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Security Narratives and Partisan Polarization: The Political Drivers of Trump's Immigration Policy Adjustments at the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Abstract. Illegal immigration at the US-Mexico border has long been a key part of American social and political life. Since 2019, the fourth wave of illegal immigration has hit. It is bigger in scale than ever before, and immigrants come from more countries. This wave has made political divisions in the US even worse. In this situation, the Trump administration's policy was very different from the Biden administration's policy that came after. It made strict and tough immigration rules official. These rules included building a border wall, sending many illegal immigrants back to their countries, and trying to end birthright citizenship. This study looks at this situation. It uses academic books and news reports to find the real political reasons for the big changes in the Trump administration's immigration policy. The study finds three main political reasons for these changes. First, the administration used a security story. It said immigration was a danger to national security, so extreme immigration measures were reasonable. Second, it reacted to the worries of conservative voters. These voters, especially white working-class people, thought their jobs and cultural identity were in danger. The administration did this to keep their support in elections. Third, domestic political divisions and the global movement of resources also pushed the administration to change the policy.

Keywords: Trump Administration, Immigration Policy, U.S.-Mexico Border, Securitization, Partisan Polarization

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Sharing a southern border with the United States, Mexico has a long history of cross-border migration activities with complex structures. In the early days, to meet the labor demands of its industrialization process, the United States long acquiesced in the free movement of Mexican laborers across the border. These laborers provided a large pool of cheap labor for American agriculture and construction industries, serving as an important pillar for driving economic growth. However, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, U.S. immigration policy shifted from openness to restriction. A series of legislations, such as the Immigration Act of 1917 [1] which established a

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literacy test system, strengthened entry screening and racial inspections. These measures excluded a large number of Mexicans from legal entry channels, forcing them to enter the U.S. illegally and triggering successive waves of illegal immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border. Since the 1940s, the U.S.-Mexico border has experienced three major waves of illegal immigration, each lasting over a decade, occurring in the 1940s, the mid-1960s, and the 1990s respectively. Starting from 2019, the number of illegal immigrants has surged again, forming the fourth wave after the COVID-19 pandemic. This wave is unprecedented in both scale and complexity: the source countries are more diversified, the total number has reached a peak, cross-border methods have become more varied, and the difficulty of governance has increased significantly. This new wave of illegal immigration has not only exacerbated security and humanitarian crises in border areas, but also turned immigration into a core issue of political polarization and social division in the United States.

The evolution of U.S. immigration policy can be roughly divided into four stages, reflecting changes in national interests, racial attitudes, and security demands. The period from the 18th to the 19th century was an era of free immigration. To attract population and develop its territory, the United States implemented an open policy. For example, the Naturalization Act of 1790 [2] set extremely loose naturalization requirements for "free white persons". The enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 [3] marked the rise of exclusive racial policies. The early 20th century entered the quota restriction stage. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 [4] and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 [5] established a nationality-based quota system, imposing strict restrictions on immigrants from the Middle East, East Asia, and Southern Europe. The passage of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 initiated the era of equalization reform. It abolished the nationality quota system, emphasizing family reunification and skilled immigration, which led to a surge in immigrants from Latin America and Asia. The Refugee Act of 1979 [6] and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 [7] established the institutional framework of modern immigration and refugee policies. Since the 1990s, the United States has entered an era of security and strict control. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 [8] strengthened border law enforcement. After the 9/11 attacks, the USA PATRIOT Act [9] further linked immigration control with counter-terrorism strategies. Although the Obama administration launched the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, the number of deportations during his tenure still reached a record high, reflecting the long-standing tension in U.S. immigration policy between human rights and security.

In recent years, partisan divisions and political polarization in the United States have further influenced the direction of immigration policy. The Trump administration pursued an extremely restrictive immigration policy, proposing the construction of a border wall at the U.S.-Mexico border, suspending the asylum system, and declaring a "national emergency" again, planning to deploy the military to carry out large-scale deportations. This stance reflects the conservative orientation of the Republican Party on issues of security and nationalism. On the contrary, the Biden administration has continued a more moderate humanitarian approach, focusing on legalization and the restoration of the asylum system. However, the differences between the two parties on immigration issues have become increasingly acute, making immigration governance a concentrated manifestation of social polarization, administrative system rigidity, and national identity crisis in the United States.

1.2. Research questions and significance

This paper mainly focuses on two questions. First, why did the Trump administration adopt extremely restrictive measures in immigration policy? Second, how did the political motivations

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behind these measures transform into policy tools through the logic of "securitization"? U.S. immigration policy is not only a barometer of American domestic politics and economy, but also a microcosm of global governance. Research on changes in immigration policy holds profound academic value, as it can provide new cases for the securitization theory. In terms of practical value, such research can offer key decision-making basis for policymakers, enterprises, and immigrant groups of various countries. It helps to understand the political logic behind immigration policies and provides references for future policy formulation. Especially in today's international society, where globalization is in retreat and nationalism is on the rise, research on U.S. immigration issues is of even greater urgency and practical significance.

1.3. Domestic and foreign research status

After the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States has ushered in the fourth wave of illegal immigration in its history, making the issue of illegal immigration once again a focal point of partisan games. Academic research on immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border and policy adjustments spans multiple disciplines such as political science, sociology, and economics. Overall, foreign research focuses on historical, economic, and geopolitical factors, while domestic research mostly proceeds from historical evolution and policy comparison, but theoretical analysis remains insufficient.

Foreign scholars generally believe that the political motivations for U.S. immigration policy reform are complex and diverse, jointly influenced by the administrative system, economic interests, and diplomatic environment. From a historical perspective, Baltensperger [10] pointed out that immigration management has long suffered from structural problems such as fragmented functions and inefficient law enforcement, which have become important drivers for policy reform. Economic factors are also core variables. Through empirical research on congressional voting, Facchini et al. [11] found that the economic interests of constituencies and labor market demands significantly affect legislators' positions on immigration issues, demonstrating the decisive role of the logic of economic self-interest in policy direction. Lowell and Papademetriou [12] further proposed that public-private sector collaboration is a key mechanism for balancing immigrant integration and economic restructuring. Geopolitics also shapes the external environment for policy evolution. Eskridge-Kosmach [13]studied U.S.-Yugoslav relations during the Cold War, revealing the indirect impact of foreign aid and humanitarian policies on the domestic immigration agenda. Belokonev et al. [14] pointed out that the Venezuelan immigrant wave has reshaped the domestic political landscape of the United States, and immigrant flows in specific regions may become a catalyst for policy reform. In recent years, social health issues have gradually interwoven with immigration policy. Taking drug policy reform as an example, Rouhani et al. [15] illustrated that health and social concerns are driving the emergence of a new "hybrid governance model" in the U.S. policy system. Overall, foreign research emphasizes the institutional evolution logic under the interaction of multiple factors: economic interests are the direct driving force, administrative efficiency and the international environment constitute constraint conditions, and social issues continue to expand the boundaries of the policy agenda.

Domestic scholars' research mainly focuses on historical context and policy comparison. Yang Ya [16]systematically sorted out the evolution of the U.S.-Mexico illegal immigration wave since the 1960s and its policy impacts; Li Qingsi and Xu Hongbo [17] analyzed the moderation of the Biden administration's immigration policy and its comparison with the Trump era from a political science perspective; Wang Congyue [18] focused on the governance contradictions between the federal government and local governments in asylum policies, and revealed the structural social divisions

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behind the immigration crisis in a commentary article [19]; Shen Zhen [20] analyzed the formation mechanism of three immigration waves and their impact on U.S.-Mexico relations from an international relations perspective. In terms of research methods, domestic scholars mainly adopt qualitative research approaches, such as literature analysis, policy comparison, and case studies, with few quantitative models or empirical methods applied. Research data mostly rely on U.S. official statistics, think tank reports, and international organization materials, leading to insufficient exploration of the micro-mechanisms of policy motivations.

In summary, the reform of U.S. immigration policy is the result of the combined effects of administrative system constraints, economic interest games, geopolitical considerations, and social health concerns. Existing literature rarely systematically explores the key issue of "how securitization narratives are mobilized in the context of partisan polarization". This paper will adopt an analytical framework from the three perspectives of "securitization narrative - intergroup threat - partisan polarization" to attempt to explain the political motivations behind the immigration policy adjustments of the Trump administration.

2. Theoretical framework and research methods

This paper takes the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School, intergroup threat theory, and partisan polarization theory as the analytical framework to explore the political motivations behind the immigration policy adjustments of the Trump administration. These three theories reveal the deep-seated logic of U.S. immigration policy from the perspectives of national security, social psychology, and institutional politics respectively.

The Copenhagen School regards securitization as a social construction process. That is, political actors frame an issue as an "existential threat" through discourse, and after the audience accepts this framing, extraordinary means are adopted to address it. If a country’s security is in real danger, special measures are acceptable. They can even go beyond the usual political rules [21]. The Trump administration used this idea exactly. It turned the US-Mexico border immigration problem from a social issue into a national security issue. Trump said in his speeches, "the United States is being invaded" and "they bring drugs and crime". These words made people feel a strong sense of crisis. The government declared a national emergency at the southern border. It also sent military forces there. This is a typical example of using Securitization Theory in practice. The administration talked about immigration as a life-or-death crisis, not just a normal policy matter. This way, it made its tough executive measures seem reasonable.

Intergroup Threat Theory explains why people support these strict policies. It also tells the social and psychological reasons behind this support. The theory says a dominant group will dislike others when they feel threatened. The threat can be to their economic interests, or to their cultural leading position [22]. In this case, unauthorized immigrants coming into the US were seen as two threats to white working-class people. Economically, immigrants pushed down wages and took low-skill jobs. Culturally, Latin American immigrants had different languages and religions. Trump made this "us vs them" idea louder. He turned the anxiety of white working-class people into strong support for strict immigration rules.

Partisan Polarization Theory also matters. It shows the important political background of this immigration policy [23]. Democrats focus on helping others and being inclusive. Republicans care more about national sovereignty and defense. The gap between the two sides’ ideas is growing. Trump used this division to his advantage. He made strict "zero-tolerance" immigration enforcement a sign of patriotism and order. He also said the opposition party wanted open borders and chaos. So

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political polarization was not just a social division in the US. Trump used it on purpose as a political strategy. It helped him keep the Republican Party united.

This study uses three theories together to analyze the issue. Securitization Theory explains why tough immigration policies were considered reasonable. Intergroup Threat Theory shows how the government got public support for these policies. Partisan Polarization Theory tells how political division made immigration policies more extreme.

This paper uses two main research methods: literature analysis and policy comparison. It takes the US-Mexico border immigration issue as the key case. The paper sorts out relevant research both at home and abroad. It analyzes how US immigration policies changed under different governments. It also compares immigration policies of the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations. This shows how the immigration issue played different roles under different political systems. The research uses many materials. They include academic journals like American Studies and International Political Studies. They also include first-hand data such as White House statements, US Department of Homeland Security statistics, UNHCR reports and mainstream media news.

3. Case analysis: immigration policy adjustments of the trump administration

The overall orientation of the Trump administration's immigration policy is a comprehensive restrictive strategy centered on "national security" and "border control". This policy is not only a response to the long-standing illegal immigration problem in the United States, but also a tool for Republican political mobilization and ideological shaping. In his new term, Trump continued and strengthened his previous tough stance, signed a number of executive orders, comprehensively tightened immigration channels and expanded law enforcement powers through legislative and administrative means, and strengthened militarized border management to achieve the goal of the "Zero Tolerance" policy.

3.1. Paradigm shift: from humanitarian governance to securitization

The Trump administration’s immigration policy changed in a key way. It turned immigration from a normal social management issue into a national security crisis on purpose. This move was not just going against the Biden administration’s gentle immigration policy. It was a complete change to the whole policy model. The Biden administration canceled the "Remain in Mexico" policy for humanitarian reasons. But when the Trump administration came back to power, it quickly said it needed to "stop border problems". The administration declared a national emergency at the southern border. It did this to make its strict immigration measures seem reasonable. This policy change shows the big difference in ideas between the two major parties. The Democratic Party focuses on formal humanitarian help. The Republican Party thinks national sovereignty and public safety are the most important things. So it says strict control of illegal immigration is a must.

Illegal immigrants have clear group characteristics. Most of them are low-skilled and low-income people from Mexico, Central America and Venezuela. These facts supported the Trump administration’s security-related statements about immigration. These immigrants mostly work in low-wage job markets. They directly compete with local workers in the US. The Trump administration made these people’s worries stronger on purpose. It said immigration was the reason for "growing crime rates" and "heavier social burdens" in words. This way of speaking made people want to protect themselves.

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3.2. Physical barriers and the expansion of executive power

On January 20, 2025, President Trump officially declared a national emergency at the southern border. He did this based on the National Emergencies Act (NEA) [24]. The real aim of this official action was to get around the budget rules set by the legislature. It let the government use resources from the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The goal was to keep using the "physical exclusion" strategy started in 2017.

Trump built about 700 kilometers of border barriers in his first term. These barriers covered one-third of the US-Mexico border. But his new administration wants to fill the remaining gaps in border defense. In March 2025, the government announced a new 7-mile border wall project in Arizona [25]. This project is not just continuing the building work. It is also a political statement to stick to the "wall strategy".

The government allowed active military soldiers to help with border enforcement. It also hired thousands more border patrol agents. These actions show that border management is becoming more militarized.

3.3. Systemic contraction of the immigration architecture

The Trump administration built a multi-layer control system. It wanted to block all immigration channels, both legal and illegal.

In terms of laws and systems, the administration took action against birthright citizenship. This rule is written in the 14th Amendment. It used an executive order [26] to try and stop children of illegal immigrants from getting citizenship by law. At the same time, it paused the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). It also took down the online application platforms for refugees. This made the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. drop fast in 2025. The number hit its lowest point in 30 years [27].

In terms of law enforcement and deterrence, the zero-tolerance deportation rule was put back in use. The administration ended the CBP One appointment system from the Biden era. It also brought back the Remain in Mexico policy. These moves greatly reduced the legal ways for asylum seekers to apply. Data from the first half of 2025 shows federal agencies took action. They arrested more than 8,000 people. They also sent over 142,000 illegal immigrants back to their countries in large numbers. They used military logistics to do this [28,29]. The administration also used economic pressure. It threatened to put a 25% tariff on imports from Mexico and Canada. It wanted the two countries to help stop illegal immigration at the border.

4. Analysis of the political drivers of the trump administration's immigration policy adjustments

In recent years, the polarization of the U.S. political environment and social division have intensified significantly, providing a political and social soil for the Trump administration to implement tough immigration policies. The Trump administration "securitized" the immigration issue, successfully elevating it from an original social issue to a core issue of national security and identity survival. This narrative not only catered to the intergroup threat psychology of voters, but also further deepened the partisan antagonism in the United States. Against the backdrop of the decline of centrist forces, extreme left and extreme right forces have expanded rapidly, making the immigration issue one of the most prominent manifestations of U.S. political polarization.

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4.1. Securitization narrative: from social issue to national threat

According to the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School, the "securitization" of the immigration issue usually goes through three stages: first, political actors put forward an existential threat; second, extraordinary or emergency measures are taken; third, the legitimacy of these measures is achieved by breaking through conventional political procedures. The Trump administration has demonstrated a typical performance in this process.

4.1.1. Putting forward an existential threat

Trump and his core staff, through the construction of political discourse, framed illegal immigration from a socio-economic problem into an existential threat to national sovereignty, security, and national identity. In his campaign speeches, he frequently used incendiary language such as "our country is being invaded" [30] and "they bring drugs, crime, and rape", endowing the immigration issue with the symbolic meaning of a "hostile other". This security narrative aroused the fear of the public, making the immigration issue transcend the rational discussion at the policy level and turn into a political symbol of national security and national survival.

4.1.2. Taking emergency measures and breaking political conventions

Under the narrative framework of the "national emergency", the Trump administration implemented a series of policies that exceeded the boundaries of conventional law enforcement: including the "family separation" phenomenon caused by the "zero-tolerance" policy, large-scale deportation operations, the repeated implementation of travel bans by invoking Section 212 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and the proposal to terminate birthright citizenship. Although these measures have triggered strong criticism from the international community, they were packaged domestically as necessary measures to "defend national security", thus putting opponents in a moral dilemma of "opposing national security". This narrative effectively consolidated the political legitimacy of Trump among conservative voters.

4.2. Voter mobilization: responding to the economic and cultural anxieties of white blue-collar workers

Trump's political base is mainly composed of conservatives, white blue-collar workers, and rural groups. Intergroup threat theory can explain why he was able to achieve voter mobilization through anti-immigrant discourse.

4.2.1. Economic intergroup threat

For a long time, illegal immigrants in the U.S. labor market have mainly engaged in low-skilled and low-paying jobs. The white working class generally believes that the existence of immigrants suppresses wage levels and crowds out employment opportunities for local workers, thereby weakening their economic status. Trump accurately responded to this anxiety with slogans such as "building the wall" and "zero tolerance", emphasizing strict law enforcement to "protect American workers". This strategy was particularly effective in the "Rust Belt" region in the Midwest, enabling him to consolidate the support of white blue-collar voters in the 2016 and 2024 elections.

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4.2.2. Crisis of cultural and identity recognition

In addition to economic factors, cultural identity anxiety is also an important foundation of Trump's securitization narrative. With the increase in the number of immigrants from Latin America and Asia, the ethnic structure of American society and the trend of cultural diversification have deepened. Some white voters feel that the traditional dominant position is shaking, resulting in the psychology of "identity replacement". With the political slogan of "Make America Great Again" [31], Trump met the cultural security needs of voters by strengthening the symbolic logic of "national border - national identity - white subjectivity". This narrative transformed the immigration issue into an issue of the "survival" of culture and national identity, providing legitimacy for social mobilization for his tough policies.

4.3. Partisan polarization: strengthening republican political cohesion through the immigration issue

4.3.1. Partisan differences and political games

The immigration issue has become one of the areas with the most obvious differences between the two major parties in the United States. The Republican Party has long advocated strict border control and strengthened law enforcement, while the Democratic Party tends to emphasize humanitarianism and inclusiveness. After taking office, Trump, through extreme policies such as "family separation", "border wall construction", and the termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, forced moderate factions within the Republican Party to compromise, thereby consolidating the dominant position of the conservative camp within the party. At the same time, he depicted the loose policies of the Democratic Party as symbols of "open borders" and "conniving at crimes", further intensifying social divisions.

Political polarization has led to a long-term deadlock in immigration reform legislation. The opposition between the two parties in values and policy orientations has turned the immigration issue into a tool for political attacks, rather than an object of rational policy discussion. Trump's tough stance not only catered to the positions of traditional conservative Republicans, but also became an effective strategy to weaken the voter mobilization ability of the Democratic Party.

4.3.2. Domestic political pressure and the intervention of interest groups

In a highly polarized political environment, interest groups have exerted a profound impact on the formulation of immigration policies. According to the analysis of Illinois State Representative Theresa Mah [32], interest groups related to the immigration issue in the United States can be divided into four categories:

a.Pro-immigration economic interest groups, representing high-tech, agriculture, and other industries, advocating the relaxation of visas and the absorption of labor to meet industrial needs;

b.Anti-immigration economic interest groups, worried that immigrants will cause wage declines and increase social welfare burdens, advocating strict restrictions on visas and the deportation of illegal immigrants;

c.Pro-immigration ethnic minority interest groups, based on their own immigrant backgrounds, advocating moderate policies and legalization processes;

d.Anti-immigration ethnic minority interest groups, supporting the "zero-tolerance" policy out of considerations of cultural assimilation and social security.

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Trump skillfully balanced among different interest groups, winning the support of anti-immigrant factions by strengthening the security narrative, while retaining certain policy flexibility friendly to enterprises at the economic level. This strategy not only maintained the internal unity of the Republican Party, but also shaped the immigration issue into one of the most politically beneficial issues during the election cycle.

4.4. International dimension: global economy and structural spillover effects

From an international perspective, globalization and the transnational flow of labor are the deep-seated backgrounds of the immigration problem. Economic globalization has promoted the free flow of capital, technology, and labor on a global scale. For developing countries, the surplus of population and labor force has put them under employment pressure, prompting a large number of workers to migrate to economically developed countries through legal or illegal means. Immigrants from Latin America entered the United States under this structural driving force, seeking higher income and living standards.

U.S. immigration policy also reflects the fluctuations of the global economic situation to a certain extent. Historically, global economic downturns and conflict-induced refugee surges have served as structural precipitants for restrictive admission policies in destination countries. This pattern was starkly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the backdrop of sluggish economic recovery provided a fertile ground for policy contraction. The Trump administration strategically conflated domestic economic volatility with the inflow of migrants, tightening refugee and asylum protocols under a dual pretext. By linking the preservation of public health and economic stability to border impermeability, the administration successfully instrumentalized the global crisis to enforce a more conservative exclusionary regime.

5. Conclusion

The immigration policy adjustments of the Trump administration are influenced by multiple factors. The study found that at the domestic level, the motivations are as follows: first, through the "securitization narrative", the immigration issue was framed as a threat to national security, rationalizing its extreme measures; second, catering to the conservative voter base and responding to the employment and cultural identity anxieties of the white working class; third, using the immigration issue to further strengthen the antagonism between the two parties, consolidating the internal unity of the Republican Party and attacking the Democratic Party's "open border" stance; fourth, being influenced by interest groups. At the international level, the factor flow brought about by economic globalization is also an important factor. This paper argues that the immigration policies of the Trump administration not only reflect the high degree of polarization in American domestic politics, but also serve as an important tool for the administration to consolidate power and fulfill campaign promises. The immigration problem at the U.S.-Mexico border is a highly representative microcosm of the U.S. immigration problem. Through case analysis, we can form a relatively systematic understanding of the political motivations behind the adjustment of U.S. immigration policies. The future changes in U.S. immigration policy are also an important entry point for the study of the global illegal immigration problem.Sample Heading (Third Level). Only two levels of headings should be numbered. Lower level headings remain unnumbered; they are formatted as run-in headings.

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