



PHOTO MARTIN CHAMBERLAND, THE PRESS

Randi Weitzner is the president of the Montreal chapter of Democrats Abroad.

Over half a million Americans of voting age live in Canada. For them, November 3 is now: the mail-in ballots have started to arrive. Thousands more watch with a sometimes relieved, sometimes bitter eye this election for which they will not be able to vote, after having renounced their citizenship, often for financial reasons.

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JANIE GOSSELIN, PRESS

“People are feverish. There are those who send me a message saying: 'This is it, my vote is in the mail', they are so excited,” said Randi Weitzner, president of the Montreal chapter of Democrats Abroad.

For months, the energetic Democrat has multiplied the calls and emails to his compatriots to inform them of the voting procedures from abroad and to convince them to vote for his candidate. To address concerns, too, as voting by mail is called into question by the US president.

Democrats Abroad, with its committees present in 44 countries, is part of the structure of the Democratic Party and even enjoys a representation of 8 voting members on the Democratic National Committee. In a polarizing election where every ballot could make a difference, its members hope to "get the vote out" - by mail, distance requires. "In Michigan, in 2016, the election was played by 11,000 votes," recalls Dianna English, of the organization's communications department in Canada.

With some 516,300 Americans in Canada of voting age, according to 2018 figures from the Federal Voting Assistance Program, this is where the most expatriates from the United States are found. Their weight could matter.

But living abroad also has its drawbacks, and thousands of Americans renounce their citizenship every year, even though their passports are the envy of many countries.

Waiver

Laura, a retiree living in Ontario, follows the campaign bitterly. "None of the candidates looked at the situation of people with dual citizenship," said the septuagenarian, who does not want to reveal her last name, uncomfortable with the US government. She renounced her U.S. citizenship in 2017, even though the decision tore her apart. "It's part of my identity, it's in my soul," explains the one who moved to Canada in the 1970s, but for whom belonging will always remain double.

Thousands of expatriates do like it, every year, often for tax reasons: the US government requires a tax return, subject to taxes, to all its citizens or foreign residents, no matter where they live. Depending on their income and the tax system in their country of residence, they don't always have to pay Uncle Sam money, but the system has its irritating elements, say those who denounce it. "Sometimes you don't owe anything, but it's so complicated, you have to hire accountants and that's expensive," says Laura.

Moodys Tax has made the renunciation of citizenship a specialty. Last weekend, its specialists held a webinar in Canada. "I would say we help 400 to 700 people each year," says Alex Marino, director, US tax law.

The start of 2020 shattered waiver records, he says.

Surrenders of US citizenship are published quarterly by the US government. According to figures compiled by *La Presse*, there were 5,313 waivers of US citizenship for the first six months of 2020, all over the world. In 2019, they were 2071. In the last election year, in 2016, the number stood at 5,409 for the 12 months.

Different platforms

Moodys Tax denies playing politics. "It's none of my business that people vote for," says Marino. The important thing is to make sure that no matter what the outcome of the election, by putting emotions aside, the person is comfortable. "

The American living in Calgary admits, however, that he has never seen "such a big difference" between the platforms of the two major parties when it comes to taxation. The Republican program is more advantageous than the Democratic proposals for expatriates, he judges.

"I think if you look at the economy and people's finances, most people can conclude that [Joe] Biden's presidency would be better [for the economy] for everyone," says ^{Ms.} English.

The president of Republicans Overseas in Canada, John Richardson, is also not buying the idea of a waiver. The body represents the Republican Party abroad, but is much smaller and does not have the same structure as that of the Democrats. "I spend time trying to change the tax law," he says. I don't think people should be marketing the waiver issue. "

Mr. Richardson works in the field himself, as a lawyer; he supported citizens in their renunciation procedures. But he prefers to keep fighting to change the laws from within, so that Americans abroad can retain certain advantages of their status without too many disadvantages.

Like his Democratic counterparts, he hoped for a massive dispatch of ballots. "You shouldn't be spectators," he notes. Voting abroad counts. "

A presidential debate that sparks the exodus?

Already presented by several observers as the worst presidential debate in the history of the United States, the first clash between Donald Trump and Joe Biden seems to encourage Americans to consider settling in Canada. At least that's what we see in view of the most recent trends revealed by Google, which notes a significant spike in searches entitled "How to apply for Canadian citizenship" since Tuesday evening. Shortly after 9 p.m., while the presidential debate was on the air, graphs that the American giant is making available on Google Trends indeed show increases of 70 points for this particular research, all compared to the region where it is the no longer used (a value of 100). Thursday morning, this index was almost at its maximum, around 99. Searches for Canadian citizenship are most frequent in the state of Massachusetts, according to the company. Then follow Washington, New York, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

- Henri Ouellet-Vézina, *La Presse*