its first chapter, in London, in 1978 (Dark 2003b; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014, 196) and was never, unlike DA, a formal part of the

party. It dissolved in 2013 (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020), with Republicans Overseas (RO) established as RA's successor in 2013, and is seen by the Republican National Committee as a so-called affiliated group, not holding any official Party status, although RO members are often invited to attend Republican National Convention as guests (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020). Both RA – which had more than 50 country committees at its height – and RO have held the status of a 527 non-profit political organization, which is tax-exempt, has no upper limit on fund-raising, unlike political parties or candidates, and may seek to influence an election, but may not campaign for one particular candidate.

The right to vote for all US non-resident citizens, including many of those born abroad, was achieved in 1975 with the Voting Rights Act,[3] following extensive lobbying efforts by overseas Americans, particularly the Association of Americans Resident Overseas (AARO), the Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas (FAWCO) and Democrats Abroad (DA). Key points of the lobbying included reference to the extension of taxation to all overseas citizens in the *Revenue Act* of 1962, with the well-known slogan in American history of "no taxation without representation", and claims for equal treatment with overseas US civilians employed by the US government, who had the right to vote following the *Federal Voting Assistance Act* of 1955.

The 2009 *Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act* (MOVE), amending the 1986 *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act* (UOCAVA), has extended and protected the vote from abroad. The *MOVE* Act addressed concerns that late receipt of ballots and challenges with postal systems (FVAP 2021) were key reasons for overseas voters'

[3] The right to vote remains limited to federal elections, namely for President, Senators and member of the House of Representatives. Enfranchisement for state and local elections – for Governor, representative in state legislature – is regulated by the 50 states, with great variation.

ballots not being able to be cast, allowing for electronic return of a ballot via email or fax and mandating that absentee ballots be sent to voters at least 45 days prior to an election.

Making a Difference

Demonstrating their relevance to domestic politics is key for non-resident voters. The 2002 *Help America Vote Act* (HAVA), lobbied for by DA and others, allows for more granular vote tabulation, with overseas absentee ballots (so-called UOCAVA voters) tabulated separately from domestic absentee ballots, allowing for identification of elections in which overseas ballots may have tipped the result. It is known that at least 913,000 ballots were voted by overseas civilian and military voters in the 2020 US federal election (FVAP 2020a, 55) although more may have been cast.

FVAP calculates a 7.8% turnout rate for the 2020 elections (FVAP 2021, 3).[4] A different calculation would be of 913,000 ballots cast in 2020 as a percentage of the FVAP estimate of 2.9 million voting-age US citizens living overseas, for a participation rate of 31.5%. Drawing on the US State Department estimate of 9 million, with roughly half voting age, results in a turnout rate of 20.3%. Earlier research (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014) indicates that the ballots voted are likely an undercount, with the real figure higher. Ciornei and Østergaard-Nielsen discuss the difficulties in determining overseas voter turnout (2020, 3) in their elegant analysis of factors influencing diasporic voter turnout, while Vintila *et al.* (2023) show that external voting rates are, in the case of Spain, consistently lower than domestic. Cognizant of the difficulties in counting, Ciornei and Østergaard-Nielsen draw on two different population estimates in their turnout calculation – showing that turnout rates above 10% are the exception rather than the rule (2020, 5). Dominican non-resident citizens

[4] FVAP (2021, 3) calculates this turnout rate based on the known number of voted ballots (135,000) and their estimate of 1.74 million US citizens living in what it estimates to be the top ten countries of residence for US citizens living outside the United States.

are seen as one of the most transnationally active groups (Itzigsohn and Villacrés 2008) yet in the 2020 election, only 9% of the Dominicans abroad voted (Finn and Besserer Rayas 2022, 6). Both El Salvador and Mexico show rates below 1% (Finn and Besserer Rayas 2022, 7).

Insofar, rather than constituting low turnout, a 7.8% voter turnout rate of eligible non-resident US citizens is comparable to others, and a 20.2% or 31.5% turnout rate approaches the 40% turnout rate of Turkish citizens living abroad (Sevi *et al*. 2020). As has been the case in the Global South, US politicians are increasingly aware of the potential power of non-resident US voters (Serhan 2022), leading to goals of higher voter turnout among advocates and politicians alike.

Methods

This article is based on semi-structured interviews with 14 "core members", achieving saturation, of what Shain and Barth would call the political diaspora – activists in a US political party abroad. As noted above, DA is the only US political party with a formal overseas arm. This article draws on interviews with 14 individuals who have held or hold elected or appointed positions within DA. The interviewees were engaged in voter registration efforts, Get Out the Vote (GOTV) efforts, special issue advocacy and awareness-raising, social media engagement and outreach, press spokesperson, participating in and/or preparing for lobbying activities and more. The 14 individuals – 13 women and 1 man – were identified via purposive sampling and reached through existing networks and the snowball method.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Pseudonym	Gender	Region of Residence	Age	Education	Citizenship	Est. Hours per week
Brenda	F	Europe	50-60	University/BA	US	15
Christopher	M	Asia/Pacific	40-50	MA degree	US	15-30
Diane	F	Europe	60-70	University/BA	Dual	10-20
Emily	F	Europe	30-40	MA degree	Dual	Min. 20
Jill	F	Europe	50-60	University/BA	US	25
Kathy	F	Americas	50-60	University/BA	Dual	Min. 15
Kimberly	F	Europe	50-60	University/BA	US	20-30
Lynn	F	Europe	50-60	MBA	Dual	Min. 15
Melissa	F	Europe	50-60	MA degree	Dual	30-40
Pamela	F	Europe	50-60	MA degree	Dual	Min. 10
Sarah	F	Europe	50-60	University/BA	US	Min. 15
Sharon	F	Europe	70-80	MBA, JD	Dual	Min. 10
Tina	F	Americas	50-60	JD	Dual	30-40
Virginia	F	Asia/Pacific	40-50	University/BA	US	Min. 10

All were university-educated, with 7 additionally holding a graduate degree (4 an MA, 2 a JD, 2 an MBA). Ages ranged from 30s to 70s, with the majority in their 50s and 60s. Ten lived in Europe, two in the Asia/Pacific region and two in the Americas. Eight of the 14 had dual citizenship; six had US citizenship only. Semi-structured interviews were carried out via Microsoft Teams and recorded and transcribed. Interviews were coded in NVivo using a mix of inductive and deductive coding; the majority emerged from the data. Pseudonyms were given to all participants, and residence country was anonymised.

The gender imbalance of the sample – despite attempts to reach more men – is consistent with existing data, presented above, which suggests both a gender imbalance among overseas Americans (well more than half of overseas Americans are women) and the politically engaged. FVAP found that consistently more women than men engaged with political issues on social media (FVAP 2019, 94). DA requires that Chair and Vice Chair be of opposite gender, but there is a clear over-representation of women among the so-called "super volunteers". One interviewee (Jill), a woman in Europe in her 50s, ventured an explanation: "Women, especially women my age and older are so used to doing important work for free. You know, raising children … elder care … we already are over that bridge of not valuing ourselves by how much money we make." Research has found that women consistently volunteer more for additional, often invisible, tasks than do men (Babcock et al. 2018; Bergeron and Rochford 2022).

Data and Analysis

Thematic analysis of the data revealed several key motivations. The most prevalent was seeking to change things at home – closely linked to partisan preference and what can be characterised as a form of social remittances. The second key motivator was an expressed awareness of the US' role as an important actor on the world stage. Third was a sense that voting – and helping others to do so – was a civic duty. The fourth key motivator was a sense

of fulfilment through this work. Reactive transnationalism, found to be a key motivator in earlier research (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014), emerged among these respondents as well, but was not as strong as other factors. The primary difference to earlier work is the more widely expressed motivation of US's geopolitical position.

Above all, however, we do see qualitative elaboration on McCann and Rapoport's quantitative finding of having attended DA events as significant for later activism: 12 of the 14 respondents noted that their first foray into activism came as a result of an existing DA member having reached out, having suggested that they run for an office, or noting that their skills could be of service. Other motivations were present simultaneously, and it is those which resulted in continuing activism, but the initial motivator was most often from a DA member.

Changing Things at Home

Mobilising to change things at home – often a reason for transnational engagement among non-resident citizens (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Shain and Barth 2003) – emerged as the key motivation for engagement among these core members. Diane noted: "Because I have friends and family in the United States. Because my sister has four granddaughters who have fewer rights than she and I had, and that my mother and grandmother had." She was referring to the 2022 *Dobbs* decision of the US Supreme Court to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973 guaranteeing abortion rights. She hopes that by registering overseas voters, a Democratic Congress can come to power and override the Dobbs decision.

Lynn mentioned the so-called "red", or Republican, states, with many "blue" voters – and said "I do try to stay a bit more involved… there have gotta be more people like me out there. If I can get people like me to vote, then maybe we can start shifting things a little

more.” She referred to poor health care, schooling and “rampant homelessness” in the US as specific concerns. Jill picked up on other issues: “I have two daughters who are dual citizens. They're [European] citizens. But they're not safe as long as there are wacky wackos in Washington, nobody is safe. … I guess the bottom line is I'm trying to protect my daughters from crazy environmental, and anti-democracy, patriarchal crazy and all the other crazies.” Diane noted she had been slightly involved in political activities, “And then Trump happened. …. I just sort of have this incandescent rage about ‘What is happening to my country?’ kind of thing” and she shifted to more consistent and higher level engagement. Lynn also seeks to mobilise voters across the United States – overseas US voters vote in their last state of residence, not in an overseas jurisdiction. They vote in every state in the country – there is potential for tipping elections in more than one jurisdiction, but this also means that voter mobilisation, including information on the different intricacies of registration and elections, takes place across all jurisdictions.

What might be called partisan preference was a clear motivation, but improving the situation in the US was as well –improving health care, achieving affordable university education, reducing homelessness and achieving gun control..

Social Remittances

Improving things for family and friends in the United States takes the form of desired cultural and political shifts, with social remittances closely linked. Respondents made explicit comparisons to the situation in their residence countries. Levitt and Lamba-Nieves note of social remittances that “Migration affects political life by influencing cultural orientations and social norms” (2011, 6). And, indeed, these respondents’ attitudes have been shaped by their residence abroad and they feel it important to bring those attitudes and perceptions back to the US.

Sharon referred specifically to women's rights "in America and not just the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] thing. But you know, the care economy, paid leave, maternity, you know, necessary maternity leave, affordable childcare, equal pay, you know, they're just so many barriers… … in [Europe these are] … more and more accessible. Things that we wanted to see brought to our you know, our country, should be in our country, the richest country in the world, right?" Sharon makes the reference back to the US' position in the world, as "the richest country in the world", with some irony in her voice as she lists the different types of support available to women in Europe, but not in the US. In registering voters and trying to strengthen rights in the US toward a European level, she does so by reminding them of the differences between the two.

Melissa, too, referred to living in Europe as having led her to "see your country with completely different eyes." She went on to say that "I also find living in a society with a government that is farther left than America. You know, like having national health system, having a good benefits program, you start to see the benefits to society of how a more left approach can work and a longer history of kind of context. … I started becoming a little more entrenched or supportive of democratic beliefs and policies." Living in Europe changed her political beliefs, and she moved toward the left, or Democratic, political perspective – a perspective that, in turn, continues to motivate her political activism in the hopes of bringing those beliefs to the US.

For Sarah, public transportation, affordable college education and health care were all elements of life present in Europe that are missing in the US: "also you see not only just for minorities, but also for poorer families. Just how unfair the US system is. And so and in [Europe], of course, we have amazing public transportation. People will go to college and don't come out in debt. Healthcare is just assumed. It's a right. You don't have to have a GoFundMe page in order to survive. And you know, there's just so many elements of the

lifestyle that we have here, which I wanted to be able to bring back to the United States, that's one of the major reasons … I got involved.” Sarah’s thoughts are a clear example of social remittances.

Literature on social remittances tends to assume a Global South-Global North flow of migrants and of values. The US, residence country for the largest number of migrants in the world, is usually thought of as a country from which social remittances flow, including rule of law, women’s equality, and more. Yet the findings here demonstrate that North-North social remittances, in this case from Europe to the US, are a significant phenomenon. This finding suggests that we can expand our understanding of social remittances. We also see, in this case, that overseas US citizens act in much the same way as do other migrant groups.

Role of the United States in the World

Yet the position of the US in the world makes this case different from many other emigrant groups. A number of respondents mentioned the high-profile role of the US globally and the responsibility they feel to ensure that the US remains a respectable global role model. They are then acting precisely as we might expect US citizens living abroad to act – as educated, cosmopolitan voters. At the same time, this is neither the only motivation nor even the most common. US citizens living abroad rarely engage directly in foreign policy activism, unlike some other non-resident citizens (e.g. Shain 1999; Prasad and Savatic 2021). However, there is an indirect link: their awareness of the global role of the US motivates them to support US leaders whose foreign policy objectives are in line with their own. Insofar, we see parallels with other non-resident citizens.

Pamela was speaking both about what motivates her, but also how to encourage others to vote, when she said: “Keep voting. Keep making your voice heard because you have a right to make that voice heard. Because you *are* a U.S. citizen. Because there are people

who would kill to be able to influence US politics given the outsized weight the US plays in global power dynamics and the global economy and that's why I think a little bit, sort of, the responsibility *as* a U.S. citizen comes in, you know, like it or not. And that's somehow… you've got to find whatever version of that can motivate somebody to step up [emphasis original].” This is perhaps a key difference between Shain and Barth’s core members and those who are silent or passive members –for the core, activism is about their own motivations, but above all, also about what motivates them to support others in casting their ballots. Insofar, their motivations may be of a different nature.

For Sarah, it was a question of doing her best to effect change in the world. She felt that being a US citizen gives her that opportunity: “Well, America is the biggest democracy in the world. And if you can make a difference there, you're making a difference that impacts the entire world”. She referred to her European residence country and said “I don't have the same opportunities to do that type of work here. I'm not a citizen. I can't vote. And even if I were …. You know, my ability to help the world would be limited”. Unable to become a citizen in her residence country, due to tough naturalisation procedures, she is very involved in DA, valuing that involvement and its outsized significance compared to her residence country.

In speaking about her efforts to help others vote, Tina noted “What happens in the US … is hugely important not just to what's going on in the US, but worldwide.” She votes in a “blue state” (one almost guaranteed to be Democratic), but notes that “We need to get the voters in the swing States”, whose votes could tip elections. Jill was speaking about her dual-citizen adult children when she said “It's really the vote they cast in the United States that makes the biggest impact on the world, and I guess that's one of those things that I tell my people, you know it's … the best tool in our toolkit?”

Kimberly was even more explicit as she laid out what she felt to be the danger of a Trump presidency: "[T]he United States of America is very different from most countries. And … we can effect major change on the world by our actions and we need to stay as close to the good side as we possibly can, and Trump was not…. with his love of dictators and you know his hatred for immigrants … is not the America that we should be striving for. … I don't believe that he understood the immense power of our government and what we can do." She implicitly points out that she does understand the "immense power" of the US government, and feels an obligation to be as involved as she can.

All of these respondents were aware of the power of the US and its potential for affecting world politics. It was one key motivation behind their engagement in voter registration, GOTV and advocacy activities.

Civic Duty

Voting as a civic duty has been found to be a key motivator for domestic US citizens (Blais and Achen 2019), as it is also in other countries (Szulecki et al. 2021, Umpierrez de Reguero and Dandoy 2022). For a number of respondents, that duty carried over to abroad. Civic duty was the main motivator for Christopher, still active in veterans' issues in the US: "I'm a US citizen… I served in the [military]. I worked at the post office, I worked for [an elected official]. I'm a patriotic person… I'm always gonna be American no matter what." Kimberly also linked her activism to her civilian employment in the US military: "when I started working for the military, you know, you have to take an oath … to defend the constitution against enemies foreign and domestic…. And I took that seriously." For Diane, exercising the right to vote was also central: "I've always voted. I've always considered it a privilege to vote."

Melissa referred to broader issues when she said: "I believe in democracy. I believe in the ideals of democracy and the only way democracy works is if everybody votes. … All the major issues in our country. Abortion, gun control." While Melissa started her reflections in this comment by speaking of civic duty and the "ideals of democracy", she concluded this thought by coming back to improving the situation in the US when she referred to abortion rights and gun control. None of these respondents is driven by only one motivation.

Fulfilling Work

In another development that may be unique to non-resident citizens originating from the Global North or to those who are affluent, a secondary motivation emerged – that the volunteer work was fulfilling and that it filled time. These comments were made by women who did not hold paid employment, and were either retired or home-makers. For them, the work is both important, making a difference in the world, but is also, as a secondary motivation, fulfilling on a personal level.

Jill, who teaches English on an hourly and free-lance basis, explained that what she does at DA "absolutely needs to be done and I found accidentally that I'm good at it and I can afford it thanks to my husband's income. You know there are a lot of smart women who would love to do it but can't afford it. And I actually can… here in my little corner… I can afford to do it, I've discovered that I'm good at it, I enjoy it." She repeated several times that she was able to "afford" to spend the time on the DA work since her European husband's salary afforded her that opportunity, and she reduced her teaching at critical moments in the electoral cycle. As noted above, she also mentioned that she feels women are "used to" doing unpaid labour and are more willing to step up and spend hours volunteering. Indeed, many respondents noted that DA occupied 20 to 40 hours of their week.

Brenda said “I love the buzz” of the work and that she enjoyed the positive feedback she received on her DA work: “this new job that I have there is with [a caucus] and I'm writing the newsletter and getting a lot of kudos on that, really enjoying.” Melissa, divorced and with grown children, explicitly said that “Yeah, but this is what gets me up in the morning now, because now I got nothing else to do”, while for Kathy the fulfilling nature of the work was almost an after-thought: “So that's one of the reasons I do it every day because I know it will be better. I also don't work. I have a lot of downtime.”

Reactive Transnationalism

Finally, there was reactive transnationalism, a key motivator for many non-resident citizen groups (Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002, Snel et al. 2016). For these US citizens, interviewed a few short years after President Trump left office, engagement was a means of showing that they, as individual US citizens, are not representative of everything happening in the US.

Diane said that for her, “Part of the activism …. well it's *because* you’re in [Europe]… [many of us] feel we're sort of like mini ambassadors for our home country. People would often ask me to justify, well, why does this or that happen in the US? … You know, we could see that our position was so diminished in the world and so that was maybe part of what motivated me. I wanted people to be able to look at the US and admire it again and not look down on it and think ‘they've lost their minds.’” Similarly, Lynn thought of herself and referred to others when she said “I know there are people out there working really hard to show that… you know, we're not all like Lindsey Graham [conservative South Carolina Senator]”. Finally, Tina explained that “But on the whole, most people [in residence country] are just, you know, were just horrified and stunned... It makes me feel good that I could, you know, tell them ‘I'm doing my best, working hard.’”

Reactive transnationalism draws on a negative context of reception to explain why non-resident citizens may turn to organisations or communities among their fellow nationals. In the case of the US, it is not a negative perception of US citizens abroad as dangerous criminals, potential terrorists, or as migrants rejecting "European values" – stereotypes which citizens of other countries may face. For US citizens, it is about the stereotypes around their origin country. The US's role on the world stage affects thoses living abroad, as Brenda clearly explained: "Everyone hates us [Americans] … so I shelter myself a little bit. … I want to be with more Americans." The negative attitudes of some toward US citizens is one factor in her choice to work with DA.

Conclusion

Starting from a research gap around the motivations of Global North non-resident citzens for political activism abroad, this paper examined the case of non-resident US citizens, asking whether they engage in political transnationalism for the same reasons as other non-resident citizens. Findings show that they do indeed engage politically for many of the same reasons as Global South migrants, including reactive transnationalism and changing things for the better "at home". While many are motivated by a sense of urgency, it is clear that their sense of urgency is of a different order than those seeking freedom from dictatorship or seeking to end ethnic persecution. Yet political transnationalism is widespread, and it may be more fruitful to study motivations more broadly, rather than those linked to particular situations, and perhaps not limited by citizenship. In addition to its contributions to political transnationalism, this paper additionally enables us to draw policy-relevant conclusions. First, policy-makers, from both origin and residence countries, can take this similarity among international migrants into account in reflecting on non-resident citizens' political engagement. Non-resident citizens from the Global South and from the

Global North both engage in political activism and/or remain politically attached to an origin country.

Overseas US citizens are informal ambassadors, supporting and explaining US policies. This is an untapped opportunity for US policy-makers; these informal ambassadors vote and are engaged, while also having knowledge of, and living in, local communities in residence countries. They are able to support the US abroad in a way that foreign service officers and cultural exchange programs cannot do, yet this potential remains unexplored. Finally, this article contributes to a qualitative elaboration of McCann and Rapoport's (2023) finding that attending multiple DA events is a predictor of activism; 12 of the 14 respondents became core members of DA after having been asked to participate by an existing member. The policy recommendations here would suggest more robust support for DA and RO activities as a means of further enhancing the enfranchisement of non-resident US citizens.

Finally, we need further comparative research on political transnationalism between the US case and other non-resident citizens from the Global North with those from the Global South (see e.g. Snel *et al.* 2006). Rather than being a separate category – "expats" – this research suggests that non-resident citizens from the Global North and from the Global South may well have much in common. This should be explored further.

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