



## Research Article

# Immigration, Nationalism, and Power: Assessing the Impact of Trump's Immigration Policies on America's Future Global Role

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## ABSTRACT

In this work, the author examines the point of contact between immigration policy, nationalism, and international power by evaluating how the restrictive immigration agenda of President Trump affects the international leadership position of the United States. Using the case study approach of research design through qualitative analysis of policy documents, diplomatic speech, and media coverage, the study defines how the travel ban, separation of families, and limits on asylum impacted the nationalist ideology and transformed the views of America as a soft power and a legitimate nation. The results indicate that the Trump immigration crackdown has led to the reduction in international approval, damaged alliances, and the loss of normative leadership of the U.S. in terms of human rights and multilateralism. The paper presents the idea that nationalist internationalization policies, though strategically important in the domestic context, hurt the long-term world power and reputation. It adds to the literature on political economy and international relations by making connections between domestic populism and undermining the liberal world order and demanding the policy to be adjusted in response to the loss of international trust.



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## Introduction

The immigration policy has always been a mirror and a magnifying glass of the extended political ideologies in the United States. During the presidency of Donald J. Trump, first (2017-2021) and early in the second (2024) terms in office, immigration became the core of the populist-nationalist agenda. The immigration policy of Trump did not only mirror the domestic fears of identity, security and economic nationalism, but also had a deeper political implication on the global position of America. The policies and rhetoric that were enacted during his tenure represent an enormous divergence of the multilateral; liberal principles that had long been emphasized in American foreign affairs.

The immigration policy based on the idea of America First, which Trump promoted, resulted in such measures as a blockade of Muslim travel, the separation of families at the border, the unsuccessful attempt to abolish DACA, and the dramatic decrease in the number of refugees taken in (Pierce and Selee, 2017). These policies have intensified in his 2024 re-election, as he once again tries to limit asylum, increase deportations, and revert to merit-based entry requirements (Meissner, 2024). These immigration strategies that focus on the United States have continued to weaken the image of the country as a land of opportunity and freedom before the world.

This paper examines the impact of the immigration policies of Trump, both in his first and second term in office, on the US position in the world. It examines the interactions between soft power, geopolitical alliance, and normative leadership in the

international system and rising nationalism and exclusionary migration policies.

### The study is premised on 4 main objectives that include;

1. To analyze the main characteristics of the immigration policies of Trump in the first and second term.
2. To assess the impact of these policies in terms of the ways they depress or support nationalistic ideologies in the United States.
3. To evaluate the effects of these immigration policies on the soft power of America and its image of the world.
4. To examine the overall geopolitical ramifications of such policies to U.S. foreign leadership and allies.

### The key questions that were answered included;

What are the characteristic features of the immigration policy of Donald Trump during his first and second term in office?

1. How do these policies support and advance a nationalist agenda?
2. What have been the implications of the Trumpian immigration policies to the soft power and image of the United States?
3. How then does these policies affect the American ties with allies in the global arena and its future as a global leader?

### Importance of the Study

This study adds to the body of literature of international political economy and the U.S. foreign policy by establishing

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relationships between immigration, nationalism, and hegemony. It contextualizes Trump era immigration policies in the global framework of populism and declining liberal order and offers the thought of how domestic politics discourse impacts global management. The study contributes to the comprehension of the fragile interactions of national sovereignty, international norms, and strategic use of soft power, which can provide a lot of insights to both scholars and policymakers.

## Literature Review

The American identity was always defined by the conflict between its ethos of settlers-immigrants and the periodic nationalistic counter-reactions (Hollifield, 2004). The immigration policy of Trump can be regarded as a very good example of the latter as it embodies the spirit of the nativist urges that have always revealed themselves in the times of economic insecurity and racial friction (Higham, 1955; Alba and Foner, 2015). The argument among scholars is that the logic of immigrants posing threats to national security and economic stability presented by Trump is a larger exercise to determine what kind of American identity is sought, along the ethnonationalist lines (Mounk, 2018).

The initial Trump administration started more than 400 executive actions regarding immigration, which indicated a complete overhaul of immigration with the goal of deterrence and enforcement (Pierce and Bolter, 2020). These were construction of a border wall, the Remain in Mexico policy, and drastic cuts in legal immigration routes. During the second term of Trump, power is once again being centralized in immigration courts, militarizing borders, and making anti-immigration rhetoric institutionalized by using public campaigns (Nowrasteh and Bier, 2025).

Nationalism coupled with state power is more likely to promote unilateralism and protectionism in international relations (Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1991). The America First policy of Trump broke the old alliances and discredited multilateral institutions (Ikenberry, 2018). The immigration policy, being a nationalism in all its visible manifestations, has been quite instrumental in making this transition known to the outside world. Opponents claim that the adoption of anti-globalization approaches towards refugee rights and free movement of people has weakened the American credibility in other countries (Carens, 2013; Nye, 2020).

The idea of soft power introduced by Joseph Nye implies that an immigration openness would improve the attractiveness of a country (Nye, 2004). This transparency has literally been worn away under Trump, especially with allies and in international institutions like the UNHCR and the OECD (Chacon & Davis, 2018). Human rights agencies have condemned U.S. policies as discriminatory and against international laws, which only alienate the country further to its past partners (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Theories of immigration policy more often than not are based on larger ontologies in international political economy, with the political economy of immigration stressing the mutuality of domestic economic demands, labor markets and state sovereignty. It sees the immigration control as the state action to create equilibrium between the advantages of free-flowing labor and the perceived threat to the economic stability and social unity. Expanding on this, nationalism and populism theories can be useful in understanding the impact of identity-based politics and anti-elite moods in influencing the exclusionary immigration policies, especially when there is perceived demographic or economic crisis. The issue of immigration frequently becomes a loss of power which nationalist-populist leaders exploit to amass

political backing. In addition to these paradigms, the concept of soft power by Nye (2004) offers a perspective through which the effects of such policies on the rest of the world should be examined. When immigration policies are opposite to the declared democratic and humanitarian ideas, the soft power, the power of a state to influence and attract people by their values and culture, may be seriously undermined.

## Empirical Literature Review

There are more than 400 executive actions that transformed the area of U.S. immigration that are recorded in the empirical studies, as well as the policies like the Muslim travel ban, family separation, and the Public Charge Rule (Pierce and Bolter, 2020). In 2024, the reelection led to increased initiatives, such as the increased application of Title 42-style health reasons to deny asylum (Meissner, 2024). According to quantitative data provided by Migration Policy Institute (2021), the legal flows of migration decreased by 60 percent between 2017 and 2020.

A number of content analyses (e.g., Mounk, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019) show the way in which the rhetoric of Trump portrayed immigration as a danger to American values and civic safety. Empirical evidence revealed the strong connection between anti-immigrant media communications and the mobilization of nationalist voters (Parker and Barreto, 2017). The social media usage of Trump was also critical in the spread of xenophobic discourse, which is proven through algorithmic discourse research (Daniels, 2020).

According to surveys by Pew Research Center (2020) and Edelman Trust Barometer (2021), the trust in U.S. global leadership has declined measurably in the first year of the Trump administration resting on the issues of immigration and unilateralism in foreign policy. UNHCR (2023) and Human Rights Watch (2020) lament U.S. abandonment of humanitarian responsibilities, but state-level information reveals that the US has diplomatic issues with Mexico, Germany, and Canada (Ikenberry, 2018).

Empirical evidence (e.g., Clemens, 2021; Nowrasteh and Bier, 2025) points at adverse effects on the labor market due to immigration restrictions, specifically in agriculture, technology, and health. Statistics indicate that workforce shortages in foreign-born workers led to reliance on temporary labour programs that have minimal human rights guarantee.

Although abundant literature has been created on the aspect of U.S. immigration under Trump, there are still significant gaps. First, it does not pay much attention to the long-term global power dynamics due to the immigration policy in the context of a decrease in moral authority and the geopolitical leadership. Second, numerous articles fail to combine the theory of soft power with the immigration analysis in a sufficient way, neglecting the role of domestic exclusionary policies on the legitimacy of the state internationally and its diplomatic efficacy. This paper fills these gaps by tying the nationalist immigration activities into the fate of U.S. hegemony in the liberal international system.

## Theoretical Framework

Nationalism is explained as a political ideology that tries to make the national boundaries to match those of a culturally or ethnically determined nation (Gellner, 1983). Nationalism has found its way in the immigration policies of Trump as an attempt to defend the American identity against external threats, especially the non-European immigrants, Muslims, and asylum seekers. Trumpian nationalism builds on ethnocultural lines to define who should belong and immigrants are seen as economic rivals and cultural foes (Anderson, 1991; Mounk, 2018).

The theory of nationalism can be used to understand the rhetoric of immigrants as existential threat and the politics of limiting migration, border control, and the exclusion of other people. Ideologies of nationalism when incorporated into the state policy will be translated into exclusionary politics that will not only inform the domestic politics but also shape how such state interacts with the international one (Smith, 1991). The rhetoric of the America First and the policy shift to populist nationalism, basing itself on sovereignty, cultural preservation, and anti-globalism, demonstrate that Trump has adopted a more populist nationalism approach in rhetoric and policy.

#### Key Assumptions:

- Immigration control is a means of building and defending of national identity.
- Nationalistic ideas form the immigration policy and affect international relations.
- Multilateralism and international cooperation are usually hampered by nationalism.

Soft power is the capacity of one state to influence the desires and the behaviors of other states by enticement and authorization and not by force or bribery (Nye, 2004). The U.S. global leadership has traditionally been founded not only on military and economic hegemony (hard power), but also on the attractiveness of beliefs, liberty, possibility, diversity, and receptiveness. In this soft power dynamic, immigration policy is very critical.

Immigration policies under Trump have put pressure on the attractiveness of the United States as a land of opportunity due to restrictive and discriminatory immigration policies. Such policies as Muslim ban and separation of families not only affected the communities concerned, but also attracted massive criticism on the international scale, which undermined the moral authority of America (Chacón & Davis, 2018). According to the framework of Nye, such policies will make the U.S. values less appealing, and the U.S. will not be able to lead through persuasion and example.

#### Key Assumptions:

- Attractiveness and legitimacy of a country influence the global influence of that country.
- Immigration policy reflects the great national values and ideals.
- Anti-immigrant policies damage the international goodwill and faith in U.S. leadership.

Constructivism points out that the international system is not entirely influenced by the material capabilities alone but ideational aspects like identity, norms and discourse also influence it (Wendt, 1999). According to this perspective, a state acts, and the immigration policy is not only a rational choice, but also a way in which a state perceives itself and how it is viewed by the other states.

Trump policies and narratives rebuild U.S. identity against outsiders, making immigrants appear as invaders and a limited understanding of Americanness. These identity formations influence the way the U.S. relates with other nations and the international organizations. In one such instance, the perception of immigration as a security menace justifies unilateralism and exit of global obligations and responsibilities, which subsequently changes the impressions of world legitimacy of Americans (Hollifield, 2004; Acharya, 2014).

Of specific relevance to the analysis of the performative nature of the Trumpian nationalism, the application of language, symbolism, and policy to rebrand the U.S. both domestically and internationally is useful in constructivism.

#### Key Assumptions:

- Identities and social constructions determine state interests and policies.
- The discussion of immigration has an impact on the international perceptions and relations.
- The U.S. reconstructs its international status using the household policy and political discourse.

#### Theoretical Synthesis

Put collectively, these theories help construct a comprehensive theory of how the immigration agenda of Trump can be understood as a system of domestic policies, but as a symbolic, strategic expression of nationalism whose effects are felt internationally. This combined model allows making a subtle insight into the effects of immigration restrictions on not only the internal state processes but also redesigns international political framework within which the United States is incorporated.

#### Research Methodology

This research paper will follow a qualitative case study design under the rubric of interpretive political economy, which aims at discovering the way in which power, ideology, and institutional activities influence the conduct of both local and international policy. The interpretive lens makes it possible to critically analyze the process of building, justifying, and receiving immigration policies of the Trump administration not only in the United States but also abroad. Through the Trump era, as a critical case, the research would make generalized conclusions regarding the issue of nationalism and immigration as well as world leadership.

The study uses a number of data sources to promote triangulation as well as enrich the interpretive validity. They are: (1) official policy documents and executive orders like the Executive order 13769 (the so-called travel ban) and border enforcement memoranda; (2) data on the public opinion and international reaction indicators, especially surveys and diplomatic statements giving an evaluation of adherence to international standards; (3) media and diplomatic rhetoric, which includes press reports, speeches, and international opinions on the matter, and (4) reports of the international community organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International

The study uses discourse analysis, content analysis, and critical policy evaluation in order to analyze these data. The narrative and the rhetoric that Trump and his administration have employed to make immigration out to be a threat to national identity and national security are interrogated through the use of discourse analysis (Chilton and Schaffner, 2011). The content analysis is employed to compare the media and diplomatic reactions systematically, whereas the critical evaluation of the policy is employed to address the coincidence or deviation of these policies with the international standards of human rights (Boswell, 2007). All of these tools can be brought together to provide a detailed interpretive framework to understand both the political economy of Trump-era immigration policy and its international implications.

#### Immigration Policies by Trump: Nationalism in Action.

The attitude of the Trump administration towards immigration was a stark contrast to the existence of the bipartisan policies aimed at balancing between the humanitarian duty and the enforcement one in the past. At the core of its policy orientation were very controversial and symbolically powerful actions that strengthened an exclusionary vision of American identity. The Muslim travel ban was one of the most characteristic actions since it was officially declared as the executive order 13769 in January 2017, and it prevented the entry of people of many Muslim-majority nations based on national security concerns.

Although several legal changes and cases have been proposed and altered, the ban was later legally supported by the Supreme Court in 2018, cementing the administration in its security-first immigration agenda (Pierce & Selee, 2017).

Just as important was the family separation policy by the administration at the border between the U.S and Mexico which was under the zero-tolerance directive. Children were taken away against their will, causing the world to condemn the practice and psychological damage to the affected families in a long-term basis. The administration stated that it was aimed at deterring, but the policy worked to sensationalize the story of border control as national salvation (Human Rights Watch, 2018). In a similar manner, efforts to repeal Deferred Action to Childhood Arrivals (DACA) also represented a larger ideological approach to unauthorized immigrants, including the ones who grew up in the U.S. since their childhood. Although the rescission was stopped temporarily through judicial intervention, the initiative demonstrated a measured balancing of nationalist imperatives and dismissal of previous inclusiveness models.

The securitization of immigration was also demonstrated in other means like border militarization and the limitation of eligibility of asylum. Physical barriers, the use of the National Guard troop, and coercion on Mexico to keep northbound migrants strengthened a fortress-like image of sovereignty (Rosenblum, 2020). Also, grounds to asylum, especially in gang and domestic violence victims, were radically reduced as a sign of abandoning international refugee commitments.

These policies can be explained in terms of nationalist and populist rhetoric, which depicted immigrants as an existential threat to the American economy, culture, and the security. The campaign and presidency of Trump were characterized by the discourses around returning the control, and the revival of an allegedly lost national identity (Moffitt, 2016). The practice was part of a larger international trend where populist leaders seek to establish in-groups and out-groups through migration to establish their legitimacy by finding an internal or external threat. The securitization of immigration, according to which it is not a social or economic question, or an economic issue, but a national security threat-enabled the administration to be able to legitimize extraordinary actions and executive overreach (Chilton & Schaffer, 2011). All these policies together became the operationalization of nationalism, transforming immigration into a political source of control and a remaking of the national belonging.

### Domestic and International responses

The immigration policies of President Trump created strong polarization domestically, which caused a vast amount of legal, political, and social reaction. Although his fundamental base championed the hard line approach of the administration as the reestablishment of national sovereignty and the rule of law, critics considered this an abuse of the American principles of democracy and a humanitarian crisis waiting to happen (Pierce & Selee, 2017). Criminal issues were fast and considerable. The first travel ban of 2017 was immediately prevented by several federal courts, which resulted in several amendments and the most recent part that the Supreme Court approved in *Trump v. Hawaii* (2018). On the same note, the attempts to revoke DACA were challenged in court, and, in 2020, the Supreme Court made the ruling that the termination was procedurally invalid. Outside the courtroom, civil society activism had reached an all-time high, involving mass demonstrations, like the Families Belong Together rallies, backing for sanctuary cities, and grassroots campaigning to offer legal assist, which demonstrates the durability of immigrant rights activism in an ever-ferocious context (Nicholls, 2019).

Trump was highly criticized internationally, especially by long time U.S. allies, global institutions and human rights

organizations about his immigration policies. The travel restrictions, family disruption, and asylum limits were broadly criticized by the United Nations, the European Union and international non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International that termed the policies xenophobic and contrary to the international standards of refugees (UNHCR, 2018). Such changes resulted in the great loss of U.S. international positions since international polls revealed a decreasing level of preference towards the U.S. in Europe, Latin America, and in some parts of Asia (Pew Research Center, 2020). Besides, the U.S. exiting of multilateral agreements and institutions such as the Global Compact for Migration was seen as a renunciation of global leadership on humanitarian challenges, leaving a leadership vacuum that is rapidly occupied by competitors such as China.

Diplomatic consequences did not interfere with reputational damage. A number of countries, such as Canada, Germany, and Mexico, explicitly dissociated themselves with the U.S. strategy, which made the normative divergence stronger. This tense collaboration on greater geopolitical and security matters especially on platforms where there should be a unanimity regarding democratic values and human rights. Overall, the global response to the Trump immigration policies was a reminder of the conflict between the policy of nationalism and the demand to lead as a moral role model, thus diminishing the reputation of the U.S. as a champion of liberal international standards.

### Major Research Findings Discussion

The loss of U.S. soft power can be considered as one of the most obvious effects of the Trump immigration policies. Policy views on refugee caps, visa rejections, and family separation have been broadly criticized by allies and international organizations and also the global population (Nye, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). As an example, European leaders pushed Trump-era migration policy away, which made it difficult to work on more comprehensive foreign policy matters across the Atlantic (Ikenberry, 2018).

The immigration policy of Trump has led to diplomatic strains between the United States and Mexico, Canada, and Muslim world states. During the first term, the travel ban imposed on the majority of the Muslim states caused numerous protests and diplomatic condemnations (Chacon & Davis, 2018). During his second term, it has been reported that the U.S.-Latin American collaboration in countering drug trafficking and border control remains poor because of unilateral deportation (Meissner, 2024).

The nationalist immigration policies of Trump attract the domestic audience, which questions the ideals of globalization and multiculturalism (Mounk, 2018). But this populist discourse creates a worldview abroad of the U.S. as unfriendly, unreliable and withdrawing itself internationally. The decreased interest in resettlement of refugees by the U.S. such as one has made nations such as Canada and Germany to occupy the vacuum thereby usurping leadership (UNHCR, 2023).

The policies of Trump have left a bureaucratic legacy that will be difficult to overcome even by the administration of the future due to appointments to immigration courts, bureaucratic restructuring, and new regulations (Pierce and Bolter, 2020). All these structural shifts imply that regardless of the change in political leadership, America will remain to play the same role in the world due to these deep-rooted policies.

### Conclusion, summary and recommendations

#### Conclusion

The study affirms that the immigration policies by Donald Trump during his first and second terms are not merely a domestic program, but a nationalist recreation of American identity with far reaching international implications. The soft power of the U.S., alliances and the position of the U.S. as a

normative power in global governance have been undermined due to such policies. The nationalist immigration policies are indicative of internal socio-political realignments, in addition to having an exclusionary image to the international community, which diminishes the flexibility of diplomacy and international impact.

### Summary

- This paper examined the fusion of immigration, nationalism and power through the presidencies of Donald Trump.
- The policies espoused by Trump are characterized by a high level of nativism and securitization on immigration policies.
- These policies are driven and resulted by nationalism.
- On a global scale, the changes have been a blow to the image of America and undermined multilateral participation.
- Without adoptive and comprehensive immigration policies, the U.S. may lose a long-term stay in the world leadership position.

### Recommendations

- i. The future governments need to overturn the exclusionary policies and restore confidence among the international partners by following UNHCR and international asylum protocols.
- ii. Encourage the idea of public diplomacy, which attributes the advantages of immigration as a means of regaining moral authority and international attractiveness (Nye, 2020).
- iii. Reconnect with the global bodies such as Global Compact for Migration and regional partnerships to work together to eliminate the causes of migration.
- iv. Create nonpartisan control systems to evaluate the social, economic and diplomatic effects of immigration laws.
- v. Connect immigration determinations to greater foreign policy objectives so that diplomatic unity exists between practical enforcement in the US and international leadership.
- vi. Invest in civic education and counter-propaganda that reveal the socio-economic myths of anti-immigration populism.

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