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# Attitudes of the United States' Presidents Towards Immigration: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump

## Introduction

There is no doubt that the issue of immigration all over the world is a paradoxical conundrum. On the one hand, all people have the right to move from their native land in order to find a better job, education, or access to public goods. No nation has the right to forbid residents from leaving the country in which they were born. The United Nations Charter proclaims this fundamental human right. At the same time, it is an obvious right and decision of every sovereign country, including federal ones such as the United States of America, to manage its borders and to determine who can come in, stay, study, work, and become a citizen. Sovereign nations have the right to decide how their laws should be enforced.

In the United States, immigration has always been managed. Throughout its history, it has never been a nation of open borders. The focus of the immigration laws has been on the skills of the newcomers and on attracting immigrants with northern European Protestant values (see Orchowski). However, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the shock of the 9/11 attacks had unfortunate consequences on immigration processes. Those horrific attacks were committed by criminals who reached the United States by using visitor or student visas. In the aftermath, border control became a core topic of concern.

The famous historian John Higham argues in his significant work on nativism in the United States that xenophobic policies and their consequences are adopted during times of national lack of confidence or discomfort. Little can make a nation as uncomfortable or unconfident as a remarkable rise in

immigration that probably challenges a country's conception of itself. The 2000 Census statistics indicate that there has been a 54% increase in the residents who were born abroad in the United States since the 1980s (see Del Valle). Since 2000 also the number of United States immigrants has increased to reach 13.4% of the last century's immigration proportion (see Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt). Aristide R. Zolberg predicted in 1980 either another group of restrictive immigration policies or a serious attempt to appeal to Hispanic voters' growth with immigration reform (Zolberg 448-49). In fact, the years 2000-19 have experienced both types of procedures anticipated by Zolberg. Immigration policy has been shaped by restriction and appeals – in other words, by exclusion and inclusion. Restrictions, such as security clampdowns and deportations, as well as appeals, like immigration reform bills and resolving the status of immigrant children without documents, have both significantly increased. Nevertheless, not much Federal government legislation has been passed. Most remarkable changes have come from executive orders and executive discretion.

In summary, the time since the George W. Bush administration has been characterized by an excess of executive decisions regarding the issue of immigration, along with legislative and judicial stalemate. This is due to increased partisan polarization, party shifts, the growing number of newcomers, and security and economic fears regarding immigrants after the 9/11 attacks.

Over the past 18 years, the Federal government has increased law enforcement targeting immigrants to unprecedented levels. The rate of deportations jumped above 30,000 per year by the end of the Bush administration, and this number climbed again under Obama to reach 40,000 per year (see Orchowski). Ironically, these statistics do not account for immigrants in the custody of the United States Border Patrol, who account for the lion's share of the Federal government's enforcement powers and deportation processes. Some scholars argue that these types of enforcement all over the United States have led to a class of criminalized noncitizens, in a sort of war against non-American citizens (see Golash-Boza).

This study analyzes the attitudes of US Presidents toward immigration in the period from 2001 to 2019 – a period that has started with the George

W. Bush administration and ended with Donald Trump's second year in office. Furthermore, it examines documents of three Presidents in the target period. It seeks to establish the three Presidents' attitudes and position on immigration through their official documents and addresses. It also highlights their main efforts on the issue of immigration. It tries to answer the question of how immigration and immigrants have been described in the available presidential official documents and what the differences are between the three Presidents in their attitude toward immigration. The paper starts with a background introduction to the topic, then presents its methodology and procedures in section two. Section three deals with the findings and is the core of the study, showing and discussing the available data. The findings section highlights each of the three Presidents' efforts on the topic of immigration. Finally, the conclusion provides the main results of the work.

### The corpus and the method of analysis

This study is the first one addressing the attitudes of US Presidents toward immigration by using data obtained from their speeches and documents. The work is a creative one; it uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

In order to examine and analyze the Presidents' explicit and implicit attitudes on the issue of immigration during the period from Bush to Trump, we use data from the searchable "Public Papers" archive of *The American Presidency Project*, maintained by John Woolley and Gerhard Peters. The search strings were "immigra\*" or "migra\*," and this search matched: immigration, immigrant, immigrants, migration, migrants, migrant and migratory. Due to the large number of documents containing material related to immigration, we chose to limit our investigation to cover only 10 types of presidential documents: executive orders, inaugural addresses, letters, messages, oral addresses, statements, statements of administration policy, vetoes, written messages, and written presidential orders. These 10 kinds of documents usually contain the most tangible policies of United States Presidents.

Our search returned 440 different documents containing one or more of the targeted words (immigration, immigrant, immigrants, migration, migrants, migrant and migratory) during the target period. The empirical research methodology carried out in an article on the immigration attitudes of United States Presidents should be evidence and facts-based. The analysis of immigration policy should follow a well-articulated and clear framework, and it should be rigorous, systematic and results-oriented. Therefore, in order to classify the three Presidents' attitudes towards immigration through the 440 documents produced during their administrations and to examine these data, the research depends primarily on quantitative analysis. After having found all the Presidents' statements in the issue of immigration and after reading them carefully, analyzing the remarks and comments about those statements and finding their purpose, the study allocates each of them to one of the four policy models proposed by James Q. Wilson. Wilson supposes that attitudes and policies have distributional consequences. Costs and benefits can be diffuse or concentrated, resulting in four main attitudes, as follows:

- Concentrated benefits and diffuse costs. Produce client politics, a producer dominant attitude that includes easy and small organized groups to get direct benefits (Wilson 369). This attitude always coincides with low political and social conflict. An instance is the support to permanent residence visas.
- Diffuse costs and diffuse benefits. Produce majoritarian politics: "All or most of society expects to gain; all or most of society expects to pay. Interest groups have little incentive to form around such issues because no small, definable segment of society can expect to capture a disproportionate share of the benefits or avoid a disproportionate share of the burdens" (367). This attitude usually coincides with low political and social conflict. An instance is the support to non-immigrant visas for purposes other than work (tourism, studying, therapy...).
- Concentrated benefits and concentrated costs. Should produce interest-group politics. Affected groups have serious incentives to act and the general populace do not believe they will be affected one way or another (368). This attitude usually coincides with high political and social

conflict. For instance, banning immigration visas for all but high skilled immigrants, and this entails complex procedures.

- Diffuse benefits and concentrated costs. Engender entrepreneurial politics when a policy “will confer general (though perhaps small) benefits at a cost to be borne chiefly by a small segment of society” (370). This attitude always coincides with high political and social conflict. For instance, taking into account only asylum seekers, rather than immigrants.

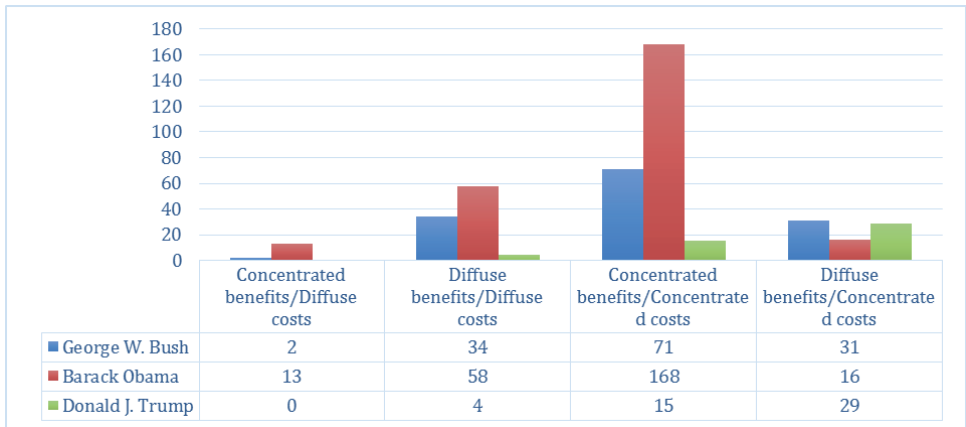
## Results and analysis

As explained above, our focus in this work is on the Presidents' attitudes, which include their stated opinions and how they value immigration. The nature of the United States political system fragments power between legislature, courts, presidency, states, and local government. However, there is a clear evidence that Presidents of the United States can influence public opinion, giving them another source of power in addition to their role in policy making as head of the executive branch of the government. There are many definitions of “attitude” as a concept, but we use here the definition given by the *Oxford American Dictionary of Current English*, of attitude as “a settled opinion” and a “behavior reflecting this” (44). Many studies find that elites including Presidents can affect public attitudes toward all issues (see Nicholson). Presidents employ symbols, images and metaphors to evoke and mobilize public, Congressional and Supreme Court opinions about immigration. When these symbols and attitudes connect with Congress and people's actions, punitive policies targeting particular subgroups can result, as for instance with immigration (see Sears).

Since the turn of the twenty-first century and the September 11 attacks, the discourse of US Presidents on immigration has become dramatically more negative. Immigration has appeared often in their communication, and new topics have been mentioned in order to manage immigration issues, such as the role of the Homeland Security Office within the White House in restricting immigration, the process of expanding enforcement powers all over the country, visa security, and border control (see Rosenblum).

Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump during his two years in office mentioned immigration in 440 documents in their executive orders, inaugural addresses, letters, messages, oral addresses, statements, statements of administration policy, vetoes, written messages or written presidential orders (see Chart 1). All three Presidents mentioned immigration during their inauguration address as one of their priorities. Bush spoke about immigration in his first inauguration and Obama in his second.

**Chart 1:** Attitudes of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump (during his two years in office) toward immigration according to Wilson's schema of policy models.



### George W. Bush

President Bush started his presidency in 2000 with an immigration reform program as a stated priority (see Orchowski). He mentioned immigration issues in 138 documents, as chart 1 indicates; this number is far from President Obama's, who mentioned immigration issues in 254

documents during his administrations. President Bush often concentrated on immigration benefits and costs in his addresses, but less than Obama. Also, Bush mentioned immigration diffusing its cost and its benefits in 34 documents. For example, during a statement on February 16, 2001, he stated:

Migration is one of the major ties that bind our societies. It is important that our policies reflect our values and needs, and that we achieve progress in dealing with this phenomenon. We believe that Mexico should make the most of the skills and productivity of their workers at home, and we agree there should be an orderly framework for migration which ensures humane treatment, legal security, and dignified labor conditions. (Bush, "Joint Statement" n. pag.)

From his first days in the presidency, Bush engaged in a series of discussions on immigration with President Fox of Mexico. He expressed hope for more cooperation on the issue between the two countries. The two Presidents met on five occasions during the first nine months of 2001 and established a bilateral Cooperation Group on immigration. Believing that immigration is an important resource to the United States economy, Bush called for a full temporary worker program (see Rosenblum).

However, after the shock of the 9/11 attacks, everything changed. New waves of restrictive immigration policies arose, and serious comprehensive immigration reform was thwarted (see Zolberg). Most proposals, attitudes and addresses regarding immigration issues addressed security concerns, and Bush strongly supported these immigration efforts. For example, the Patriot Act of 2001 allowed the United States to deny any visa admission to suspected terrorists, and the Homeland Security Act of 2002 established a new department for homeland security (see "Major US Immigration Laws"). In a message to the Congress asking for legislation to Create the Department of Homeland Security on 18 June 2002, President Bush wrote: "The Secretary of Homeland Security would have the authority to administer and enforce all immigration and nationality laws, including the visa issuance functions of consular officers" (Bush, "Message to the Congress" n. pag.).

Consequently, in 2003 immigration policies shifted from the Department of Justice to the Department of Homeland Security,

indicating that the issue of immigration had become a security priority. In December 2005, as Bush had demanded, the House of Representatives passed the Sensenbrenner Bill, which concerned only borders and security enforcement. Many security measures were put in place in order to tighten borders. But the Sensenbrenner Bill could not pass the Senate. Later, in May 2006, Senate passed the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act. The House immediately responded by passing the Secure Fence Act with Bush's support. The Secure Fence Act passed Senate as well, and in October 2006 was signed by President Bush (see Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt).

In fact, this was because Bush aimed at placating angry Americans, particularly conservatives, who had mobilized on the immigration issue. With the victory of the Democratic Party in the midterm election of 2006, Bush could not progress further in the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act even with Senate maneuvers (see Bush, "The Debate Over Immigration Reform"). Undoubtedly, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act was for Bush the most important bill regarding immigration, and he struggled to persuade Congress to pass it. The bill included a complicated visa procedure, border security, and a program for guest workers and undocumented residents. After long debates, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act did not get enough support to pass the Congress, to President Bush's disappointment (see Rosenblum).

As a consequence of 9/11, Bush was concerned about the security of the country, even though he appreciated the benefits of immigration for his country and its contribution to the prosperity of the United States throughout its history and for its future. As Chart 1 indicates, Bush concentrated the benefits and costs of immigration in 71 out of the 138 documents about the immigration issue.

## Obama

Immigration is a more salient factor in Barack Obama's worldview than in Bush's. Obama has a much broader attitude about immigration issues. He has a long experience with immigration, having had a Kenyan father and an Indonesian stepfather. He lived in Indonesia and attended school there



for five years. He also has multilingual, multinational and non-English speaking relatives who migrated to the United States. Although President Obama did not make comprehensive immigration reform a top priority, he emphasized both the concentrated costs and benefits of immigration. For example, in the 28 November 2012 statement on administration policy, he announced: "The Administration values reforms to attract the next generation of highly-skilled immigrants, including legislation to attract and retain foreign students who graduate with advanced science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees" (Obama, "Statement of Administration Policy: H.R. 6429" n. pag.).

However, Obama was the subject of overlapping racialization discourses of anti-blackness, xenophobia and Islamophobia. In the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, "[t]he irony of Barack Obama is this: he has become the most successful black politician in American history by avoiding the radioactive racial issues of yesteryear, by being 'clean,' and yet his indelible blackness irradiates everything he touches" (qtd. in Volpp 402). The contribution of the Hispanic population to Barack Obama's first election created expectations that he would propose immigration reform. But like President Bush, during his eight years in the office Obama did not succeed in promoting major immigration legislation. His executive actions filled the legislative void (see Golash-Boza). However, Obama was not uninterested in passing immigration legislation. On 16 April 2009, he met with President Felipe Calderón in Mexico and confirmed his pledge to pass an amnesty act (see *President Obama's Record*), but failed to provide and defend any comprehensive immigration legislation. The Economic Opportunity, Immigration Modernization Act and Border Security did not make it through the Congress (see Reich).

Executive action offered a good resource to Obama in asserting control over immigration. In June 2012, as the DREAM Act was languishing in Congress, he established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program (see Orchowski). This program allowed unauthorized immigrants who were brought to the United States before the age of 16 to apply for resident permits. DACA covered some 1.7 million migrants. Also, in November 2014, Obama announced the creation of the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents program (DAPA).

This program deferred the deportation of undocumented immigrants who were the parents of either US citizens or legal permanent residents (see Volpp). Obama resorted to these many forceful executive actions because of his failure to push Congress into legislative action. In a climate of partisan division, the makeshift nature of immigration policy via executive action became clear. The Obama administration was characterized by congressional inaction, and in his executive actions and statements on immigration Obama initially focused on deportation (see Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt). For example, in the 8 December 2010 statement, he said:

The young people who would be eligible for relief under the DREAM Act are prime examples of the need for comprehensive immigration reform that is based on requiring accountability and responsibility from all – the government, employers, and those who have entered the country illegally. The present system is broken and the Administration continues to call on the Congress to pass comprehensive reform. While the broader immigration debate continues, the Administration urges the House to take this important step and pass the DREAM Act. (Obama, “Statement of Administration Policy: House Amendment” n. pag.)

Indeed, Bush and Obama displayed similar attitudes towards immigration, even though Obama deported more immigrants than Bush, and they came from different parties with different ideologies. It is probable that President Obama was forced to adopt a more conservative attitude towards immigration, which further restricted his ability to do as much as he wanted for immigrants. Since he was the first President with a non-American, non-white father, he was rhetorically branded as a disloyal terrorist sympathizer if he appeared to support immigrants equally or more than US citizens.

## Trump

President Donald Trump has a long history of making racially charged public statements, such as his racist accusation that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States and should not be its President

(see Flores). He has referred to immigration in 48 documents since his inauguration till 31 December 31. Trump has been the only President in recent United States history to publicly take a hard-line position on immigration. His statements are considered by many scholars to have sent a shockwave through global public opinion on immigration (see Reich). According to our results in chart 1, Trump downplays immigration benefits all over the United States throughout its history and concentrates on the costs. This attitude is repeated in 29 documents out of 48. For example, in his inaugural address on 20 January 2017, he stated:

Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength. I will fight for you with every breath in my body, and I will never, ever let you down. (Trump, "Inaugural Address" n. pag.)

Trump's attitude towards immigration is distinct from that of his two predecessors, and is marked by a negative framing of the issue. Since his inauguration, Trump has signed more than nine executive orders on immigration, which included hiring 15,000 extra enforcement officers, building a wall, and eliminating "sanctuary cities." He also introduced three orders attempting to ban visas for immigrants, visitors, and refugees from many Muslim countries. Despite not being able to carry out as much policy change as he had promised, Trump succeeded in enforcing the law against non-citizens all over the country. Between 20 January and 30 September 2017, the Trump administration removed 61,000 immigrants from the United States, a 37% increase on what had been done in 2016 (see Sacchetti). His administration also arrested about 110,000 immigrants, a 42% increase compared to 2016. Ironically, during 2017, 38,000 of the arrested immigrants were without any criminal convictions. This number was 15,000 in 2016 (see Pierce, Bolter, Selee).

Overall, Trump's removals were fewer than Obama's, probably because a lower number of immigrants tried to enter the country during Trump's first year as President. Trump removed 226,000 immigrants in 2017, while Barack Obama's removals averaged 344,000 per year. However, President

Trump has also made remarkable reductions in the number of accepted refugees. In the first nine months of 2018, the Trump administration admitted only 16,000 refugees (see “Admissions and Arrivals”). Furthermore, Trump has made many changes that have increased the complications of the vetting procedure for future immigrants and have significantly slowed down legal admissions. He has increased the number of steps applicants must go through prior to being eligible to travel to the United States (see Pierce, Bolter, Selee), and at the time of writing this text (early 2019), President Trump has shut down the government budget for three weeks, calling for \$5.7 billion to build up construction a steel barrier along the Southwest border. Trump said that he might enforce border wall funding by declaring a national emergency.

No President in United States history has placed such a high priority on immigration or had such a focus on restricting immigration as President Trump. For example, in the 5 September 2017 statement, he said:

We must remember that young Americans have dreams too. Being in government means setting priorities. Our first and highest priority in advancing immigration reform must be to improve jobs, wages, and security for American workers and their families. It is now time for Congress to act. (Trump, “Statement on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Policy” n. pag.)

He has reduced refugee admissions, slowed visa processing, expanded enforcement of immigration laws, and promoted a strongly negative public discourse against immigration. Many people consider Trump’s attitude toward immigration as a turning point in shaping American immigration (see Pierce, Bolter, Selee).

President Donald Trump’s attitude on immigration is very far from his two predecessors’. He diffuses immigration benefits and concentrates on immigration costs. Trump is spearheading a multifaceted campaign against immigration. He is trying to influence public opinion by describing immigrants as the hardest problem jeopardizing the American Dream. This is what has happened during his first two years in office, but what about the next two years? And will he be re-elected for another term with this anti-immigration attitude or not? The result will definitely determine the future role of immigrants in the United States.

## Conclusion

Attitudes towards immigration are complicated, dynamic, and emotional. This study sheds light on how US Presidents' attitudes towards immigration have changed over the last two decades. The overwhelming majority of results points to the fact that until 2001 presidents adopted stances on immigration which were conducive to increasing the number of immigrants coming to the United States. Since the turn of the twenty-first century and the 9/11 attacks, the Presidents' discourse regarding immigration has taken a dramatic turn to the negative. Immigration has featured often in their speeches, and new actions have been taken in order to manage immigration issues, such as the role of the Department of Homeland Security within the White House in restricting immigration, the process of expanding enforcement powers all over the country, visa security, and border controls.

President Bush was concerned about the security of the country, but also appreciated the benefits of immigration, its contribution to the prosperity of the United States throughout its history and into its future. Bush concentrated on the benefits and costs of immigration. Bush and Obama presented a similar attitude towards immigration, despite the fact that Obama deported more immigrants than Bush did, and even though they came from different parties with different ideologies.

President Donald Trump's attitude towards immigration is different from that of the previous two administrations, in his negative framing of immigration. During his 2016 campaign Donald Trump repeatedly promised to change many things, and particularly focused on immigration reform. Multitudes over the world see a remarkable relationship between the change of the United States presidency and the fortunes of their countries. In the first two years of Trump as the United States President, no fundamental change has come about on the issue of immigrants, but a lot of animosity has been engendered against them – and in the last months a growing number of measures against immigration have been taken. No President in United States history has placed such a high priority on immigration or had such a focus on restricting it as Trump.

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