Public Policy Research: The Impact of Partisan Media on Public Perception of Immigrants and American Economy

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Abstract. This paper examines how the American partisan media affects public opinion about immigration, and how that public opinion then results in the development of more restrictive immigration policy. These restrictive laws disrupt the labor market, with consequences for the broader economy. By utilizing a combination of communication studies, political history, recent economic data from reputable sources such as Congressional committees and various think tanks, and a recent case study of the effects of President Trump’s mass deportation, this paper undoubtedly demonstrates a cycle where partisan media framing is associated with polarized public opinion over immigrants, which then influences policymakers to implement restrictive policies. The result is an unpredictable labor market and a precarious economic situation.

Keywords: Public Policy, Partisan Media, public opinion, immigration policy, American Economy.

1. Introduction

The media have, for decades, framed how Americans perceive immigration. Immigration is so closely tied to the economy that it is one of the most divisive issues in American politics. Broadcast news outlets like Fox, CNN, and MSNBC each frame the issue differently. Fox News, in particular, often sells immigration as a danger to national security and economic well-being. At the same time, MSNBC and CNN usually emphasize humanitarian considerations, presenting immigrants as vulnerable families in need of protection. These competing storylines widen divisions among the public and drive policymakers toward repressive or permissive responses. The Trump 2.0 administration exemplifies that dynamic in practice. The 2024 campaign's polarizing coverage of immigration led to fears on the far right and laid the seeds for Trump’s crime-fighting policies. The administration’s policies, including the indiscriminate deportation of tens of thousands of people and the mass detention, reveal how media-driven polarization can lead to the transformation of government policy. At the same time, these new measures prompted serious concerns not only among immigrant communities but also about the labor market and the health of the broader economy.

This paper addresses the following question: How does the American media's depiction of immigrants impact public opinion, leading to the churning out of restrictive policies and finally affecting America’s economy? The paper contends that polarized construction of representations in the media informs the perceptions and views of the public regarding immigrants, leading to the development of restrictive immigration policies, a move that will result in a reorganization of labor market participation, harming both immigrants and U.S.-born workers, with Trump 2.0 being an embodiment of the statement.

2. Media narrative

Partisan media outlets construct opposing “realities” around immigration, leading to widely divergent public perceptions. The role of the American media in shaping public opinion regarding immigration is key. It is a phenomenon noted along with the Reinforcing Spirals Model, where people choose media in line with their beliefs and, in turn, the media reinforces and strengthens those beliefs. Fox News offers the most glaring evidence, as consumption is always associated with more restrictive immigration preferences. And even after we take into account ideological preferences, Hoewe and

his co-authors find that Fox viewers are more likely to support restrictive immigration policies: a result suggesting that Fox News helps to directly inject conservative views as opposed to only reflecting them. Through stories of authority, criminality, and subversion, Fox News seduces viewers to see immigrants as undermining the social order [5].

CNN and MSNBC, in contrast, often advance humanitarian frames that prioritize suffering, family separation, and compassion. According to a content analysis by Hoewe, CNN used much more "care" and "harm" language, describing immigrants as weak groups that are to be pitied [5]. A typical example would be the representation of Syrian refugees in the United States, where media from the right wing, like Fox News, have relentlessly simplified the refugees to their Islamic identity, associating them with extremism and jihadism. The coverage frequently suggested that Syrian immigrants and refugees were infiltrators of Western society, related to cultural threat and terrorism. On the other hand, left-wing sources tend to adopt a more inclusive tone when it comes to covering Syrian immigrants as new arrivals, refugees of displacement and civil war in need of humanitarian support [2]. However, positive humanitarian appeals impact public opinion less than negative narratives against immigrants [5]. That's because liberal outlets are more likely to preach to the choir and lift already held views by friendly viewers and readers. In contrast, conservative outlets can mobilize restrictionist sentiment to an outsize degree.

The stakes for debates about immigration are high. As Hoewe et al. illustrate, Fox News' portrayal of immigrants as lawbreakers rationalizes repressive policy. The mechanism is soft, but the impact is hard: people who are already distrustful of immigrants, Fox's coverage makes them doubt more, and doubting implies an even stronger support for hardline solutions, ones that can make people fearful of the demographic future of the United States. That's because even though CNN and MSNBC help hype outrage over humanitarian crises, they're mostly preaching to people who are already discouraged by restrictionist policies. In other words, the disproportionate influence of partisan media leads to negative threat narratives about immigrants being more effective at shaping public opinion than empathic ones.

Media Reinforces stereotypes, overshadows pragmatism with partisanship, and sets the stage for restrictive policies by normalizing negative portrayals. Another study by Mills and colleagues finds similar results, in which consumption of partisan media outlets leads to polarized public opinion on immigration. Their analysis of CNN, Fox, and CBS online coverage between 2017 and 2019 reveals that immigration was regarded as a symbolic battleground in the larger partisan war during Trump's presidency, instead of an issue deserving a pragmatic solution. Similarly, Fox News overwhelmingly utilized threat narratives, portraying Latin American immigrants as criminals, rapists, or economic burdens. In contrast, CNN tended to use humanitarian frames, lengthy descriptions of family separations, and the suffering of children [9]. Although these frames paint immigrants in a more sympathetic light, they are essentially partisan-oriented because coverage often focuses on Trump as the central figure, who is the most-mentioned figure across articles studied. The criticism of his cruelty and emphasis on the democrats' opposition overshadow immigrants themselves in these narratives [9]. In practice, the media coverage is more about what these immigrants represent for Trump's political agenda and the larger partisan struggle than about immigrants themselves. This politicization indoctrinates the public into seeing immigration not as a policy problem that requires subtle and practical solutions but as a litmus test for one's party affiliation. By simplifying immigrants to political symbols, it's taking misinformation and making it acceptable in how it describes who immigrants are, what legal language, such as asylum seeker, refugee, or undocumented, means in practice, and eventually contributing to the formation of restrictive policies such as mass deportations or denying asylum without any humanitarian and legal consideration.

This way, partisan news outlets complement the Reinforcing Spirals Model: audiences seek out news that reaffirms their existing beliefs, and partisan media strengthen those foundations. The result is a loop in which stereotypes are entrenched, and public opinion shifts in ways that legitimize restrictive immigration policies when conservative news outlets like FOX are more successful in converting their messages.

3. From public opinion to restrictive immigration policy

When public preference leans toward less immigration, policymakers respond with restrictive legislation disproportionately than when public preference favors more immigration. A study by Sarah Damhof shows that policymakers respond more actively to restrictionist rhetoric than to inclusive sentiment. This finding, along with the fact that FOX News's threat narrative is more successful in shaping public opinion, demonstrates the longstanding popularity of restrictive immigration policies in American politics. From 1992 to 2013, 85 immigration-related policies were enacted, of which 54 were restrictive, 29 liberalizing, and two neutral [4]. This imbalance indicates that restrictive opinion translates into legislation much faster than liberal opinion.

When public support for decreasing immigration rose dramatically in the three years between 1994 and 1996, policymakers implemented 20 restrictive immigration policies, compared to just three less restrictive measures [4]. Among those restrictive policies were Proposition 187 in California, which led to Congress passing the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in 1996. Both laws acted to respond to the concerns of Californian voters who demanded stripping immigrants of their welfare, toughening detention, and deportation. The same year, Congress included clauses excluding lawful immigrants from federal welfare programs in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act [7]. By contrast, when public opinion shifted toward favoring more immigration in 1996 and 1998, only nine liberalizing policies were enacted over 3 years [4].

The study finds that negative opinion consistently generates stronger policy responses than positive opinion. Significant pro-immigration shifts rarely encompass the same volume of legislative change, and when they do, the liberalizing measures are often narrower in scope. This suggests that anti-immigration sentiment is more politically salient and likely to be acted upon, perpetuating a cycle in which restrictive immigration policies are more favorable in the American political landscape.

4. Impact of restrictive policies on labor market

Restrictive policies exclude immigrants from jobs, pushing them into low-wage and dangerous work that harms their health. Under such policies, immigrants are driven into precarious, low-paying, unhealthy workplaces where health risks are enormous. The report by Lee, Nakphong, and Young investigates this phenomenon at a population level. Using data from the RIGHTS sample of Asian and Latino immigrants in California, the authors show that labor market and workplace exclusions have health consequences.

Labor market exclusion based on the legal status, that is, being unable to apply for jobs due to legal status, losing work authorization, or being forced to settle for jobs below one's skill level, was associated with 21% greater odds of poor health. This is critical evidence of the manner in which the policy creates systemic barriers that severely trap immigrants in low social status, where their skills are not properly utilized and wages are suppressed. Additionally, being excluded from the workplace also hurts the health of immigrants. Immigrants who experienced wage theft, hazardous tasks, or workplace injuries were found to be 45 percent more likely to report poor health and to suffer higher stress levels [8]. These findings indicate that restrictive immigration policies do more than limit job access. They channel immigrants into insecure, unsafe forms of work where exploitation and injury occur at much higher rates. Notably, the study also showed that these risks were not limited by legal status: even naturalized citizens and documented immigrants faced health harms linked to the same structural exclusions [8]. This underscores how deeply these vulnerabilities are embedded within the labor system itself.

Restrictionist immigration policies are harmful for American workers: they bring wages down and even upset entire industries. Work-site immigration police change hiring conditions and have measurable consequences for labor market wages and security. According to the Dallas Fed study, industries targeted by immigration enforcement actions experience declines in average salaries. Worker turnover rate, the speed at which employees leave one employer and are then replaced by

others, becomes significantly higher than usual under these adverse conditions of labor supply instability.

The study finds that enforcement actions such as audits, fines, and investigations are consistently associated with lower average wages. On average, wages fell by 0.16–0.21% following enforcement actions. For example, investigations reduced wages by 0.21%, fines by 0.18%, and charges by 0.21% [11]. This pattern implies that employers tend to replace more experienced unauthorized workers with legal workers who are often less productive and earn lower pay, after feeling pressure from restrictive immigration policies, thereby pulling down the wage average. Enforcement also increases employer compliance costs, which can be passed on to workers through lower wages.

At the same time, workplace enforcement actions raise worker turnover. Industries that experienced enforcement saw 0.5--0.8% higher hires and separations within the same quarter, indicating that enforcement actions destabilize the employment. For example, audits and investigations boosted hires and separations by nearly 0.4–0.5%, while fines and criminal charges increased turnover by around 0.3% [11]. This cycle of firings, replacements, and constant new hires shows how businesses scramble to cope with immigration enforcement, whether by letting go of undocumented workers, shifting them onto official payrolls, or clinging tightly to legal workers to avoid future shortages. Together, the evidence points to two primary ways enforcement disrupts industries. First, it reduces wages by replacing experienced workers with cheaper, less-experienced labor. Second, this process brings instability in the business environment, reaching a point where companies have to change frequently to stay ahead of enforcement risks. Although its impact on the national economy is minimal, the disruption is especially pronounced at the industry level—concentrated primarily in food processing, manufacturing, and agriculture, where illegal labor is essential. From this point of view, both wage standards and the work environment are endangered by restrictive workplace enforcement. Nevertheless, undocumented workers still aggregate themselves, since the entire labor market is overturned to suit employers and not workers at all, meaning that they bear higher costs. This type of situation benefits no one—neither workers nor bosses.

Restrictionist immigration policies harm the U.S. economy in terms of labor supply and across productivity, innovation, growth, and global competitiveness. Restrictive immigration policies harm productivity by breaking the delicate balance between immigrant and native labor. Numerous industries operate with immigrant workers simply because natives either will not take or will be unable to do these jobs; among them are agriculture, food processing, construction, and health care. In these sectors, immigrant labor sustains production by meeting seasonal or low-wage demand that the domestic workforce does not satisfy. Limiting immigration, therefore, reduces output and drives up production costs. Furthermore, restrictions break down complementarities across skill levels. For example, high-skilled professionals such as surgeons, engineers, and architects depend on immigrant workers in supporting roles that enable them to specialize fully in their expertise. Without access to immigrant labor, the efficiency of both groups declines, producing productivity losses throughout the economy [10].

High-skilled immigrants are disproportionately represented in innovation-driven industries, contributing to patenting, technology development, and start-up formation. Restrictive policies that cap or delay visa approvals reduce the talent pipeline for U.S. firms, slowing productivity growth and weakening regional innovation clusters. Companies unable to recruit needed immigrant talent often respond by relocating research and development abroad, transferring high-value activities to more open economies. This relocation reduces domestic innovation and undermines local spillovers such as supplier development, workforce training, and venture capital attraction [10]. New immigrants are now more likely to have gone to college than in the recent past because of new flows of immigration. These highly skilled immigrants are increasingly driving innovation and working in high-demand industries. Restricting immigration risks cutting off this rising source of skilled labor just as the U.S. economy faces new technological and demographic challenges [6]. Over time, strict immigration attitudes corrode the United States' place as the world's central node for science and technology, eroding its long-term competitiveness. Restrictive immigration policies stifle GDP growth.

As an economy, and at a macro-socioeconomic level, the two most obvious ways restrictive immigration policies stifle GDP growth are that they limit labor supply and reduce consumer demand. Immigrants enlarge the working-age population and directly bring about participation in labor market growth, which is essential for continuous long-term growth. They also boost aggregate demand through household consumption, supporting beneficial employment across multiple sectors [6]. Through a decline in immigration flows, restrictive policies measure off these demand-side and supply-side sources, slowing GDP growth and raising the risk of labor shortages. These risks are more pronounced because of the aging U.S. population, which is reducing the size of the native-born workforce, and the growing number of foreign-born workers [6]. Restricted immigration thus fuels demographic pressures, restraining the economy's ability to undertake productive adjustment and maintain stable growth.

Immigration drives down prices in labor-intensive, high-demand industries such as health care, child and elder care, food production, landscape maintenance, and residential construction [6]. Without immigrant labor, prices in these sectors would skyrocket because of all the unmet demand. Restrictive policies, therefore, risk increasing consumer prices and reducing affordability for American households, thus harming the American economy by lowering the number of potential consumers.

Immigrants are statistically more likely than natives to start businesses, contributing to job creation, industry diversification, and local economic resilience. Restrictive policies dampen this entrepreneurial activity, reducing the formation of small and medium-sized enterprises that fuel growth across U.S. communities. At the same time, restrictions weaken global trade linkages. Immigrant diaspora networks foster trust, facilitate exports, and build bilateral investment relationships. By reducing the size and density of these networks, restrictive policies weaken U.S. firms' ability to access international markets [10]. This dual effect, lower domestic entrepreneurship and weaker global competitiveness, further illustrates how restrictionist policies harm the U.S. economy in both local and international dimensions.

5. Case study: trump 2.0 (2024–2025)

Public Opinion demanded restrictive policies during the election. According to the Pew Research Center, public opinion during the 2024 elections saw a surge in discontent against the current immigration status in America. In June 2020, 74% of voters agreed that undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay legally. However, this number dropped substantially to 59% in 2024. Almost two-thirds of Republican and Republican-leaning voters think undocumented immigrants should not be allowed to stay in the country legally, a number that increased from 42% in 2020. About the same number of republican voters now contend national deportation efforts, giving clear mandates for restrictive immigration policies [12].

Trump implemented extremely tough measures against immigrants after being elected. After entering the White House, President Trump immediately responded to rising public opinion against immigration with swift and extreme measures. He declared a national emergency at the southern border, labeling migration an "invasion." He militarized the border with executive orders, deploying 10,000 military personnel and spending $376 million on border enforcement, including surveillance towers, naval assets, and active-duty troops. He set a goal of deporting 1 million immigrants annually, expanded the expedited removal nationwide, introduced daily arrest quotas, and permitted enforcement at previously protected sensitive locations. He also breaks away from the long-term tradition of welcoming refugees by suspending refugee admissions indefinitely, affecting at least 22,000 approved refugees, freezing processing for nearly 600,000 applicants, and pausing green card processing for refugees and asylum seekers, leaving thousands in legal limbo. His policies also target the economic well-being of immigrants. He revoked Social Security numbers for flagged migrants, cutting off access to banking and employment. Extended detention is also remarkable when he signed multi-billion-dollar contracts with private prison operators to expand ICE detention capacity to

100,000 beds. His policies also raise concerns about American openness to academic freedom and international competition by revoking visas for thousands of international students. Furthermore, he unprecedentedly signed an executive order seeking to end birthright citizenship for children of undocumented immigrants and temporary visa holders [1]. This move would make it harder for immigrants to get legal status and raise concerns among constitutional scholars.

Trump's mass deportation hurts various industries, stalling economic growth Research consistently shows that mass deportations would not create jobs for native-born workers but instead destroy millions of them. The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) estimates that if 4 million immigrants are deported over four years, the U.S. would lose 5.9 million jobs, including 3.3 million immigrant jobs and 2.6 million jobs held by U.S.-born workers [13]. This outcome stems from the fact that immigrant and native employment are often complementary, meaning employers reduce demand for U.S.-born workers when immigrant labor is removed. The U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee (JEC) similarly finds that for every 500,000 immigrants deported, 44,000 U.S.-born workers lose their jobs, underlining that mass deportations shrink the entire labor force rather than reallocating jobs to citizens [3]. The sectors most dependent on immigrant labor, construction, agriculture, hospitality, and childcare, would be devastated by mass deportations. According to EPI, the construction workforce would shrink by nearly 19%, losing 1.4 million immigrant jobs and 861,000 U.S.-born jobs, while the childcare industry would contract by 15%, eliminating over half a million positions [13]. The JEC similarly projects that deportations would remove 1.5 million construction workers and 225,000 agricultural workers, creating severe shortages in housing and food production. These losses would drive up consumer prices, with economists estimating that deporting 8.3 million immigrants could raise prices by up to 9.1% by 2028 [3]. Rather than stabilizing the labor market, mass deportations would create bottlenecks in essential industries, increasing costs for American families. Beyond industry-specific effects, mass deportations would deliver a macroeconomic shock comparable to a recession. The JEC projects that deporting 8.3 million immigrants would reduce the U.S. GDP by 7.4% by 2028, effectively wiping out all projected economic growth for a presidential term. Even a smaller-scale deportation of 1.3 million would cut GDP by 1.2% and reduce employment by 1.1% [3]. EPI echoes these concerns, warning that large-scale deportations would "wipe out employment growth that the Congressional Budget Office had forecast for 2025–2029," plunging the U.S. into a recession-like downturn [13]. Far from benefiting the U.S.-born workers, such policies would shrink demand, reduce consumer spending, and stall long-term economic progress.

Immigrants are not only workers but also taxpayers, contributing nearly $580 billion annually in taxes and $1.6 trillion in spending power. Deportations would remove these contributions, creating massive fiscal shortfalls. The JEC estimates deportations would cut $23 billion annually from Social Security and $6 billion from Medicare, accelerating the insolvency of these programs [3]. EPI further shows that deportations weaken bargaining power and workplace protections, leading to lower wages, more wage theft, and higher injury rates not just for immigrants but for U.S.-born workers who share labor markets [13]. Thus, deportations harm fiscal stability and degrade working conditions across the economy.

6. Conclusion

This paper has shown how immigration in the United States becomes politicized through media coverage. Polarized narratives split public opinion and often lead to restrictive immigration policies. These policies hurt both immigrants and the broader American economy.

The evidence makes this clear. Fox News uses threat frames that firmly push the public toward restriction. Outlets like CNN and MSNBC use "humanitarian" frames, which build sympathy but do not change public opinion much. Once opinion shifts toward restriction, policymakers act quickly and forcefully. Damhof's study shows that restrictive views translate into law more reliably than inclusive ones. The Trump 2.0 administration is a strong example. Fueled by strong public opinion

against immigration during the 2024 electoral climate, Trump carried out harsh measures like militarized borders, expanded detention, and mass deportations once in office.

These actions harm more than just immigrants. Research by Lee, Nakphong, and Young shows that immigrants blocked from stable jobs end up in unsafe and low-paying work, damaging their health. The Dallas Fed found that enforcement lowers wages and destabilizes industries. The Migration Policy Institute and others show that restriction reduces productivity, slow innovation, and weakens long-term economic growth. Reports from the Economic Policy Institute and the Joint Economic Committee warn that mass deportations would devastate the U.S. economy, cutting millions of jobs, worsening labor shortages, raising prices, and reducing tax revenue for Social Security and Medicare.

Taken together, the findings show that restrictionist policies are both harmful to immigrants and damaging to the economy. U.S. policy currently rewards negative narratives and punishes positive ones, creating a politically beneficial but economically destructive cycle. Immigration should not be seen as a zero-sum conflict between Americans and newcomers. Instead, it is an engine of growth and innovation. To break the cycle, the debate must shift. Immigration must be recognized as a structural need for America's prosperity. Only then can the U.S. design a system that balances security with realism and restriction by recognizing immigrants' essential contributions.

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