

# ***Immigration Reform: The Influence of Nativism in Political Rhetoric and its Impact on Immigration Policymaking***

ALAYNA GILLILAND

WR 122, Willamette Promise

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In 2016, a local high school in Forest Grove, Oregon made state-wide news over a large poster with the slogan “Build The Wall”, hung by a student for the school to see. The slogan was prominent that year in the Trump presidential campaign as a means of promoting the U.S-Mexico border wall, a centerpiece to his proposed immigration policy. Also included in his immigration proposal was the vocal support for increased deportation of undocumented migrants south of the border. Because of what this slogan represents, the poster sparked a major controversy within the largely Latinx student body. To bring attention to the discrimination they felt, students led a walkout which reached state level news and inspired many other high schools in the area to do the same. What the “Build the Wall” banner represented is one of many examples highlighting the unfavorable attitudes Americans have adopted towards the Latinx community. A more recent and violent example of hate crimes targeted at Latinos in America was the 2019 El Paso shooting in which the shooter stated that he “set out to kill as many Mexicans as he could” (Hutchison et. al), and according to an FBI report, in 2018

“the number of victims in anti-Latino or Hispanic hate crimes rose over 21%” (Brooks). In understanding why discriminatory actions and attitudes towards Latinos have increased since the 2016 election, it is important to analyze the way in which political rhetoric portrays Latino illegal immigrants in mass media, specifically in rallying support for immigration policies.

As a model of this type of rhetoric, in his presidential bid announcement, Trump stated that “When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you...They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Trump). In this declaration, like many others, Trump employs a method of discourse Professor of Sociology at Bentley University, Angela Cora Garcia, identifies as an “‘us’ versus ‘them’ model” which juxtaposes the images of immigrants and natives. This strategy “[creates] a positive depiction of citizens (‘us’) which is then contrasted with a [negative] depiction of immigrants (‘them’)” and is used in politics to support policies made against these groups (Garcia). The model Garcia describes is depicted in the president's word choice and he states that “they are not sending you” (‘us’), they are “sending people...[with] problems” (‘them’), referring to Mexicans as a whole. Rhetoric such as this associates Latinos with specifically negative stereotypes and can influence others to do the same.

Not only do statements such as these associate an entire ethnicity--in this case “Mexicans”--with a negative image, but also perpetuate stereotypes which progress the concept of *migrant criminality* (Parsons). Associate Professor of International Studies at

Arcadia University, Hilary Parsons Dick, defines this term as “the positioning of unwanted migrant groups as dangerous outsiders who need to be removed at any cost.” She elaborates, providing the example that the dehumanizing of migrants through frequent use of descriptors suchlike “animals” and “vicious”, made disturbing family separation policies at the U.S Mexico border possible. Through methods such as “‘us’ versus ‘them’”, the normalization of migrant criminality has helped spread misinformation. Even though research and data show that Mexican immigrants, whether documented or undocumented, are far less likely to bolster crime rates or be incarcerated than native citizens (Nowrasteh), “In 2017 nearly half of Americans polled agreed that migrants make crime worse and cite this as a leading reason for increased border security” (Parsons). The misconception that the majority of illegal immigrants are dangerous and bring crime is detrimental to the image of immigrants as a whole and can cause fear driven division between natives and immigrants. Additionally, it steers society into supporting policies that are ineffective at fixing actual solvable problems surrounding immigration. If we as a country want to limit the inflow of undocumented migrants and drug trafficking, the two most prominent issues regarding immigration from the south, promoting primarily anti-immigration policies stemming from a largely nativist viewpoint will be counterproductive, and instead continue to cause division and hostility between natives and Latinx immigrants in America.

US-Mexico border wall, estimated at 11 billion dollars, is a literal division of immigrants and natives that the president places at the forefront of his immigration policy. One of the major issues this wall aims to solve is drug trafficking across the

border. Drug Trafficking has been an alarming issue since the 1980s when the U.S-Mexico border became the primary channel for drugs, such as marijuana and cocaine, into the United States (“History of Drug Trafficking”). Today, according to the most recent National Drug Threat Assessment, “Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs), [still] remain the greatest criminal drug threat to the United States; no other group is currently positioned to challenge them” (U.S Dep of Justice). With the goal of decreasing drug trafficking from Mexico and other southern countries, the Trump Administration has passionately advocated for a wall along this border. Unfortunately, while the National Drug Threat Assessment made clear the continued severity of the concern, it also found that a larger percentage of the drugs being trafficked were through legal ports of entry (POEs), not across the border fence. The tendency for drug trafficking to occur through POEs began in response to the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), which authorized a new fence and tighter security, making it more difficult for drugs to pass over the border. By increasing funding for border security and enforcement, drug traffickers were directed to POEs where enhanced security methods would be more effective in detecting and decreasing the inflow of drugs (Kerwin). While its improved control over trafficking decreased the amount of drugs travelling over the border, it increased the amount traveling under the border; a tactic much harder to contain. Reporter Gustavo Solis points out that “while the majority of smuggling attempts happen in the ports of entry, the biggest loads of drugs enter...through tunnels. The ones equipped with rails can carry packages as big as 35 tons.” Because these tunnels are still expanding and facilitating the movement of large

amounts of drugs into the U.S, policies and actions to reduce their expansion are imperative. Sadly, the border wall is not a policy that would limit either of these two major methods of transportation. Drug flow through POEs would remain unchanged and unless the wall extends underground, it will not combat the growing tunnels. Instead, the wall would divert money which could be used for enhanced detection methods at POEs and funding for Tunnel Task Forces, to a bigger wall that would replace the already existing border fence.

Along with decreasing drug trafficking, the wall also aims to decrease illegal immigration over the border. To promote the reduction of illegal immigration, many argue that undocumented immigrants are a serious threat to the economy, and ‘steal jobs’ from legal citizens. The President urges that, “[They are] taking our jobs. They’re taking our manufacturing jobs. They’re taking our money. They’re killing us” (Trump, “Phoenix Presidential Campaign”). The danger of immigrants in the workforce is implied in this statement as it promotes migrant criminality in its rhetoric. Though maintaining strong job security for Americans is important for the health of the economy, immigrants’ threat to the workforce is less than claimed. The most recent “Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics” released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), found that only 17.4 percent of the workforce was made up of “foreign-born” persons, which included undocumented immigrants along with refugees, legal immigrants, and interim residents (BLS). Some might say that despite the low percentage native workers are still threatened under the presumption that foreign-born workers displace native workers in the industries (“Preface to ‘The Effects’”). Because more workers increases competition, more

undocumented workers means less jobs for legal citizens, but this isn't true for many of the sectors they occupy. The Labor Force Characteristics also revealed that "foreign-born workers continued to be more likely than native-born workers to be employed in service occupations...natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations...and production, transportation, and material moving occupations" (BLS), illustrating that foreign-born workers are filling the low-wage, high-manual labor jobs of the U.S economy. They dominate these industries, not because they are taking jobs away from others, but because they are filling jobs in sectors that have high demand for workers. In the manufacturing sector alone, an estimated 2 million jobs will be unfilled over the next century (Quality). Because jobs in these sectors are increasingly important in the country's global competitiveness, their higher demand reduces competition in these industries, leaving room in for native and foreign-born workers, and highlighting the importance of undocumented workers' role in the economy. The continued promotion that illegal immigrants are a threat to the workforce both perpetuates migrant criminality, and could mean potential harm to the economy if too many foreign-born workers are driven out.

While the current government stresses that illegal immigration is a growing problem from Latinx countries, historically, past policies and trends have shown a considerable decrease in illegal residents. Dating back to the Clinton Administration, data shows that there has been a consistent decrease in unauthorized inflows from the region. "Analysts have attributed this trend...to improved economic conditions...reduced post recession job demand in the United States, ramped-up enforcement, and the

increased use of different enforcement tactics at the border” (Chishti et al.), revealing that policies, such as the IIRIRA, were productive in decreasing the rate of illegal immigration inflow. As that decreased, policies made under the Obama Administration saw a substantial increase in undocumented immigrant removals. A critical component of this shift was that seventy-seven percent of those removed were “National security threats, noncitizens apprehended immediately at the border, gang members, and noncitizens convicted of felonies or aggravated felonies as defined in immigration law,” and 7% were those who had entered only a short period of time before being removed (Chishti et al.), exhibiting that the administration centered less on deporting merely large numbers, but specifically worked to target unauthorized immigrants who had crossed recently and high priority criminals (Rosenblum 11-12). As these measures focused on deporting those illegal immigrants who could be harmful to the United States, other policies worked to protect invested undocumented immigrants who may be beneficial and promote a more streamlined path to citizenship for them through programs such as DACA and DAPA. By granting residing illegal migrants citizenship, they become legally integrated into the economy and workforce, bolstering the economic state of the country.

Current policies in conjunction with the border wall take a different approach, and many of the pre existing policies like DACA and DAPA have been abolished. The government alternatively seeks to focus on “[removing] millions of illegal aliens...as fast as they come in” (@realDonaldTrump). Different from the prior administration, a new priority is placed on deporting large numbers of illegal immigrants, not just targeting certain categories. This decision generates some probable complications in the

effectiveness of a wall in decreasing border crossings. Esteban Flores, Chair of Copy Editing for the *Harvard International Review*, demonstrates in his analysis of global successful border walls that “a wall would have to be accompanied by effective legislation that could be oriented either towards making it less desirable for immigrants to work in the United States, or towards making the path to citizenship easier.” If no work is done to decrease incentive to immigrate to the United States or make it easier to come here without it being illegal, no matter what kind of barrier is built, immigrants will continue to find ways around it. This concept is present in the drug trafficking problem, for example. The creation of underground tunnels proved that when one method of transportation was closed off, a new one would emerge. As Solis pointed out, “It goes back to the demand side [of drugs] in the U.S. If the demand wasn’t so high, then you wouldn’t have the supply problem.” While it is important to continue working to decrease drug trafficking from the south, a border wall without accompanying policy will not create the dramatic change the government wishes.

The border wall alone cannot effectively solve the problems surrounding illegal migration and drug trafficking concerning the government, so why is it at the forefront of immigration policy? Unfortunately, support for the border wall and other anti-immigration policies rely heavily on political rhetoric. The nativist attitudes present in this rhetoric might explain the strong promotion of these policies and beliefs. Julia Young, Associate Professor in the Dept. of History at the Catholic University of America, recounts the surge of nativism in the 1920s and compares it to today, pointing out their many similarities: “In 1920, immigrants made up 13.2 percent of the population...both the masses and

educated elites held deep suspicions, hostility, and fear of these immigrants...As a result, politicians and the press frequently portrayed immigration as a threat to the nation.” She observes that the portrayal of immigrants as a threat--economic burdens and criminally dangerous--is also apparent in political rhetoric and policies of today, like those of the 1920s. It is these nativist fears that drive policymakers to promote dramatic actions in limiting immigration and driving out “millions” of illegal immigrants. The unfortunate consequence of nativism is the discrimination whole ethnicities face as targets to its promotion. It is important that moving forward, immigration issues are not addressed with nativist rhetoric, which spreads misinformation and division, but focused on policy making to directly solve the problems without bringing harm to associated groups. Without nativist influence in these policies, the fear of immigration does not blind policymakers from taking effective action against the real dangers that reside in illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Taking steps towards limiting nativism’s influence in politics will be beneficial in building positive images of the many diverse ethnicities that contribute to our country, as well as supporting focused policies.

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@realDonaldTrump. "Next week ICE will begin the process of removing the millions of illegal aliens who have illicitly found their way into the United States. They will be removed as fast as they come in. Mexico, using their strong immigration laws, is doing a very good job of stopping people." *Twitter*, 17 Jun. 2019, 6:20 p.m.,

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