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COMPARISON OF OBAMA'S AND TRUMP'S DISCOURSE ON ILLEGAL MIGRATION THROUGH THE PRISM OF SECURITISATION

The article examines the transformation of the discourse on illegal immigration as one of the central and controversial topics of American politics (2009-2021). The theoretical framework of the research is based on Ole Wæver's securitisation theory. The methodology is presented by a mixed-method approach that combines content and sentiment analysis. The main purpose of the quantitative method is to count the number of keywords defined by the authors in the official speeches of politicians. The objective of the qualitative method is to evaluate all the matches from the sample on a scale of "rigidity" in the contextual framework of political statements. The authors conclude that there is a considerable degree of difference in the rhetoric of Obama and Trump, with statements by the former being categorised as neutral or negative, and those by the latter being predominantly positive or neutral. The article contributes to closing the gap in existing research by providing a comprehensive analysis of the presidential discourse related to illegal immigration to the United States. In the final part of the article, the authors believe that the tendency to build a narrative about illegal immigration through the prism of securitisation will continue to be a characteristic feature of the new Trump, elected in 2024.

Keywords: securitisation, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, official discourse, illegal migration.

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Обама және Трамптың заңсыз көші-қон туралы дискурсын секьюритилендіру аясында салыстыру

Бұл зерттеу жұмысында 2009-2021 жылдар аралығында американдық саяси кеңістіктегі өзекті және даулы тақырыптардың бірі болып табылатын заңсыз көші-қон туралы дискурстың өзгеру үдерісі қарастырылады. Зерттеу жұмысының тұжырымдамалық негізі – Оле Вавердің секьюритилендіру концепциясына құрылған. Зерттеудің әдістемелік базасы ретінде контент- және сентимент-талдау әдістерін біріктіретін аралас әдісі таңдап алынды.

Сонымен қатар, зерттеуде қолданылған сандық әдістің негізгі мақсаты – саясаткерлердің ресми сөздерінде авторлар ұсынған кілт сөздердің санын есептеуге бағытталған. Ал, сапалық әдістің міндеті – саяси мәлімдемелердің контекстік шеңберіндегі «қаттылық» шкаласы бойынша іріктемедегі барлық сәйкестіктерді бағалау болып табылады.

Зерттеу нәтижесінде авторлар Обама мен Трамптың риторикасы айтарлықтай өзгерген деген қорытындыға келеді. Мәлімдемелер көбінесе бейтарап немесе негативті деп жіктеледі. Обама көші-қон туралы негізінен позитивті немесе бейтарап түрде мәлімдеме жасаған. Бұл зерттеу жұмысы АҚШ-тағы заңсыз көші-қон үдерістері аясындағы Президенттік дискурстың жан-жақты талдауын қамтамасыз ету арқылы қазіргі кезге дейін жүргізілген зерттеулердегі олқылықтың орнын толтыруға ықпал етеді.

Авторлар зерттеудің соңғы бөлігінде заңсыз көші-қон дискурсының секьюритилендіру шеңберіндегі тенденциялық нарративі 2024 жылы қайта сайланған Трамптың ерекшелігі болып қала береді деп санайды.

Түйін сөздер: секьюритилендіру, Барак Обама, Дональд Трамп, ресми дискурс, заңсыз көші-қон.

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Сравнение дискурса Обамы и Трампа о нелегальной миграции через призму секьюритизации

В статье рассматривается трансформация дискурса о нелегальной иммиграции как одной из центральных и противоречивых тем американской политики в период с 2009 по 2021 год. Теоретическая основа исследования базируется на теории секьюритизации Оле Вевера, согласно которой социальные и политические проблемы могут быть переосмыслены как угрозы безопасности. Методология основана на смешанном методе, который сочетает контент- и сентимент-анализ. Основная цель количественного метода – подсчитать количество ключевых слов, предложенных авторами, в официальных речах политиков. Задача качественного метода – оценить все совпадения из выборки по шкале «жесткости» в контекстуальных рамках политических заявлений. Авторы приходят к заключению, что риторика Обамы и Трампа значительно различается. Высказывания классифицируются в большинстве своем как нейтральные или негативные. Обама высказывался о миграции преимущественно в позитивном или нейтральном ключе. Статья вносит вклад в закрытие пробела в существующих исследованиях, предоставляя комплексный и междисциплинарный анализ президентского дискурса. В заключительной части статьи авторы полагают, что тенденция по построению нарратива о нелегальной иммиграции через призму секьюритизации по-прежнему будет характерной чертой новой администрации Трампа, избранного в 2024 году.

Ключевые слова: секьюритизация, Барак Обама, Дональд Трамп, официальный дискурс, нелегальная миграция

Introduction

The persistent influx of undocumented immigrants poses significant security challenges for nations worldwide. The U.S.-Mexico border is particularly notable for its high volume of unauthorised crossings. Despite efforts by successive U.S. administrations to curb this flow, it continues unabated. Donald Trump's presidency notably highlighted this issue, and it may regain prominence in U.S. politics following the 2024 elections. Consequently, illegal immigration remains a persistent challenge for the United States, influencing both foreign policy and national security considerations.

Federal authorities and Republican governors hold divergent views on addressing the record number of unauthorised immigrants. In July 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice opposed measures aimed at restricting the movement of irregular migrants from Mexico. Conversely, states like Texas advocate for protecting local populations from perceived dangers associated with immigrants (Republican Governors Association, 2024). The purported link between immigration and rising crime rates, often referred to as the "Trump hypothesis" (Green, 2016), lacks empirical support, as studies indicate no direct correlation between immigration and crime rates in the U.S. (Green, 2016). Following the 2024 election results, it is anticipated that policies toward undocumented immigrants may revert to those of the 2017-2021 period.

Given these developments, examining the issue of illegal immigration to the United States remains crucial. This research explores the disparity in official discourse on unauthorised immigration between Barack Obama and Donald Trump, focusing on electoral campaigns and presidential terms. Both presidents emphasised the importance of limiting undocumented immigration, but "border control" became a central theme during Trump's presidency. The study aims to trace how official discourse led to the securitisation of illicit immigration under Trump. The research period was limited to 2009-2021, excluding Joe Biden's term due to its incomplete status at the time of research completion and the shift in focus to healthcare concerns following the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019.

Historical background of illegal migration to the United States

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, established the principle that individuals have the right to freedom of movement, including the ability to leave and return to their country of origin (United Nations, n.d.). However, this declaration does not confer the right to enter another country freely, creating a paradox often referred to

as "The Catch-22" that complicates unauthorised immigration. Consequently, a significant number of individuals become undocumented immigrants.

The United States faces substantial annual influxes of undocumented immigrants, despite implementing restrictive measures (International Organisation for Migration, 2024). Undocumented migrants have significantly influenced the size, structure, and composition of the U.S. population (Chamie, 2016). If immigration had been completely halted since 1776, the U.S. population in 2016 would have been nearly half its actual size (Chamie, 2016). By 2020, the U.S. led the world in the number of foreign-born residents, with over 50 million immigrants, far surpassing Germany's 15.7 million (Migration Policy Institute, 2020). This trend persisted into 2024.

The issue of illegal immigration has been a longstanding concern in the U.S., with restrictive policies dating back to the 18th century (Truman, 1952). The Naturalization Act of 1790 laid the groundwork for discriminatory practices by granting citizenship primarily to white individuals of "good character," while subsequent acts like the Immigration Act of 1917 further limited immigration from non-European regions (Baxter & Nowrasteh, 2021). Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, U.S. immigration policies fluctuated, with acts such as the Homestead Act and the Immigration Act of 1924 favoured immigrants from Western and Northern Europe. Later policies, including the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, aimed to curb illegal immigration (Rystad, 1992). Despite these efforts, illegal immigration continues to rise, highlighting the complexity of the issue and its enduring impact on U.S. policy.

Literature review and Research question

The literature review begins with broad discussions on immigration and narrows down to focus specifically on immigration to the United States, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. For instance, Kline & Wade (2022) highlight the historical dominance of the U.S. over Latin America, emphasising the impact of geographical proximity on bilateral relations. They contrast Barack Obama's cooperative approach, which expanded rights for immigrants, with Donald Trump's restrictive policies, which strained U.S.-Latin American relations.

Roy, Klobucista, & Cheatham (2023) identify unauthorised immigration as a longstanding central issue in U.S. politics, with Mexico being the largest source of undocumented immigrants. They analyse public opinion on immigration and compare the varied approaches of the U.S. Presidents, noting consistent internal political opposition regardless of leadership style.

Massey, Durand, & Pren (2014) examine historical trends and causes of undocumented immigration, highlighting Mexico and Central America as major sources due to U.S. labor demand, migration networks, and regional violence. They argue that demographic shifts in Mexico, rather than increased U.S. border security, have driven recent declines in unauthorised immigration, with excessive spending on border measures paradoxically fostering its persistence.

Massey & Riosmena (2010) argue that decades of intensified U.S. efforts to curb unauthorised immigration have failed, as Latin American migration continued to grow, particularly in the 1990s. They emphasise social capital, such as family connections with U.S. work experience, as a key driver of migration, outweighing the deterrent effect of physical border enforcement.

Hanson (2006) reviews the drivers of unauthorised immigration, emphasising wage disparities, Mexico's growing labor force, and U.S. immigration policy changes as key factors. Despite intensified U.S. efforts to control illegal migration, the author argues that these policies have been largely ineffective due to internal political pressures, aligning with similar findings by Massey, Durand, and Pren (2014) and Massey and Riosmena (2010).

Colomé-Menéndez, Koops, & Weggemans (2021) analyse the securitisation of unauthorised immigration in the U.S. National Security Strategies (2002–2017), highlighting how the 9/11 attacks shifted immigration into a national security framework. Comparing Obama and Trump, they note contrasting approaches, with Obama framing immigration positively while Trump underscored its perceived threats, reflecting a broader trend in securitising the issue in U.S. policy.

Hutchison (2020) argues that Trump's hardline stance on unauthorised immigration represents a continuation of post-9/11 securitisation trends, albeit with a more aggressive approach than Obama's. While Obama implemented programs like DACA to provide relief for certain undocumented immigrants, Trump pursued policies such as "zero-tolerance" and the repeal of DACA, intensifying enforcement and anti-immigration rhetoric.

Domínguez & Castro (2016) highlight Obama's efforts to prioritise comprehensive immigration re-

form and normalise relations with Cuba. His "Immigration Accountability Executive Actions" provided relief to 5.2 million undocumented immigrants, bolstering ties with Latino diasporas and their countries of origin.

Pierce, Bolter, & Selee (2018) examine Trump's aggressive approach to immigration, marked by increased deportations, reduced refugee admissions, stricter screening processes, and the termination of DACA. They highlight this as an unprecedented focus on immigration policy in modern U.S. history, reflecting a significant shift in how immigration is managed and controlled.

Based on the literature review, a key research gap is identified as the lack of a holistic sentiment analysis of presidential speeches and statements tracing the origins of U.S. securitisation of illegal immigration. Therefore, the research aims to close this gap by analysing presidential transcripts and drawing conclusions regarding the securitisation of illicit immigration in U.S. foreign policy. The study suggests using a mixed-method approach to trace the evolution of presidential views on this issue from 2009 to 2021.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in two key approaches from International Relations theory. The primary framework is Securitisation theory, a branch of Constructivist theory. Securitisation involves the process by which government authorities elevate ordinary political concerns to security issues, often without these issues posing a genuine threat to state survival (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This transformation typically begins with a public declaration by an authoritative figure framing a regular problem as an existential threat, thereby garnering more attention from politicians than genuine societal issues (Zwitter & Wilde, 2010). The Securitisation theory, introduced by Ole Wæver in the mid-1990s, views "security" as a "speech act" where state officials designate issues as threats, justifying extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). The theory highlights the role of the audience in accepting these perceived threats (Wæver, 2014). By framing illegal immigration as a security issue, this discourse elevates it to a priority, enabling the use of exceptional measures with public support. This framework is particularly useful for analysing U.S. presidential rhetoric from 2009 to 2021, especially regarding the transformation of illegal immigration from an "ordinary" issue to a "security" one.

The second theoretical framework is the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. This theory defines regional security as a collection of interconnected units whose security problems cannot be resolved independently (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). It emphasises that security issues should be examined through multiple lenses: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Considering the North American region as a regional security complex unit, RSCT is an appropriate complement to the central theory of the research.

Methodological framework

The methodology of this study is guided by Lamont's "Research Methods in International Relations" (2021) and employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The quantitative component involves content analysis, examining raw databases of official transcribed speeches delivered by Barack Obama and Donald Trump during their electoral campaigns and presidential terms. The selection criteria for analysis include keywords associated with the securitisation of illegal immigration to the U.S.: "immigration," "security," "control," "border," and "wall." This quantitative analysis is conducted both manually and using Python programming to automate data selection for the qualitative part.

The qualitative component involves sentiment analysis of the speeches, performed manually by identifying keyword occurrences and defining sentiments. A "rigidity" scale, designed by the authors, is used to assess the sharpness of statements regarding illegal migrants, focusing on perceptions that undermine state stability, such as increased crime rates and national security concerns. Each match is categorised as positive, neutral, or negative, with each occurrence counting as one point in the sentiment analysis tables. The higher the negative value, the tougher the President's discourse on immigration. This approach was inspired by Heidenreich et al. (2020), with modifications.

To mitigate subjectivity, a random selection intercoder reliability check was conducted on 20 items, showing 95% accuracy that allows to partially mitigate the subjectivity factor. Nonetheless, the discussion between the coders revealed ambiguity in the interpretation of some items. One of the most illustrative statements is delivered by Obama: "I want everybody here to understand, there are folks who are good, decent people who are worried about im-

migration". The case demonstrates the challenges in unequivocally identifying the narrative underlying the sentence. On the one hand, the sentence incorporates positive words (e.g., "good") with a statement about the pure interest or concern regarding immigration. On the other hand, the construction of the phrase subtly implies countervailing actors in a sentence like "good, decent people" and the issue of immigration, that they are "worried about". While the text does not explicitly accuse illegal migrants, it is implicitly acknowledged that the phenomenon of illegal immigration is facilitated by human agency (e.g. clandestine migrants). For this reason, similar cases are counted as "neutral" ones, because "rigidity" is not explicit.

The study includes a comparative component examining the discourse of Obama and Trump, adopting a comparative approach to identify distinctive characteristics of discourse formation (Fox & Miller, 2004). The research design contains the following steps. The quantitative analysis is executed. For this part, the content analysis method is selected. All the speeches delivered by the Presidents constitute a general population. Considering the peculiarities of the official sources of information, some differences are present in the analysis process. The authorised White House webpage of Donald Trump (Trump's White House, The American Presidency Project) possesses a separate "immigration" filter for transcribed remarks that allows it to skip the initial sample selection. The supplementary American Presidency Project webpage (The American Presidency Project), which contains all the electoral campaigns remarks, is subject to the software analysis. Namely, the Python programming language, where the code for searching the keyword occurrences in the headings is written. All the matches are added to the sample of official speeches stored in Trump's official White House webpage. However, Barack Obama's White House website (Obama's White House) does not have a separate filter to extract immigration-related transcribed remarks. Hence, all headings of the speeches delivered by Barack Obama amid the electoral campaigns and time in office are analysed by software. Thus, all the matches comprise a sample. Afterwards, the qualitative analysis is completed. The sentiment analysis method is applied. The sample is inspected manually.

In total, Obama and Trump delivered 8,817 speeches, from which 118 transcribed speeches related to migration were selected after applying keyword filters. The keywords occurred 215 and 3,643 times in Obama's and Trump's discourse, respectively. After excluding irrelevant contexts and verbatim repetitions, 112 and 1,157 occurrences formed the basis for qualitative analysis for Obama and Trump, respectively.

Real and perceived threats of illegal migration conceptualisation

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, profoundly altered the U.S. approach to immigration, integrating it into national security concerns (Chamie, 2016). This shift was influenced by global terrorist activities in regions like the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Europe, which heightened international pressure on the U.S. to reassess its immigration policies. Consequently, entry requirements became more stringent worldwide, with immigration increasingly perceived as a state security issue (Chamie, 2016). Critics argue that this broadened definition of security leads to the securitisation of common processes (Lupovici, 2014), often with ineffective outcomes, as evidenced by the U.S.'s long-standing challenges in managing immigration flows since 1776 (Chamie, 2016).

Before 9/11, international terrorism and immigration were already concerns, but the use of conventional means by non-state actors heightened their importance (Kilroy Jr, Rodriguez Sumano, & Hataley, 2017). The end of the Cold War in 1991 shifted U.S. focus from containment and deterrence to addressing new global challenges. Regional conflicts in Somalia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo highlighted ongoing international tensions (Kilroy Jr, Rodriguez Sumano, & Hataley, 2017).

Securitisation theory provides a framework for identifying threats, involving three steps: threat identification, extraordinary actions, and impacts on inter-unit relations (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). However, challenges arise as perceived threats vary by country, and responses depend on historical context and foreign policy (Kilroy Jr, Rodriguez Sumano, & Hataley, 2017).

The Regional Security Complex Theory explains how unauthorised immigration is perceived as a security issue. Lake & Morgan (1997) note that regional dynamics influence state responses to global challenges. In the North American region, the U.S. as a hegemon shapes security contexts, affecting neighbouring countries like Canada and Mexico. Following 9/11, the U.S. and Canada aligned their security policies, while U.S.-Mexican relations faced contradictions due to differing perceptions of threats (Kilroy Jr, Rodriguez Sumano, & Hataley, 2017). The U.S. viewed terrorism as a primary threat, linking it to border security, whereas Mexico

focused on internal organised crime (Kilroy Jr, Rodriguez Sumano, & Hataley, 2017).

The securitisation of immigration is not new but has intensified over the past two decades, with American authorities framing immigration as a criminal act and national security threat (Colomé-Menéndez, Koops, & Weggemans, 2021; Hutchison, 2020).

Immigration policies of the Obama and Trump administrations

Barack Obama's presidency is notable for its efforts to address immigration reform, particularly focusing on legalising non-criminal immigrants in the U.S. His administration emphasised providing opportunities for legal permanent residents, minors, and immediate family members of U.S. citizens, aiming to prevent family separations within immigrant communities, which became a pressing concern as the number of undocumented immigrants reached a record 12.2 million by 2007 (Passel & Cohn, 2018). Despite Obama's commitment to comprehensive immigration reform, legislative gridlock in Congress, largely due to Republican opposition, hindered the passage of key bills. The Obama administration introduced initiatives like the DREAM Act, which aimed to offer a path to citizenship for immigrants who arrived as children, but it failed to pass in the Senate. Subsequent efforts, such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, provided temporary work permits and protection from deportation but faced legal challenges and were eventually repealed by his successor, Donald Trump (The U.S. Congress, 2010, U.S. Homeland Security, 2017).

Obama's approach to immigration, though criticised for its limited results, marked a shift in U.S. policy by aiming to ease the legal status of undocumented immigrants, particularly through temporary protections for young people under DACA. His administration extended these protections to parents of U.S. citizens in 2014 with the Immigration Accountability Executive Action (Baxter & Nowrasteh, 2021). However, his presidency also saw a significant increase in deportations, earning him the nickname "Deporter-in-Chief" for overseeing the removal of over a million undocumented immigrants (Baxter & Nowrasteh, 2021).

In contrast, Donald Trump's administration adopted a more rigid stance, viewing all unauthorised immigrants as security threats. Trump prioritised the removal of immigrants regardless of criminal history, expanded the powers of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and pursued the construc-tion of a physical wall along the U.S.-Mexico border (Baxter & Nowrasteh, 2021). Trump's approach, often described as harsh and intolerant, resulted in increased detentions and border apprehensions without substantial reductions in illegal immigration (Gramlich, 2020).

In summary, while both Obama and Trump addressed immigration, their approaches differed significantly. Obama focused on providing protections and opportunities for undocumented immigrants, particularly those with familial ties to U.S. citizens, whereas Trump adopted a more punitive and securitised approach. Although Obama's efforts at comprehensive reform were largely thwarted by Congressional opposition, his policies, especially DACA, are viewed more favorably compared to Trump's far-reaching changes, which reversed many of his predecessor's accomplishments (Pierce, Bolter, & Selee, 2018). This comparison highlights the contrasting priorities of the two administrations, with Obama emphasising legalisation and family unity and Trump focusing on border security and strict enforcement.

Analysis of Barack Obama's discourse regarding illegal migration to the U.S.

The primary sources for analysing Barack Obama's discourse on immigration are the White House archives and the American Presidency Project websites. These resources provide comprehensive access to all transcribed speeches delivered by Obama during his electoral campaigns and official speeches in office. Through these sources, it was determined that Obama delivered a total of 5,557 speeches throughout his electoral campaigns and presidential terms.

To identify relevant speeches, a keyword search was conducted using Python code to detect instances where the terms "immigration," "security," "control," "border," or "wall" appeared in the headings. This process resulted in the selection of 13 speeches where these keywords were mentioned. Overall, the keywords were referenced 215 times. Following content analysis, 112 occurrences were deemed relevant for sentiment analysis, excluding any irrelevant matches (see Figures 1 and 2)[1]. The most representative instances of these occurrences are documented in Figure 3.

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[1] The total number of occurrences in content and sentiment analysis diverge. The first one includes all the exact matches of the keywords in presidential speeches, whereas the second one excludes the statements made not by the Presidents, those in irrelevant context, and verbatim repetitions.
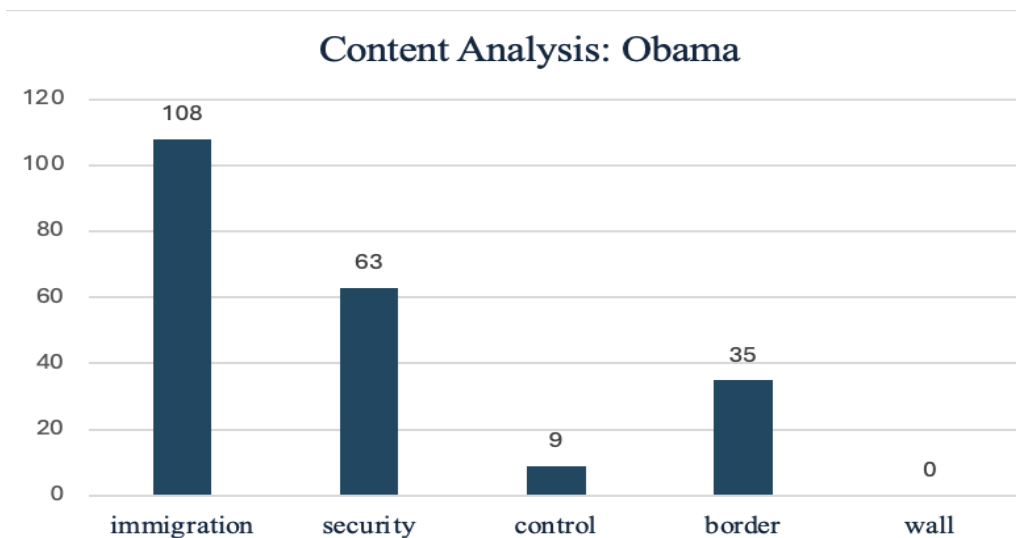
Content Analysis: Obama

Figure 1 – Content analysis. The number of immigration-related keywords mentioned by Barack Obama amid the presidential campaigns and presidential terms

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.),
Obama's White House (n.d.) (The histogram composed by the authors).

Figure 2 – Sentiment analysis. Assessment of the "rigidity" of Barack Obama's statements amid the presidential campaigns and presidential terms

	Positive statements	Neutral statements	Negative statements
Obama	48	64	0

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.), Obama's White House (n.d.) (The table composed by the authors).

Figure 3 – The most representative occurrences in Barack Obama's discourse

	Positive statements	Neutral statements	Negative statements
Obama	"It means working with state and local partners to disrupt terrorist attacks, to make our borders more secure, respond to natural disasters, and make our immigration system more effective and fair" "But we all know that today, we have an immigration system that's out of date and badly broken; a system that's holding us back instead of helping us grow our economy and strengthen our middle class" "It would have made the legal immigration system smarter and fairer"	"And as you can imagine, for the past few days, a lot of them have been about immigration" "I want everybody here to understand, there are folks who are good, decent people who are worried about immigration" "Independent experts said that bill would strengthen our borders, grow our economy, shrink our deficits"	–

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.), Obama's White House (n.d.) (The table composed by the authors).

The analysis of Barack Obama's discourse on immigration reveals an overall neutral-positive trend. Obama emphasized the need to improve conditions for migrants in the U.S., enhance their rights and freedoms, and provide pathways to citizenship (Hernández, 2014). Simultaneously, he un-

derscored the importance of border protection as a critical component of his policy. He advocated for undocumented migrants to have the opportunity to live legally in the U.S., reflecting his commitment to comprehensive immigration reform.

Most instances where keywords were mentioned had a neutral connotation, as Obama frequently highlighted the brokenness of the U.S. immigration system and the necessity for reforms. The absence of more assertive positive statements can be attributed to Republican opposition, which made it challenging for Obama to fulfill promises of legislative improvements without facing political backlash. This context likely influenced Obama's cautious approach to immigration policy, balancing reform efforts with enforcement measures.

Analysis of Donald Trump's discourse regarding illegal migration to the U.S.

The primary sources for analysing Donald Trump's discourse on immigration are the White House archives and the American Presidency Project. These resources provide comprehensive access to all transcribed speeches delivered by Trump during his electoral campaign and official speeches in office. It was determined that Trump delivered a total of 3,260 speeches throughout his electoral campaign and presidential term.

To identify relevant speeches, a systematic approach was employed. The Trump White House webpage features a dedicated "immigration" filter, which facilitates the selection of speeches directly related to this topic, reducing the likelihood of inaccuracies. Additionally, materials from the American Presidency Project were analysed using software to identify speeches with keywords in their headings. This process resulted in the selection of 105 speeches focused on immigration. Overall, the keywords were referenced 3,643 times. Following content analysis, 1,157 occurrences were deemed relevant for sentiment analysis, excluding any irrelevant matches (see Figures 4 and 5)[1]. The most representative instances of these occurrences are documented in Figure 6.

In Donald Trump's discourse, the keyword "border" emerges as a prominent term, being mentioned 1,282 times. Additionally, the words "immigration" and "security" are frequently used, each occurring over 800 times. This prevalence suggests that immigration was a significant focus in Trump's rhetoric. Given that Trump delivered a total of 3,260 speeches, the frequency of these keywords is notable.
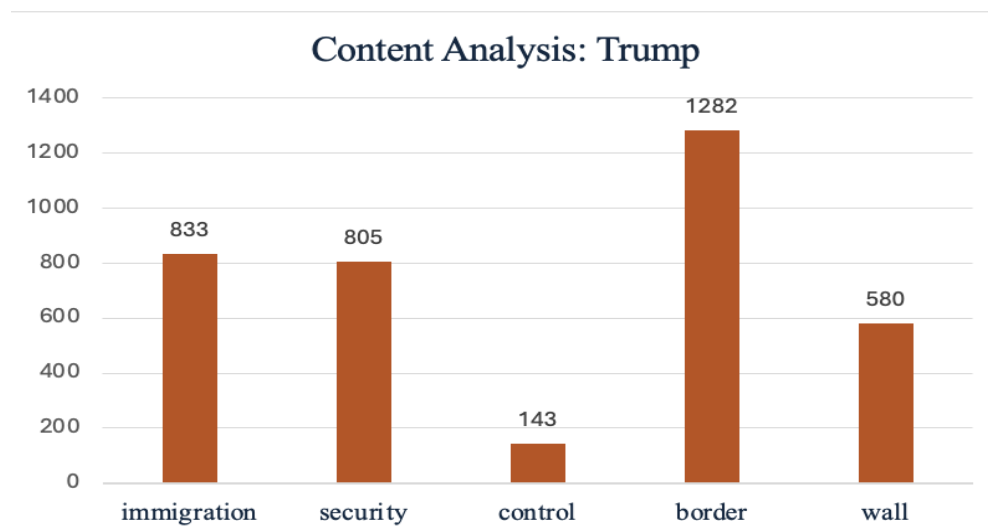

Figure 4 – Content analysis. The number of immigration-related keywords mentioned by Donald Trump amid the presidential campaign and presidential term

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.), Trump's White House (n.d.)
(The histogram composed by the authors).

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[1] The total number of occurrences in content and sentiment analysis diverge. The first one includes all the exact matches of the keywords in presidential speeches, whereas the second one excludes the statements made not by the Presidents, those in irrelevant context, and verbatim repetitions.

The qualitative sentiment analysis of Trump's discourse is based on a sample derived from the quantitative analysis. Each transcribed speech is manually examined, with each keyword occurrence assigned to a specific "rigidity" category, as designed by the researchers. This approach allows for a detailed assessment of the tone and emphasis in Trump's speeches regarding immigration.

Figure 5 – Sentiment analysis. Assessment of the "rigidity" of Donald Trump's statements amid the presidential campaign and presidential term

	Positive statements	Neutral statements	Negative statements
Trump	4	1070	83

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.), Trump's White House (n.d.) (The table composed by the authors).

Figure 6 – The most representative occurrences in Donald Trump's discourse.

	Positive statements	Neutral statements	Negative statements
Trump	"America is a proud nation of immigrants and we will continue to show compassion to those fleeing oppression, but we will do so while protecting our own citizens and border" "We welcome people who come to the United States legally, but we cannot allow our laws to be broken and our borders to be violated" "It's about keeping families together, while at the same time, being sure that we have a very powerful, very strong border" "No, no, the border is just as tough, but we do want to keep families together"	"It won't be very substantial because we have millions and millions of cars and trucks going through the border" "Our ability to maintain integrity in the immigration system has increased" "So it's a very powerful, very powerful wall – the likes of which, probably, to this extent, has not been built before" "Anyway, we're asking Congress to step forward on border security and help us with border security"	"Vast migrations out of Central America undermine the future of those countries" "It's a humanitarian emergency. And we are going to take care of our border" "They've allowed millions of low-wage workers to compete for jobs and wages against the poorest Americans" "Our current immigration system helps special interests, but hurts American workers, taxpayers and national security"

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.), Trump's White House (n.d.) (The table composed by the authors).

The analysis of Donald Trump's discourse on immigration reveals an overall neutral-negative trend. While Trump often mentions keywords in a neutral context, emphasizing border protection, crime reduction, and immigration reform, he rarely highlights the positive aspects of immigration or incentives to improve conditions for immigrants. Instead, his rhetoric focuses on uncompromising restrictions and deportations, frequently portraying Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol as "brave heroes" who curb the influx of undocumented immigrants. The border wall is presented as a necessity, reflecting Trump's central project.

The securitisation of illegal immigration is evident, as Trump frames it as a national security concern, emphasising its negative effects and largely abandoning the positive measures enacted by his predecessor, Barack Obama. Trump's policies, including the consolidation of border infrastructure, cancellation of integration programs, and portrayal of immigrants as criminals, contributed to elevating illegal immigration to the status of a national security threat. The comprehensive results of the content and sentiment analysis are detailed in Figures 7 and 8.

Connecting discourse and action: a comparison of the two administrations
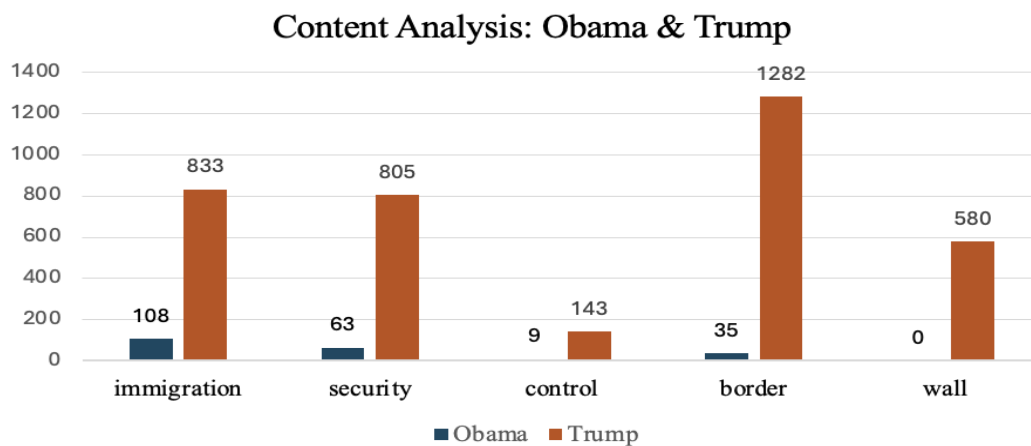
Content Analysis: Obama & Trump

Figure 7 – Content analysis. The number of immigration-related keywords mentioned
by Barack Obama and Donald Trump amid the presidential campaigns and presidential terms

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.), Obama's White House (n.d.),
Trump's White House (n.d.) (The histogram composed by the authors).

Figure 8 – Sentiment analysis. Assessment of the "rigidity" of Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's statements amid the presidential campaigns and presidential terms

	Positive statements	Neutral statements	Negative statements
Obama	48	64	0
Trump	4	1070	83

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.), Obama's White House (n.d.), Trump's White House (n.d.) (The table composed by the authors).

Figure 9 – Sentiment analysis. Assessment of the "rigidity" of Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's statements amid the presidential campaigns and presidential terms, distributed in percentages

	Positive statements	Neutral statements	Negative statements
Obama	42.8%	57.2%	0%
Trump	0.4%	92.5%	7.1%

Sources: The American Presidency project (n.d.), Obama's White House (n.d.), Trump's White House (n.d.)(The table composed by the authors). Note: number of cases for Obama = 112; number of cases for Trump = 1157.

While the proportion of explicitly negative statements in Trump's discourse (7.1%) appears modest, the sheer volume of immigration-related rhetoric–nearly 10 times more frequent than Obama's–signals its prioritisation as an urgent security concern (see Figure 9). This quantitative disparity aligns with qualitative differences in policy implementation between the two administrations.

Barack Obama's discourse emphasised creating a "smarter, fairer" immigration system, framing un-documented immigrants as contributors to society. Initiatives like the DREAM Act and DACA provided protections for over 800,000 individuals (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). However, his tenure also saw record deportations (2.5 million over eight years), earning criticism as "Deporter-in-Chief". Enforcement prioritised recent arrivals and criminals, with internal deportations declining in his second term. Despite bi-partisan efforts like the "Gang of Eight" reform bill, legislative gridlock limited systemic changes.

Donald Trump framed unauthorised immigration as an existential threat, declaring, "All federal energies must focus on immigration security." His policies included suspending DACA, expanding ICE authority, and constructing 450 miles of border barriers (Trump's White House, 2017). The construction of the border wall became the central personification of his attitude towards immigration (Rodriguez & De Maio, 2021, Garcia, 2019). While total deportations under Trump (approximately 800,000 in three years) lagged behind Obama's first-term numbers, his rhetoric amplified enforcement's symbolic impact. The administration detained non-criminals 60 days on average – nearly double the 2009 figure – and targeted long-term residents, diverging from Obama's focus on recent border crossers.

Obama's mixed record – humanitarian protections alongside high removals – reflects tension between reform goals and enforcement realities. In contrast, Trump's 92.5% neutral rhetoric (e.g., "border control," "security") masked a punitive agenda: family separations, asylum restrictions, and indefinite detention. Both presidents faced legal challenges, but Trump's policies intensified systemic backlogs by targeting all undocumented individuals indiscriminately.

Quantitative metrics alone obscure nuanced policy shifts. Obama's discourse emphasised integration but struggled with enforcement optics, while Trump's neutral framing belied a securitised approach that redefined immigration as a monolithic threat. The data underscore how rhetorical frequency and institutional priorities – not just sentiment – shape immigration's politicisation.

Discussion

As it was outlined, the narratives in the official discourse and actions of both of the Presidents tend to coincide. Nevertheless, it is believed that Obama is more selective in his discourse related to immigration. As a result, the majority of cases from the sample were attributed to the "neutral" category. On the contrary, Trump uses a more straightforward approach that results in the "negative" indicators prevailing. Thus, the official discourse may not necessarily reflect the real approach of the leader towards the issue. In addition, social media can influence the impact or replication of a particular statement. Due to his frequent and often negative statements, Trump has become a more vocal advocate for the securitisation of migration. Many neutral comments may simply go unnoticed.

The theory of party systems, proposed by Lipset & Rokkan (1967), may function as the explanation of narratives. The immigration, being one of the central issues of U.S. politics, can serve as a cleavage that polarises American society and produces different policy propositions among the political parties. Traditionally, Democrats support the influx of immigrants that construct the essence of the American nation, whereas Republicans oppose the tendency, most substantially under Trump's wall. Thus, Obama's "positive" discourse may be explained by the commitment to the party's traditional approach towards the issue.

Conclusion

In summary, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the theoretical and historical context of illegal immigration to the United States, highlighting its enduring significance in U.S. politics. The securitisation of immigration and its application in the U.S. are examined, with a focus on the policies and discourses of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. The analysis reveals that Trump's discourse on illegal immigration is notably harsher, reflecting in policies that significantly impacted the conditions of undocumented immigrants. Trump's emphasis on immigration led to its securitisation, elevating it to a national security threat.

This research addresses a previous gap by conducting a thorough discourse analysis using all available official transcribed data, presented in tables, histograms, and textual commentaries. Unlike previous studies that relied on isolated remarks or images, this study provides a comprehensive analysis.

Based on the study's limitations and findings, several recommendations for future research are proposed. First, expanding the sample. Analysing the entire list of speeches, beyond those selected by keywords, could yield more accurate results. Second, continuing discourse analysis. Following Trump's discourse during a potential new term or comparing it with that of President Joe Biden could provide valuable insights, given their differing political affiliations. Third, comparative analysis. A comparative study between Trump and Biden's statements could highlight how political party affiliations influence immigration discourse.

In conclusion, the study achieves its objectives by demonstrating that the securitisation of illegal immigration is more pronounced in Trump's actions and discourse.

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