

MIGRATION BETWEEN LATIN AMERICA AND THE UNITED STATES IN 2015-2018. DIFFERENCES IN IMMIGRATION POLICIES BETWEEN THE OBAMA AND TRUMP ADMINISTRATIONS

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Abstract

The discussion about immigration to the United States of America was a vast and complex topic that has been extended over a period of more than two centuries. The view about immigration changed through the passing of time, however, in recent times it was a product of two very different ideals expressed between 2015 and 2018. This subject is extremely relevant because it comprises millions of lives that could have suffered a significant change due to the constantly shifting policies.

This paper aims to analyse the socio-political changes that have been generated by the creation and modification of immigration-related bills in the short, yet relevant period which comprises three years. The conclusions that have surfaced from this research are that the immigration policies were focused on stabilising the statute of immigrants before the Trump Administration. This administration modified them so to have a nationalist approach. It is important to state the negative impact that the immigration policies had upon the development of society because most recently the same bills that should create a stronger society have managed to divide it.

Keywords

Illegal migration; Mexico; migration; policy-making; society; United States of America.

1. INTRODUCTION

This comparative paper is structured in several chapters in order to analyse each administration and offer a comparison between the two, it is still relevant to discuss today about the immigration policies of the two administrations so to better understand the starting point of the Biden administration.

When thinking about immigration from Latin America to the United States of America, one of the first ideas that is brought up is that the topic represents a multifaceted process that can be altered by numerous unknown influences, such as socio-political and economic ones. From that idea, one of the first conclusions that can be drawn is that depending on the influences mentioned above, the migratory process can be legal or illegal. An important mention to be made is that Latin America is the largest source of immigrants to the United States of America, and over 50% of the foreign-born in the last-mentioned country in 2019 have Latin American nationalities (Lopez and Radford 2017).

The United States has a long history of immigration, and its immigration policy has undergone numerous changes over time. Several key pieces of legislation have shaped the modern immigration system, including the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the Refugee Act of 1980, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and the Immigration Act of 1990. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, also known as the McCarran-Walter Act, marked a significant shift in U.S. immigration policy. It replaced earlier laws that had favoured immigrants from Northern and Western Europe and established a new system that prioritised family reunification and skills-based immigration. The Act (Cornell Law School 1952) also established quotas for each country, limiting the number of immigrants who could come from any given nation. For example, we can

observe that 131,135 visas out of the yearly total of 154,277 visas (The Immigration Nationality and Act 1952) were awarded to northern and Western European countries. Taking this information into account, the Asian nations had lower quotas, of just 100 visas per country per year.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, (Cornell Law School 1965) was a major reform that abolished the quota system established by the 1952 Act. It replaced the national origin quotas with a system that prioritised family reunification and employment-based immigration. The Act also eliminated racial and ethnic restrictions on immigration, paving the way for increased diversity in the U.S. On the other hand, The Refugee Act of 1980 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 1980) established a formal process for admitting refugees into the U.S. and defined who qualified as a refugee. The Act created the Office of Refugee Resettlement to oversee the resettlement of refugees and established funding for refugee assistance programmes.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 1986) addressed the issue of illegal immigration by establishing penalties for employers who hired undocumented workers and providing a path to legalisation for some undocumented immigrants who had been in the U.S. since 1982. Afterward, The Immigration Act of 1990 increased the number of immigrants allowed into the U.S. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 1990) and expanded family-based and employment-based immigration. The Act also created the Diversity Visa Lottery, which allows individuals from countries with low rates of immigration to the U.S. to apply for visas.

The Real ID Act is a federal law that was enacted in 2005 in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The law (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2005) established new minimum-security standards for state-issued driver's licenses and identification cards, which included requirements for proof of identity and lawful status in the United States. The law was controversial due to concerns about privacy and the cost and logistical challenges of implementing the new standards. The following year, The Secure Fence Act of 2006 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2006) authorised the construction of hundreds of miles of

fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border in an effort to curb illegal immigration. The law was controversial due to concerns about the cost and effectiveness of the fence.

In 2020, the leading country that generated immigrants for the United States of America was Mexico with 11.2 million new-borns (Esterline and Batalova 2022) in the country of migration. Other top contributors to the immigrant new-born population are represented by El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and other Central American countries. The vast number of immigrants arrived from Latin America to the United States of America has risen in the last 50 years. For example, in 2020 the statistics showed that over 19.5 million Latin American individuals were residing in the United States of America, totaling a percentage of 47% (PEW Research Center 2022) of all immigrants that were living in said country.

The migratory reasons for each individual differ, however, we can encounter different similarities among them, such as the economic factor in order to ensure a better lifestyle, family reunification (Esterline and Batalova 2022) because of the migratory waves of the past, as well as a harsh and complicated life in the country from where the immigrants depart which consists of violence due to political instability and gang-related activities. The above-mentioned gang-related activities represented a large factor in recent years and are made of different types of trafficking (Babich and Batalova 2021), included but not limited to drug trafficking, human trafficking, sexual trafficking, and child labour abuse. The topic of discussion which consists of the illegal migratory waves from Latin America has represented a large political issue for the United States of America for the past century. Many administrations have tried to tackle this issue by imposing restrictions, as well as aid packages, however, the results were not as effective as the initiators stated in the promulgated bills. Lately, the Trump administration desired to implement a package of policies in order to terminate this illegal wave. This package consisted mostly of enforcement policies that were not beneficial for the people in need, (Nazario 2020) because they emphasized a nationalistic approach, without taking into consideration several causes, such as the division of families, and included building a large wall along the United States of America-Mexico border.

The Latin part of the American continent is well known in the world for its constant migration, and for having a rich history when coming to this topic and due to the fact that it comprised several waves over a long time. An interesting example could be represented by the Mexican wave which worked in agriculture in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as another wave in the same period of time in which El Salvador and Guatemala faced a complicated issue due to the political instability which generated violence in said countries. (Tienda and Sanchez 2013). Even though illegal migration was frowned upon by the general population of the United States of America, it is important to mention that the hard workers who migrated illegally have been making vast contributions (New American Economy: Research Fund 2021) to the global superpower's economy. The people of which this group consists is mainly made up of workers that have day-to-day jobs in areas such as agriculture, construction, and hospitality. A parallel to be drawn is that these individuals work in industries which are not very appealing to the citizens of the United States of America (Esterline and Batalova 2022), however, they are very important for the country's economy. In order to draw the line over this introduction, the migratory process towards the United States of America from Latin American countries is a particularly complicated issue that has shaped and will be shaping the continent's demographics, social life, cultural life, economics as well as politics. The immigration from the southern part of the continent towards its northern part has been on the political agendas, and in public and political debate for decades. Opinions have been divided, a part of the U.S. society has been advocating for tougher immigration policies, and the other part for more lenient ideas so to reach the goal of citizenship for undocumented individuals. Immigration is separated into two main paths: legal and illegal. In order to properly analyse the immigration policies, it is particularly relevant to discuss the two trends.

2.LEGAL AND ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION FROM LATIN AMERICA

The southern part of the American continent, consisting of Latin America, has represented the largest part of the world from where most immigrants arrive in the United States. This constant development has been going on for centuries and has had many changes and restrictions over the years. In 2016, for example, there were around 11.3 million unauthorised individuals residing in the United States, most of whom were Mexicans, which represented around 78% of this number (Passel and Cohn 2019). From 2006 to 2016, this total decreased by almost 1,000,000 individuals, as data shows us. In 2007 we witnessed a peak of 12.2 million unauthorised individuals residing within the United States of America (Krogstad and Gonzalez Barrera 2019). An important mention to be made is that such as the illegal immigration towards the United States of America decreased, the legal migration has been declining in recent years as well. The Department of Homeland Security stated that in 2015 there were 467,370 legal immigrants from Latin America however we can see a slight decrease the following year to 427,318 individuals and an even further decrease in 2017 to 414,238 people (United States Department of Homeland Security 2019). By interpreting the data of the United States Department of Homeland Security it is visible that around 2.8 million legal immigrants resided within the United States of America between 2015 and 2018 that came from Latin American countries. Over 1.1 million of these people arrived from Mexico, and the rest from other Latin American countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Bolivia, Cuba, and others (United States Department of Homeland Security 2021). The decline in the number of immigrants has many causes, however, one of the main causes was generated by the shift in policies done by the Trump administration, which desired to have less permissive migratory policies. For example, in 2017, the above-mentioned administration concluded the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme, which was instituted in order to help and protect young undocumented citizens, mostly minors, from deportation. This programme was generated so to help with familiar reunification where the

parents migrated illegally to the United States of America so to obtain a better life for their young due to the socio-economic situation in their countries. At the same time, the Trump administration introduced more restrictions for mostly Muslim countries, by announcing a travel ban for those individuals. This action caused a reaction of uncertainty and fear for all of the immigrants all over the world, but mostly for the ones residing within the United States of America. Also, in that period of time, the same administration generated harsher legislative procedures, such as ramping up deportations and immigration raids, creating a more difficult pass towards the obtainment of visas and green cards, and complicating the migratory process for individuals (Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera 2019) that desire to remain and work within the United States of America.

As previously stated, the numbers representing illegal immigration from Latin America towards the United States of America had a constant decline in recent years due to the actions that the Trump administration has been taking and can be observed in the following numbers (Telles and Hinojosa-Ojeda 2021). In 2016, there were 6.2 million illegal migrants, a decrease of more than 1.5 million, when comparing it to the 7.7 million in 2007 (Passel and Cohn 2019). The largest part of undocumented immigrants who arrived from Latin America have Mexican nationalities because of the proximity of the two countries and the large border between them. While focusing only on the unauthorised immigrants that arrived from Mexico in the United States of America, we can observe that the number has decreased as well from 2007 until 2016 from 6.9 million to 5.4 million (Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera 2019). The decreased number over the above-mentioned decade consists of several factors, which include but are not limited to better economic conditions in Latin America that generate improvement in day-to-day life, stronger policies to affect the people in need in those countries, as well as stronger border security in the United States of America, tougher security measures, and also a constant change in U. S. immigration policies.

3. IMMIGRATION POLICY OF THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Barack Obama's administration had a supportive approach toward people that needed help with the migratory process, which can be observed from the policies that were instated during his presidency. Said policies had a focus on improving border security, increasing legal migratory opportunities, creating an easier and smoother path for immigrants from all over the world, and also providing a better system so to generate citizenship for undocumented individuals. Some of these individuals have been residing within the United States of America for decades and did not have a chance to obtain legality over their citizenship due to the policies that were constantly changing. Barack Obama's administration had an approach that was different, and started the process with a root cause analysis of migration and generated policies such as the promotion of social economic development in Latin American countries, which was one of the most important reasons for immigration, as well as a package so to help the democratic governance in the region, which was also one of the most important causes due to the effects that semi-democratic governance had upon migration (The White House 2014). The Obama administration also invested large amounts of money in border security but was focused on technological development and aid packages. At the same time, a large sum of one billion U.S. dollars (Isacson and Kinoshian 2015) was invested in order to apprehend drug trafficking individuals before they entered the United States of America and committed drug-related crimes on the territory (The White House 2014). A relevant mention to be made is that due to the technological advancement of border security in the apprehension of drug-related individuals, The United States of America had a chance to offer support to Latin American countries which faced the same problem and helped obtain a victory in the long battle against drugs.

During the presidency of Barack Obama, a special focus existed on generating more opportunities for legal immigration for Latin Americans. For example, in 2014 the administration began a programme which was called Central American

Minors (CAM). Through this programme 51,705 children from countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were able to obtain refugee status in the United States of America (National Immigration Forum 2021) in order to begin the transition towards a calmer life, with fewer problems, and with a higher degree of safety, which comes with a lot of opportunities for their future as young adults (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2015). By performing a comparison with 2013, the number doubled, as in 2013 there were only 20,805 minors (National Immigration Forum 2021) that used this programme. In order to continue the childhood safety programmes in stated by the United States of America, the Obama enlarged the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programme (DACA). This programme offered temporary protection against deportation for children who had their parents residing legally or illegally within the territory of the United States of America, as well as work authorisation for undocumented immigrants that passed the age of 18, however, entered the United States of America as children (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2016). As previously stated, millions of undocumented immigrants arrived in the United States of America for years, or even decades before having the opportunity of sorting out their paperwork in order to become citizens that benefited from full rights and were able to legally be part of the society in which they resided for said period of time.

During the early years of the Obama administration, there has been a constant shift toward having an easier and safer path toward the obtainment of citizenship for undocumented immigrants. 2013 marks an important point in this human rights battle because the administration worked with the Gang of Eight. This group comprises senators from both parties, such as Michael Bennet, Dick Durbin, Lindsey Graham, and Marco Rubio among others. There was cross-party cooperation between the Republicans and the Democrats due to the importance found in generating a reform bill, named Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013, that comprises only the necessary actions to be taken in order to obtain full citizenship rights. At the same time, the above-mentioned bill was meant to reform the legal part of the immigration system, by establishing a shorter, clearer, and safer path to obtaining a green card, with safer benchmarks. The bill would also offer more

border security for the United States of America's border agents as well as a workplace verification of employers to reduce illegal work (Seung 2013). Unfortunately, the bill did not pass Congress, because it needed enhancements and the bureaucratic aspects have hindered it (Wolgin 2015), and remained as an ideal, but can be seen as a milestone for future administrations which could action accordingly so to reach the scope of the bill (Los Angeles Times 2013). Having a starting point the tackling of the causes of migration, either legal or illegal, the Obama administration considered that an important point to be reached during the presidency was to reduce the number of undocumented immigrants who entered the territory of the United States of America. Along with offering the possibility of having a smoother migratory transition in a legal manner, the administration also promoted social and economic development in Latin American countries, as well as a package of assistance in order to reach a higher democratic governance percentage in Latin American countries. One of programmes was the Alliance for Prosperity, which provided economic assistance and funding to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Reuters Team 2016).

4. IMMIGRATION POLICY OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Just as the Obama administration tried and succeeded prior to Donald Trump obtaining the presidency of the United States of America, the new administration focused also on reducing illegal immigration and increasing border security, however, the ways of working were completely different and that generated different results. This administration besides implementing policies that would result in the reduction of illegal immigration also implemented policies to reduce the legal immigration of Latin Americans as well. At the same time, a lot of effort was put into limiting the aid offered to Latin American countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras that

were not cooperating with the United States of America's immigration enforcement tactics (Wroughton 2019).

The Trump administration had a priority to obtain border security, which was viewed as a leading policy by the government when talking about Latin American relations. During this period of time the funding for a safer border was introduced as a need of protection against immigrants, so, in order to reach this need, the administration implemented a “zero tolerance” policy which was not meant to help the people outside of the United States of America, but to keep them as far away as possible (Refugees International 2018). These actions had several results, which are not as positive as the ones from the past administration (Collier 2020), and included, among other outcomes, the separation of families at the border (CNN 2018). Another key aspect of the priorities of the Trump administration was to build a large barrier, in the shape of a wall all along The United States of America-Mexico border (The White House 2017). This was not the first time that a wall was introduced in the barrier between Mexico and the United States of America, however, during this presidency, the development of policies so to achieve this goal reached new heights. The desire to have as a priority the well-being only of the citizens that were able to adjust their paperwork, without caring for their families as well as other individuals in need are aspects that could be represented by this barrier.

The limitations imposed by the Trump administration did not stop with the desire of separation, but continued with the conclusion of several programmes which were meant to help people so that they could start, and live in the United States of America. For example, we can observe that the policies implemented to restrict legal immigration from Latin America had a large impact in 2017 when this administration did a series of programmes meant to help the people in need. One of the programmes was the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Since 2017, the temporary protection from deportation and the possibility to obtain work authorisation for undocumented individuals that arrived to the United States of America as children, that were either still minors and needed protection from deportation in order to remain with their parents, or they were young adults that needed to work in order to support their families that resided either in the United States of America or in other parts of the world

were not possible anymore (Shear and Hirschfeld 2017). An important mention to be made at this point is that the Trump administration specifically generated harder conditions for people that had residency in certain Latin American countries to obtain visas and green cards, as shown in the statistics their numbers dropped.

Another key aspect to be taken into account for this administration is that it implemented several policies and pressured Latin American countries to cooperate with the immigration efforts. Said pressure came from threats, such as the fact that the administration will end the aid to Latin American countries that did not start preventing their citizens from immigrating to the United States of America, mostly in an illegal manner. Two years after the end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme the Trump administration signed a contentious agreement with Guatemala (Reuters Team 2019) through which the government of the United States of America was able to send back to Guatemala the asylum seekers that were in need of protection (BBC News 2020). The Asylum Cooperation Agreement refers to the possibility of the United States of America government to remove migrants in need of humanitarian protection and send them to their countries. The three targeted countries were El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (U.S. Homeland Security 2020).

5. COMPARISON OF THE ACTIONS OF THE TWO ADMINISTRATIONS

Even though the two administrations worked for around a decade they had completely different approaches to their immigration policies with regard to undocumented immigration, legal immigration, and border security. On one side, the Obama administration implemented several programmes which intended to help people, mostly children, and desired to have a point to reach familiar reunification, such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that started in 2012 and was expanded to also include the parents of children that were born in the United States of America and were citizens. This

expansion generated the possibility to help the parents to obtain lawful residency so as to have the families united and living without fear of deportation. On the other hand, the Trump administration concluded several of these programmes and had a policy to separate families at the border (Shear and Hirschfeld 2017). By acting in this manner, it was considered that people would think twice before beginning the migratory path because they would have to make the choice between family unification and the possibility of leading a better life and helping economically the part of the family that remained behind. The two administrations had as a priority border security, however, while the Obama administration focused on having better technology to have a safer border, the Trump administration focused on division by building barriers which are best described by the wall between the neighbouring countries, as well as more security personnel. The Obama administration on the other hand wanted to strengthen relations between the United States of America and the Latin American countries to address the problem from its cause in order to have more possibilities for individuals (Acosta and Collinson 2014).

The Obama administration had as a focus point a vast immigration reform that would create a smoother path to citizenship for all individuals that were undocumented which would have as a result a growth in the number of legal immigrants from Latin American countries (The White House 2017). As a direct comparison to the hard work put in by the previous administration in order to achieve its goals, the Trump administration generated policies that were very restrictive what is the legal and illegal immigration of Latin American individuals and also created a more difficult path for individuals to reach the visa programmes and the green cards (BBC News 2020).

Another comparison between the two administrations is that during the Obama administration, several efforts were made to strengthen the bilateral relationships with Latin American countries and to emphasise the causes of illegal immigration, which include poverty, (BBC News 2014) violence, corruption, and other aspects that come from this spectrum (Brookings Institute 2015). The Obama administration offered aid constantly to the countries in the region in order to support their economic development and security both internally and externally (BBC News 2014). On the other hand, the Trump

administration pressured Latin American leaders to cooperate with the United States of America's immigration enforcement efforts by imposing threats to end the necessary aid for said countries in order to keep their citizens to stop immigrating to the United States of America.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The immigration policies proposed by the two administrations from 2015 to 2018 were completely different, and they reflected vastly contradictory proposals and attitudes towards immigration and the individuals that are involved in this complicated path. Under the Obama administration, the focus was on a reform that would help people and that would provide a clearer and less complicated pathway for citizenship, as well as reduce visa backlogs and strengthen border security. More worker permits were issued in this period of time, and more protection against deportation was offered through different programmes both for children and for adults. At the same time, the Obama administration prioritised the safety of the country and its citizens, by beginning a deportation process for criminals that posed a threat to national security.

On the other hand, we can observe that in the Trump administration, a series of restrictive immigration policies were implemented, which targeted undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers, mostly from Latin American countries. This administration began a complex process of increasing border security by dividing families, best seen by the ideal of the construction of a border wall and by creating more jobs as Border Patrol agents. This administration at the same time decided to restrict also legal immigration through several measures such as travel bans, or the termination of several programmes which were meant to include diversity, such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and the Diversity Visa Lottery among others. This action generated a legal battle, which is still ongoing as this paper is being written.

The difference shown between the two administrations reflects priorities and attitudes of leaders towards individuals, national security, and bilateral

cooperation. The first administration promoted the integration of undocumented immigrants into American Society, which was a task that a lot of administrations before this one did not take into account. The Trump administration prioritised the protection of American jobs and American citizens, without taking into account the impact that these policies would have on immigrants and their families, as well as on the American Society, which comprises undocumented workers as well, and on the economy which was affected. A relevant aspect to be pointed out is that the Biden administration has begun to reverse the last administration's policies in order to ensure a better future for the individuals that reside within the United States of America, that are either documented or undocumented. The topic of immigration remains a particularly divisive and complex issue on the American continent that impacts the social life, the economic life in the political life of all parties involved, as well as the bilateral and multilateral relations between countries.

In the shift of power between the Obama and Trump administrations we can observe a uniqueness in the history of the United States of America regarding the alternation of completely opposite approaches in such a short period of time. The implications of policy coherence are negative because of the vast differences caused by the change. The economy had to suffer, as well as the immigrants themselves because the organisation for each individual when migrating takes years, and taking into account the shifting policies, the plans made are no longer feasible.

The new Biden administration tries to return to the path which was promoted in the past and approaches the new change of policies accordingly. The future seems bright, and several steps have been taken already, such as the halt in the construction of the border wall, ending travel restriction bans for several countries, and the creation of the US Citizenship Act of 2021 as an alternative to the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013, however, I consider that it is just a matter of time to see the conclusions on this difficult topic.

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