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IMMIGRATION-SECURITY NEXUS AS A DRIVER IN THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN 2024

Abstract

Although the vast majority of public opinion regards the economy as a key issue in the American presidential campaign in 2024, migration is just behind. Related to many other aspects of public affairs such as the labor market situation, public spending, identity, etc. is also strongly associated with security, especially the unauthorized (illegal) ones. The paper aims to present the immigration-security nexus discourse in the American presidential campaign analyzed through the Securitization and Just Securitization theoretical framework proposed by the Copenhagen School and the critical approach of Rita Floyd. Results show strong politicization and securitization of immigration in the case of all three candidates as well as tightening anti-immigration policies because of the growing migratory threat in the US even in the case of previously more pro-immigrant candidates.

Keywords

migration, immigration, refugees, security, presidential campaign, USA, Trump, Biden, Harris

Introduction. The United States as a “migration state”

As a hegemon, the United States is an exemplary “migration state”¹. It has more immigrants than any country in the world. More than one million have arrived in the US per year over the last decade². While historically considered a leader in refugee responsibility-sharing, the shifts in its policies and discourse after the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump changed refugee protection norms, such as “non-refoulement, non-detention, non-penalization, non-discrimination, and responsibility-sharing”³.

The US government has historically contributed around one-third of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) budget and served as the largest provider of annual refugee resettlement quotas worldwide⁴. Many governments “copy and paste” US approaches in constructing their immigration policies⁵.

Before 2017, the United States voluntarily contributed to responsibility-sharing⁶. Bipartisan support for resettlement among Republicans and Democrats signaled refugee protection standards possessed some level of normative power. In the Cold War period, Democrats connected refugee resettlement efforts with liberal ideological focuses on fairness and compassion. Republicans similarly constructed their approach as caretaking of “suffering people”⁷. In 1980 Refugee Act passed through Congress with bipartisan support, codifying the Refugee Convention into US law⁸. The 9/11 attacks resulted in annual refugee admissions declining but at the same time, Republicans joined with Democrats to establish the Bipartisan Congressional Refugee Caucus and worked together to pressure the administration of George W. Bush to increase resettlement slots⁹.

The 2016 elections resulted in an elite polarization over refugee responsibility-sharing and the applicability of international protection. As Democrats elevated commitments to multicultural diversity, and the protection of vulnerable groups, including refugees and asylum seekers, Republicans moved toward Donald Trump’s slogan America First logic where obligations toward refugees were understood as antagonistic to national interests and identity. This polarization had important effects

1 J. F. Hollifield, *The Emerging Migration State*, “International Migration Review” 2004, 38 (3), pp. 885–912.

2 A. Budiman, *Key Finding about U.S. Immigrants*, Pew Research Centre, 2020.

3 K. Banerjee, C. D. Smith, *Continuity and Change in North American Migration Governance*, in: K. Banerjee, C. D. Smith (eds.), “Migration Governance in North America. Policy, Politics, and Community”, New York 2024.

4 A. Suhrke, A. Garnier, *The Moral Economy of the Resettlement Regime*, in: A. Garnier, L. L. Jubilit, K. B. Sandvik (eds.), “In Refugee Resettlement: Power, Politics, and Humanitarian Governance”, New York 2018.

5 D. Ghezalbash, *Refuge Lost: Asylum Law in an Interdependent World*, New York 2018. J. I. Goldenziel, *When Law Migrates: Refugees in Comparative International Law*, in: A. Roberts, P. B. Stephan, P.-H. Verdier, M. Versteeg (eds.), “Comparative International Law”, New York 2018.

6 A. Suhrke, A. Garnier, *The Moral Economy ...*, p. 247

7 A. Coen, *Trump, Biden, and the US Role in the International Refugee Regime*, in: K. Banerjee, C. D. Smith (eds.), “Migration Governance in North America. Policy, Politics, and Community”, New York 2024.

8 Government Publishing Office. Public Law 96-212 – Refugee Act of 1980.

9 Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, *Assessing the New Normal: Liberty and Security for the Post-September 11 United States*, 2003, p. 45.

on the global refugee regime. Trump and his supporters appealed to conservative emphases on “toughness,” masculinity, resistance to racial pluralism, and skepticism toward international organizations¹⁰. It resulted in cuts to resettlement, halts in funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and policies discriminating against Muslim refugees. The “travel ban”¹¹ and use of “enhanced vetting”¹² to restrict admissions from Muslim-majority countries enabled the administration to reduce Muslim refugee admissions by roughly 87 percent¹³. Conservative and Republican interpretations presented restrictions as safeguarding “the American people” and “the West” from terrorism and “radical Islam”¹⁴. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 reinforced US violations of non-detention and non-refoulement. Trump administration expelled over 200,000 people across the US-Mexico border – including thousands of unaccompanied migrant children¹⁵. It resulted also in refusing to accept asylum applications at ports of entry. To justify these practices, the Trump administration invoked Title 42 (from 1944), which allows the Surgeon General to prohibit the entry of individuals when “there is a serious danger of the introduction of communicable disease”¹⁶. Trump defended his approach as that of “a wartime president” and framed border closures as necessary to “win this war” and “defeat this enemy”¹⁷. Such logic presented the coronavirus as an external rather than internal threat and encouraged conservative audiences to link southern border crossers with dangers to public health¹⁸.

The newly elected Joe Biden administration restored funding to UNRWA and proclaimed “Ending Discriminatory Bans on Entry to the United States”, as well as raised annual refugee admissions ceilings¹⁹. Through Operation Allies Welcome, the administration resettled 88,500 Afghan nationals via a humanitarian corridor in the

10 K. Aggestam, J. True, *Political Leadership and Gendered Multilevel Games in Foreign Policy*, “International Affairs” 2021, 97 (2); U. Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War*, Chapel Hill 2020, p. 108-109; A. Coen, *Trump, Biden...*

11 Executive Order 13769, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” (commonly referred to as the travel ban) M. Waslin, *The Use of Executive Orders and Proclamations to Create Immigration Policy: Trump in Historical Perspective*, “Journal on Migration and Human Security” 2020, 8 (1).

12 Federal Register, “Proclamation 9645 of September 24, 2017 – Enhancing Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public-Safety Threats”, 27.09.2017.

13 M. Chishtii, S. Pierce, *Despite Trump Invitation to Stop Taking Refugees, Red and Blue States Alike Endorse Resettlement*, Migration Policy Institute, Washington 29.01.2020.

14 A. Blake, Blake A., *Whip Count: Here’s where Republicans Stand on Trump’s Controversial Travel Ban*, “The Washington Post”, 31.01.2017. E. Dumain, S.C. Rep. Jeff Duncan Uses Provocative Image to Underscore Threat of ‘Radical Islamic Terrorism’, “The Post and Courier”, 17.06.2017.

15 J. Barnes, S. M. Makinda, *A Threat to Cosmopolitan Duties? How covid-19 Has Been Used as a Tool to Undermine Refugee Rights*, “International Affairs” 2021, 97 (6).

16 Government Publishing Office, “42 U.S. Code § 265 – Suspension of Entries and Imports from Designated Places to Prevent Spread of Communicable Diseases”, 1 July 1944.

17 White House Archives, “Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing”, 18.03.2020.

18 A. Coen, *Trump, Biden...*

19 Federal Register, “Proclamation 10141 of January 20, 2021 – Ending Discriminatory Bans on Entry to the United States”, 25.01.2021.

year following the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan²⁰. However, attempts to normalize their status through the 2022 Afghan Adjustment Act were blocked by a small group of Republican senators in Congress²¹. Biden administration presented the emergency resettlement initiatives for Afghans and Ukrainians²² as proof of the recommitment to refugee responsibility-sharing. In the context of policies toward asylum seekers arriving along the southern border shared with Mexico, however, the first two years of Biden's term reflected more continuity than change. The efforts to terminate Title 42 were stalled amid Republican-led lawsuits and court orders, keeping the policy in place²³. The window of exception to Title 42 granted to Ukrainian nationals in the weeks following Russia's 2022 invasion enabled roughly 20,000 Ukrainians to enter the United States through its southern border with Mexico while asylum seekers of other nationalities were turned away²⁴.

Immigration as a threat to the national security of the United States

In the 2024 Gallup poll immigration surges to the top of the most important problem list with the number of 28 percent of respondents indicating this option in the survey before such threats as poor condition of the economy, inflation, or poverty. It was the highest position of immigration as a threat since 1981 when Gallup added immigration threat to its survey. In the question of immigration as a critical threat, as such immigration was indicated by 55 percent of respondents²⁵. As researchers from the PRRI think-tank note, most Americans still don't perceive immigrants as a threat, but those receptive to the "threat" narrative are predictably more anti-immigrant. At the same time, people's views on this topic are significantly affected by whether they know people who are immigrants or are immigrants themselves. Those who know someone who is a documented immigrant are less likely than those who do not know any to say newcomers threaten traditional American customs and values (36 percent vs. 49 percent)²⁶. This demonstrates that the assessment of the presence of immigrants in the US is linked to emotions, stereotypes and prejudices rather than an actual judgement of the situation. And this is how it shapes the political discourse on the migration-security nexus.

Immigrants are accused of increasing crime in receiving country, although data for both the 20th and 21st centuries contradict the stereotype that they are more likely

20 US Department of Homeland Security, "Operation Allies Welcome Announces Departure of All Afghan Nationals from the National Conference Center Safe Haven in Leesburg, VA", 27.09.2022.

21 K. Gypson, *U.S. Lawmakers Fail to Pass Afghan Adjustment Act by Year's End*, "VOA", 20.12.2022.

22 Over 82,000 Ukrainian nationals were admitted into the United States as part of the Biden administration's Uniting for Ukraine program. USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services), "Fiscal Year 2022 Progress Report", December 2022.

23 A. Coen, *Trump, Biden...*

24 J. Rodriguez, J. Batalova, *Ukrainian Immigrants in the United States*, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, 20.06.2022; A. Coen, *Trump, Biden...*

25 J. M. Jones, *Immigration Surges to Top of Most Important Problem List*, Gallup, 27.02.2024.

26 PRRI, *Are Immigrants a Threat? Most Americans Don't Think So, but Those Receptive to the "Threat" Narrative Are Predictably More Anti-immigrant*, 01.17.2023.

to commit crime than US-born²⁷. For example, research by the CATO Institute in Texas shows that immigrants were 37.1 percent less likely to be convicted of a crime.²⁸ However, the mere fact that crimes are committed by ‘strangers’ is perceived as a threat *per se* by the majority of the population, which is based on the belief that if immigrants did not arrive, there would be less crime overall. Immigration is also cited as a cause of unemployment, reduced wages, and unfair competition in the labor market. However, given the complex relationships and multiple factors affecting the economy and labor market, it is difficult to identify obvious correlations here. For example, the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, in a report posted in 2024 on its website, indicates that the “unprecedented U.S. immigration surge boosts job growth, output” and predicts growth in the US economy precisely due to immigration: “The labor force in 2033 will be larger by 5.2 million people, mostly because of higher net immigration, according to CBO (Congressional Budget Office) estimates. As a result of the immigration surge, GDP will be higher by about \$8.9 trillion and federal government tax revenues by \$1.2 trillion over the 2024-34 period. Deficits will be lower by \$900 billion²⁹”. Experts point out that the US, like other Western democracies, is becoming an ageing society, with an economy dependent on immigration. Cross-sectional studies, conducted by the NBER (National Bureau of Economic Research), indicate that „immigration, thanks to native-immigrant complementarity and college skill content of immigrants, had a positive and significant effect between +1.7 to +2.6 percent on wages of less educated native workers, over the period 2000-2019 and no significant wage effect on college-educated natives³⁰. The cultural risks that immigration can generate (not so much in terms of national identity, but rather, for example, attitudes towards democratic values or the rule of law), as raised by some quarters, are also not borne out by research and statistics, although at the same time there is a growing number of supporters of the Cultural Replacement Theory – a conspiracy theory touted by white supremacists that claims nonwhite people are invading or immigrating to the United States to push white voters and citizens into the minority. Three in ten Americans (30 percent) agree (completely or mostly) with the statement “immigrants are invading our country and replacing our cultural and ethnic background”³¹.

What is of most concern, however, and, importantly, generates tangible costs for the US, is illegal (unauthorized, undocumented) migration. According to The Department of Homeland Security, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) encountered 11 million unauthorized migrants trying to enter the US between October 2019 and June

27 J. Garsd, *Immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than U.S.-born Americans, studies find*, 03.08.2024; R. Abramitzky, L. Platt Boustan, E. Jácome, S. Pérez, J. D. Torres, *Law-abiding immigrants: the incarceration gap between immigrants and the US-born, 1870–2020*, Working Paper 31440, National Bureau of Economic Research; A. Flagg, *Is There a Connection Between Undocumented Immigrants and Crime?*, The Marshall Project, 2019.

28 A. Nowrasteh, A. C. Forrester, M. Landgrave, *Illegal Immigration and Crime in Texas*, “Cato Working Paper” 2020, No. 60.

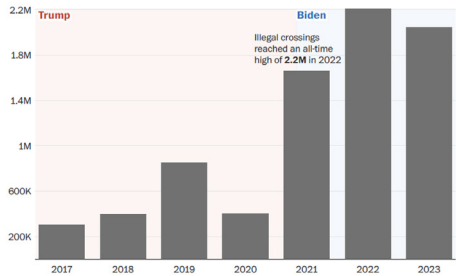
29 P. M. Orrenius, A. Pranger, M. Zavodny I. Dhillon, *Unprecedented U.S. immigration surge boosts job growth, output*, 02.07.2024.

30 A. Caiumi, G. Peri, *Immigration's Effect on US Wages and Employment Redux*, Working Paper, April 2024.

31 PRRI, *Are Immigrants a Threat?*...

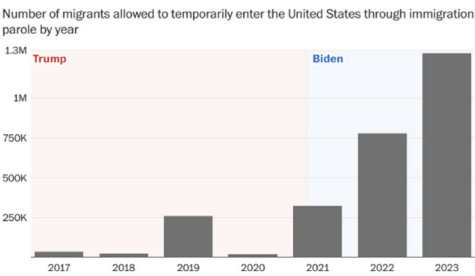
2024³². That’s equivalent to the population of North Carolina, the ninth most populous state in the US. The latest figures from the Department of Homeland Security and Pew Research indicate that there are around 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the US, a number that has remained relatively stable since 2005. Most are long-term residents – nearly four-fifths have been in the country for more than a decade³³. Illegal border crossings soared to record levels under President Biden, averaging 2 million per year from 2021 to 2023. The migrants have arrived in every state in the country, overwhelming cities such as New York, Chicago, and Denver as newcomers seek shelter and aid. Crossings dropped sharply in the spring and summer of 2024 after the Biden administration tightened border controls and closed off migrants’ access to the asylum system. Still, apprehensions exceeded 1.3 million during the first nine months of the 2024 fiscal year.³⁴ As well as a number of temporarily admitted migrants (Parole procedure) and refugees granted international protection³⁵. At the same time, the number of deportations and returns decreased during Biden’s presidency.

Illegal crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border



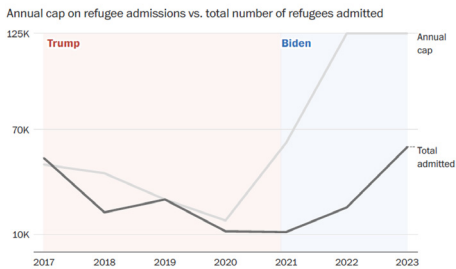
Years shown by fiscal calendar starting on Oct. 1
Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics

Parole



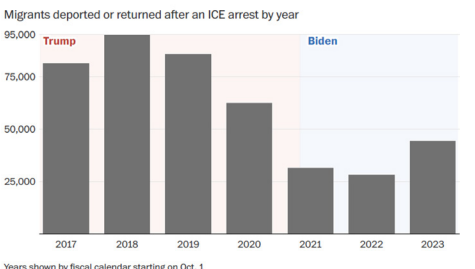
Years shown by fiscal calendar starting on Oct. 1
Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics

Refugees



Source: Department of State, Migration Policy Institute

U.S. interior immigration enforcement



Years shown by fiscal calendar starting on Oct. 1
Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics

Source: Miroff N, Sacchetti M, Frostenson S, Trump vs. Biden on immigration: 12 charts comparing U.S. border security, “The Washington Post”, 11.02.2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/2024/02/11/trump-biden-immigration-border-compared/>

32 R. Abramitzky, L. Platt Boustan, E. Jácome, S. Pérez, J. D. Torres, *Law-abiding immigrants...*
 33 B. Debusmann, M. Wendling, *Could Trump really deport one million immigrants?*, BBC, 16.08.2024.
 34 N. Miroff, M. Sacchetti, S. Frostenson, *Trump vs. Biden on immigration: 12 charts comparing U.S. border security*, “The Washington Post”, 11.02.2024.
 35 Parole, in U.S. immigration law, is an executive power that allows the government to temporarily migrants who don’t qualify for a visa.

Since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003, the federal government has spent an estimated \$409 billion on the agencies that carry out immigration enforcement, and tens of billions more on border barriers and other immigration enforcement-related infrastructure projects³⁶. Immigration enforcement spending falls into two issue areas: border security and interior enforcement. Border spending includes staffing and resources needed for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), an agency of DHS working at and between United States ports of entry. Interior enforcement is primarily focused on staffing and resources for the US. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), also part of DHS, apprehends noncitizens in the interior of the country, detain or monitor those undergoing removal proceedings, and deport those ordered removed. Currently (2024), ICE and CBP employ nearly 88,000 people in total. The number of U.S. Border Patrol agents nearly doubled from 10,717 in 2003 to 19,357 in 2022. Additionally, the number of people working at ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) nearly tripled from 2003 to 2024. In 2024, ICE was funded to employ 7,711 staff at ERO.

All these factors mean that the migration threat has found a prominent place in the 2024 presidential campaign.

Materials and methods

The paper analyzes official speeches and statements of Donald Trump, Joe Biden, and Kamala Harris from the period 2023-2024 related to immigration to the US. The analysis uses the theoretical framework of the Securitization Theory and the Just Securitization Theory to justify the use of the security discourse in the context of migration.

Proposed by the Copenhagen School (Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jeep de Wilde) the Securitization Theory shows the rhetorical structure of decision-makers when framing an issue and attempting to convince an audience to lift the issue above politics. This is what is called a speech act – ‘by saying the words, something is done, like betting, giving a promise, naming a ship’³⁷. An issue becomes securitized when an audience agrees on the nature of the threat and supports taking extraordinary measures. If the audience rejects the securitizing actor's speech act, it only represents a securitization move and the securitization has failed. When securitization is accepted by the audience, extraordinary measures to combat the threat might be implemented. This approach has generated criticism from some scholars, who recommend understanding securitization as a long process of ongoing social constructions and negotiation between various audiences and speakers.³⁸. Otherwise, over-securi-

36 American Immigration Council, *The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security*, August 2024.

37 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security: A new framework for analysis*, Boulder, London 1998, p. 26.

38 C. Eroukhanoff, *Securitisation Theory: An Introduction*, 2018, p. 2.

tization might appear and the use of extraordinary measures might be applied without justification.³⁹

Rita Floyd⁴⁰, not only pointed out the gaps in classical Securitization Theory but also proposed her normative approach, which resulted in Just Securitization Theory (JST). The main differences with the theory proposed by the Copenhagen School concern first of all the existential threat itself, which, according to Floyd, should be objective (recognized as such, thanks to studies of the intentions and power of potential aggressors). Secondly, according to Floyd, it does not matter whether the recipients of the speech act – the audience⁴¹ – accept it or not (which for the Copenhagen School was crucial) since the essence is action, i.e. the practice of security, implementation of specific policies, and not merely the acceptance of their description⁴². Figuratively, this can be represented by the equation:

$$\text{ST: SECURITIZATION} = \text{SECURITIZATION MOVEMENT} + \text{AUDIENCE ACCEPTANCE};$$

where: the securitization movement should be understood as a justification for an existential threat

$$\text{JST: SECURITIZATION} = \text{SECURITIZATION MOVEMENT} + \text{SECURITY PRACTICE}$$

According to Floyd, securitization occurs not “when the audience accepts the justification of the existential threat, but when instead there is a change in behavior by the subject, which is justified by that subject using a reference to the declared threat. Securitization becomes successful by the fact that it has occurred, without the need to break normally applicable rules or introduce extraordinary measures”³⁹. Securitization is successful only if the identification of the threat justifying the securitization move is followed by a change in behavior (action) by the securitizing actor (or someone else at his behest) and if the action taken is justified by the securitizing actor’s reference to the threat identified and declared in the securitization movement. The ultimate object of reference is the human being, and security is not so much (not only) survival as it is the possibility of development (well-being).

39 P. Polko, *P. Bezpieczeństwo w dyskursie politycznym RP (1989-2022)*, Warszawa 2022.

40 R. Floyd, *Just and unjust desecuritization*, in: T. Balzacq (ed.), “Contesting Security: Strategies and Logics”, London 2014.

41 R. Floyd, *Extraordinary or ordinary emergency measures: what, and who, defines the ‘success’ of securitization?*, “Cambridge Review of International Affairs” 2016, 29 (2).

42 R. Floyd, *Security and the environment: securitization theory and US environmental security policy*, Cambridge 2010.

43 R. Floyd, *The promise of theories of just securitization*, [in:] J. Nyman, A. Burke (eds.), “Security Studies: A new research agenda”, London 2016.

Results

Three candidates took part in the 2024 presidential campaign in the US: representing Republican Party former president Donald Trump, and representing Democratic Party President Joe Biden (by July 21st), and vice-president Kamala Harris (after Biden's resignation). Donald Trump was the one, who shaped the migration-security nexus with his well-known narrative that immigrants are a permanent, multidimensional, and very dangerous threat, that should be stopped by any measures, including extraordinary ones. Biden and Harris were rather to respond or react to Trump's proposals.

Donald Trump's proposals refer directly to the containment of migration in every form, except for the limited, controlled mobility of high-skilled migrants. He promised to reverse Joe Biden's liberalization decisions, strengthening the system for detecting and deterring illegal migration, and – in a variation of the maximum – expelling all illegal migrants at the expense of the state. In particular, he has announced to restore his 2019 “remain in Mexico” program (which forced non-Mexican asylum seekers attempting to enter the US at the southern border to wait in Mexico for the resolution of their cases), to reinstate the COVID-19-era Title 42 policy, which allowed U.S. border authorities to quickly expel migrants back to Mexico without the chance to claim asylum and to use record border crossings and trafficking of fentanyl and children as reasons for the emergency moves (10.09.2024)⁴⁴ He openly described the idea of implementation of travel bans on migrants from certain countries or with certain religious groups, like the Gaza Strip, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen and “anywhere else that threatens our security.”

Donald Trump also promises to launch the largest deportation effort in U.S. history⁴⁵, focusing on criminals but aiming to send millions back to their home countries, even if deporting migrants would be “a bloody story”. That's why he did not plan to build new migrant detention camps: “There wouldn't be that much of a need for them” because migrants would be rapidly removed, if needed by the extended activity of the National Guard and the use of the little-known 1789 Alien Enemies Act, to deport immigrants with criminal records and suspected gang members. He claimed to be determined to do this, even when experts estimated that the total bill for one million or more deportations would run into tens or even hundreds of billions of dollars⁴⁶ and even it might affect negatively the American economy⁴⁷.

44 T. Hesson, *How would Trump crackdown on immigration in a second term?*, “Reuters”, 10.09.2024.

45 Trump stated in September 2023 that if reelected, he intends to implement the largest mass deportation of undocumented immigrants in American history, referencing a 1950s operation to deport undocumented immigrants under President Eisenhower known as “Operation Wetback.” See more: M. Hackman, *Fact Check: Examining Trump's Immigration Claims*, “The Wall Street Journal”, 11.09.2024.

46 B. Debusmann, M. Wendling, *Could Trump really deport...*

47 Previous stabs at deportation in America have harmed the economy, depressed wages and hiring, and eliminated jobs, says Maribel Hastings of America's Voice, a pro-immigration reform organization. Trump's deportation plan, if successful, would remove 5% of the U.S. workforce. See more: D. Gentry, *Trump, project 2025 embrace ruinous immigration plan, critics say*, “Nevada Current”, 10.09.2024.

The former US president also declared, that he would seek to end automatic citizenship for children born in the US to immigrants living in the country illegally, even if such an action would trigger legal challenges. He also declared to back giving green cards to foreign students who graduate from American colleges or junior colleges. His second presidency also will result in the stop of programs that have allowed migrants with US sponsors to enter the country and obtain work permits, including Ukrainians and Afghans. He has called Biden's programs for these immigrants an "outrageous abuse of parole authority." He also declared to termination of Temporary Protected Status designations. He tried to eliminate most Temporary Protected Status enrollment during his first term but was slowed by legal aspects. He also planned to end DACA – a program that grants deportation relief and work permits to "Dreamer" immigrants brought to the US illegally as children. His previous trials of termination of DACA were stopped by the Supreme Court in June 2020.

All these activities were present as the only solutions to build "a merit-based immigration system that protects American labor and promotes American values (...) Prioritizing border security and immigration enforcement, including detention and deportation, is critical if we are to regain control of the border, repair the historic damage done by the Biden Administration, return to a lawful and orderly immigration system, and protect the homeland from terrorism and public safety threats" – Trump claimed⁴⁸. "Not one more innocent American life should be lost to migrant crime" – declared.⁴⁹

The language he uses to describe migration is extremely emotional and negative, and references to security are the main axis of the narrative: immigration resulted in *growing humanitarian and security crisis at our southern border. We are out of space to hold them and we have no way to promptly return them back home to their country. Immigrants themselves, are poisoning the blood of our country. That's what they've done. They poison — mental institutions and prisons all over the world. Not just in South America. Not just the three or four countries that we think about. But all over the world they're coming into our country — from Africa, from Asia, all over the world. They're pouring into our country.*⁵⁰ *They're rough people, in many cases from jails, prisons, from mental institutions, insane asylums. You know, insane asylums — that's 'Silence of the Lambs' stuff. (...) They're not humans, they're not humans, they're animals' ... Nancy Pelosi told me that. She said, 'Please don't use the word animals when you're talking about these people.' I said, 'I'll use the word animal because that's what they are.'*⁵¹ *When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best (...) 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.*⁵²

48 D. Gentry, *Trump, project 2025...*

49 B. Barrow, J. Colvin, *Trump escalates his immigration rhetoric with baseless claim about Biden trying to overthrow the US*, "Associated Press", 03.03.2024.

50 December 16, 2023, New Hampshire rally.

51 April 2, 2024, Grand Rapids, Michigan, campaign event.

52 A. Paybarah, M. Cadenhead, *Watch Biden, Trump take on immigration, each other in border speeches*, "The Washington Post", 29.02.2024.

Some of Trump's most extreme plans, such as a suggestion to electrify a border wall, and add "spikes on top that could pierce human flesh," and a "water-filled trench, stocked with snakes or alligators"⁵³ are difficult to treat seriously.

Nor does Trump shy away from references to conspiracy theories and the usual lies about immigration. For example, he claimed that immigrants are coming from the world's prisons and mental institutions. It was an interpretation of the case of a Venezuelan prison gang, known as Tren de Aragua, that has started to make its way into the US along with a large wave of Venezuelan migration into the country, representing, however a very small fraction of overall migration. Among other false information provided by the former US president is, that immigrants are taking 100 percent of jobs from US citizens or that during Biden's presidency, 20 million people have entered the country – official data and estimations show the evidence for 10-11 million⁵⁴. But probably the most famous one was the story about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, stealing and eating dogs, cats, and other pets: "They're eating the pets of the people that live there."⁵⁵

Candidate of Democrats Joe Biden also referred to migration in his political campaign but in a different way than Donald Trump. In February 2024, at the same time, both candidates visited borderland with Mexico. While Trump commented on the situation that because of the immigration "vicious violation to our country was already underway", 300 hundred miles away Biden (in Brownsville, Texas) said, that: "the country needs a new, efficient and fair process for the government to consider asylum claims."⁵⁶ He visited one of the checkpoints where people are crossing the border legally. No danger or urgency was presented in the videos and photos reporting the visit (at the same time Trump walked by a wall of razor wire and a parade of military vehicles). Biden spoke with the officials inside the Border Patrol station decorated with American flags and was briefed about the challenges of "handling the surge of families, minors, adults coming into the United States." The discussion was about smugglers "taking advantage of these vulnerable populations and individuals that are coming across", and the need for more technology and manpower to help detect weapons and drugs at the border. No references to immigration as a threat to the US have been presented during the meeting. Biden thanked "people working hard at the border" and praised the work of Border Patrol agents, as well as immigration enforcement and asylum officers by declaring: "They're all doing incredible work under really tough conditions."⁵⁷ He also referred to his efforts on the legislation on the bipartisan border deal, which was to allow to hire of 1500 additional security

53 *Trump on immigration tearing apart immigrant families, communities, and the fabric of our nation*, American Civil Liberties Union, 2024.

54 M. Hackman, *Fact Check...*

55 A. Castillo, *Why Trump kept going back to immigration again and again*, "Los Angeles Times", 10.09.2024.

56 A. Paybarah, M. Cadenhead, *Watch Biden, Trump...*

57 *Ibid.*

agents and other officers⁵⁸ but failed in the voting in the Senate. The visit was also a nod to how the Biden administration views migration: as a regional and global issue, not just a US problem.⁵⁹

As the example shows, Biden also related migration and security but was focused on illegal migration and criminal activities such as smuggling, drugs, and trafficking instead of presenting immigration as a general threat to the US which should be stopped by any, also extraordinary measures. This approach was strongly criticized by Trump, who accused Biden of waging a “conspiracy to overthrow the United States of America” and called all Democrats a people “who promote illegal migration” because they want immigrants to vote for them in the next elections⁶⁰ In return, Biden likened the words of Donald Trump on immigrants “poisoning the blood of our country,” to those of Adolf Hitler.⁶¹

The clash between Trump and Biden in immigration policy resulted from the opposite policies towards migration. During Biden’s presidency, the administration slowly reversed some of Trump’s policies, such as the use of Title 42, and scrapped the “Remain in Mexico” program. It also created and expanded programs that help some immigrants enter the country legally as long as they have a financial sponsor in the US⁶². It also expanded a 2014 program that allows children in Central America to legally reunite with family members already in the US. Some of the administration’s decisions were controversial, such as introduced in 2023 *CBP One* cellphone application required to be used by asylum-seekers to make an appointment to request asylum at a port of entry. Pro-migrant activists accused the government of slowing down applications, but at the same time, The state of Texas sued the Biden administration saying the app encouraged illegal immigration.⁶³ In 2023 the administration also implemented a rule last year that disqualifies migrants from receiving asylum if they entered the country illegally,⁶⁴ what is considered an increase of border enforcement. David J. Bier, associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank, states that in many aspects border regime is higher than when Biden came into office after Donald Trump.⁶⁵ But this point of view is hardly present in the presidential debate on migration.

58 The bill proposed overhauling the nation’s asylum system to provide quicker answers to migrants and allow presidents to order immediate deportation of migrants at the border when immigration agents get overwhelmed. It includes hundreds of millions of dollars for border wall construction.

59 C. Long, S. M. Kim, J. Colvin, *On the Rio Grande, 300 miles apart, Biden and Trump try to use immigration to election advantage*, “Associated Press”, 01.03.2024.

60 B. Barrow, J. Colvin, *Trump escalates his immigration...*

61 G. Gibson, *Trump says immigrants are ‘poisoning the blood of our country.’ Biden campaign likens comments to Hitler*, NBS News, 12.17.2023.

62 U. J. García, M. Rubin, *In two Texas border towns, Biden and Trump push for different immigration approaches*, “The Texas Tribune”, 29.02.2024.

63 R. Santana, *Texas sues Biden administration over asylum rule, saying phone app encourages illegal immigration*, “Associated Press”, 24.05.2023.

64 Under US law, migrants have a right to apply for asylum regardless of how they enter the country.

65 U. J. García, M. Rubin, *In two Texas border...*

Kamala Harris, although was called by Donald Trump as the “border czar”, though her official role was not border enforcement, but to examine the root causes of migration from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. It didn’t stop Trump from claiming that she had three and a half years to fix the border but hadn’t done it.

Immigration is a difficult issue for a candidate of Democrats because polls have shown many Americans believe Trump will be more effective in controlling the border than Harris. That’s why in the debate with Donald Trump she pivoted from directly answering a question about why the Biden administration waited until six months before the election to take action on the border after arrivals reached record levels. Instead, Harris brought up her support for what she has called the “toughest border control bill in decades,” which would have added 1,500 border agents and resources to stem the flow of fentanyl and transnational gangs.⁶⁶

These words were opposite to her previous statements. It is worth remembering, that when running for vice president in 2020, Harris promised to close private immigration detention centers, limit deportations, and fight for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in the United States. But in 2024 she declared to sign into law the tough border compromise that Congress was unable to pass in 2024 after Donald Trump objected to it. That bill would have closed loopholes in the asylum process, giving the president greater authority to shut down the border when crossings are high and limiting parole of migrants, which allows them to temporarily enter the United States. Her 2024 campaign team has said that her position on border crossings is the same as the Biden administration, and that “unauthorized border crossings are illegal.” At the Democratic National Convention, she reiterated: “We can create an earned pathway to citizenship and secure our border.”⁶⁷ During her official visit to the US-Mexico border in September 2024 she repeated previous statements on the pledge to toughen border restrictions and “take it even further”⁶⁸. Migration is a difficult topic for Harris, as some Democrats have been frustrated that Harris and the Biden administration recently embraced restrictions on asylum that resemble Trump policies they once opposed. Harris has shifted from framing herself as an advocate for the undocumented to touting herself as a former border state prosecutor who will be more effective than Trump on the southern border, because of polls showing the importance of the topic of migration in the presidential campaign. That’s why in the Autumn of 2024 she pledged to impose some of the most restrictive immigration, asylum, and border policies in decades. If elected, Harris promised not only to curtail who’s able to claim asylum and pursue felony charges for illegal border crossings but declared to continue building a border wall as well. She argued, that her asylum restrictions proposals are better than Trump’s previous attempts because of new ways they offer people to enter the country legally to seek protection — through

66 A. Castillo, *Why Trump kept going back...*

67 M. Sacchetti, A. J. Rivera, A. Cheeseman, J. McDaniel, *Harris vs. Trump on immigration: Where they stand on the issue*, “The Washington Post”, 10.09.2024.

68 B. Whitaker, A. Chasan, M. Lieberman, R. Hartman, C. McDonald, M. Riley, *Kamala Harris defends record on immigration: “Solutions are at hand”*, CBS News, 07.10.2024.

an app and programs that allow certain populations to stay in the U.S. temporarily while they're applying to stay permanently. But at the same time, she resigned from the previous declaration to crack down on felony prosecutions of illegal border crossings and started to support extending rules that essentially cut off access to asylum to anyone who crosses the border illegally — forcing them back into Mexico or rapidly returning them to their home country.⁶⁹

Discussion and Conclusions

Migration was a trigger in the 2024 presidential campaign in the US. All three candidates referred strongly to the issue and related it to US national security. All of them proposed tougher measures and changes to legislation to deter illegal migration and facilitate the removal of people who have not been granted permission to stay in the US, including more spending on border control, improvement of border installations, and more legal opportunities to manage migration. However, they did it differently.

All three candidates politicized and securitized immigration. Donald Trump, Joe Biden, and Kamala Harris presented their proposals through the lens of national security. All solutions were declared to strengthen state security and protect citizens from threats posed by migration. They did it in a situation where reports and data gave no clear answer as to how dangerous migration to the US is and how it affects the state and society. The axis of the discussion was founded by the strong anti-immigrant policy of Donald Trump and affected previously more focus on sustainable migration management presented by Biden and Harris.

Securitization of immigration as presented by Donald Trump was based in many cases on stereotypes, prejudices, conspiracy theories, and lies. He used existing data and facts in a way most adjusted to his narratives with strong racist references and presented immigration as a multidimensional threat posed by criminals, smugglers, drug addicts, and mentally sick newcomers intended to harm the US and its citizens. In this version, securitization was unjust, because it was based on the false vision of existential threat.

In the case of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris campaigns, the migration-security nexus was presented differently in time. At the beginning of the campaign, both candidates were more focused on their activities related to changes in immigration policy introduced during Donald Trump's presidency. But in the end, their proposals were even stricter than his, even though part of their supporters were confused by this shift. It was probably the result of the polls showing the importance of immigration issues in the campaign as well as the public opinion trusting more Trump than Biden or Harris while talking about solving migration problems. The securitization narrative was conducted without references to conspiracy theories, stereotypes, prejudice, or lies, but in line with the vision of migration as a global, not only regional or

69 A. Thompson, S. W. Kight, *How Harris is getting Trump-y on immigration*, "Axios", 06.10.2024.

national problem and with a strong declaration of accepting limited and controlled immigration under certain conditions (as a response to the labor market needs).

In the case of both campaigns' a securitization move was made: immigration was presented as an existential threat (both with and without justification). As polls show, it was accepted by the audience. Securitizing practice is a matter of future decisions of the new US president. It should be expected, that in both cases (Trump or Harris) US immigration policy will be stricter and more focused on increased border protection and deportation of illegal migrants not granted residence status, also from vulnerable groups of immigrants.

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