

# Demographic Dystopias: Criminalizing Immigration in U.S. Election Campaigns

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Some of us are illegal, and some are  
not wanted,  
Our work contract's out and we have to  
move on;  
Six hundred miles to that Mexican  
border,  
They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers,  
like thieves.  
– Woody Guthrie, “Deportees (Plane  
Wreck at Los Gatos)”<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Intuitions of Crime: Immigration, Nativism, and the Noncitizen Vote

In 1854, Henry Winter Davis of Maryland was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as a member of the nativist American Party. Through its various iterations as the Know-Nothing Party and the Native American Party, the American Party sought to suppress the political influence of the growing number of immigrants entering the U.S. In his address to Congress on January 6, 1857, Davis challenged the validity of James Buchanan's election during the previous year. The result had been marred, Davis claimed, by a large number of noncitizen votes. In his telling, “vast multitudes of foreign-born citizens [who were] ignorant of American interests, without American feelings, influenced

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1 Woody Guthrie, “Deportees (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos),” words by Woody Guthrie, music by Marty Hoffman, Ludlow Music Inc. of New York, 1961.

by foreign sympathies,” had been naturalized by the thousands on the eve of the election. These individuals were allegedly to blame for the fraudulent outcome of the elections. Swayed by religious zealotry, these voters had, according to Davis, aggressively usurped the “national spirit” through the “danger and degradation” of their alien loyalties.<sup>2</sup>

Davis’ concern that ignorant and illiterate foreigners had been manipulated to swing the election in James Buchanan’s favor aligned with the Know-Nothing Party’s support for strict immigration policies and naturalization periods of twenty-one years, which were aimed at limiting the power of immigrants at the polls. The party’s platform also included measures to ensure that only native-born white Anglo-Saxon Protestants could hold public office.<sup>3</sup> Both Davis and the Know-Nothings reacted to a demographic shift of unprecedented magnitude. The years between 1850 and 1860 witnessed the highest level of immigration in U.S. history, caused by the many Irish and Germans, most of them Catholic, who had fled famine and economic hardship in Europe, leading to a vicious backlash from nativist Americans. White members of the Know-Nothing Party even referred to themselves as Native Americans, thus co-opting the term from Indigenous peoples, who had been previously displaced, in order to express their own fears of displacement. Their promotional insignia included a U.S. American flag emblazoned with the message “Native Americans Beware of Foreign Influence” (Figure 1). As the sociologist Ron Eyerman has noted, the nativist sentiment conveyed by this flag prefigured the “fears of elimination that mobilize the white power movement today.”<sup>4</sup> The peak of immigration was reached in 1854, and, by the following year, immigrants had outnumbered native-born citizens in several Northern cities, including Chicago and Detroit. The same trend would soon emerge in New York and Cleveland.<sup>5</sup>

Davis was not wrong about the susceptibility of Irish and German immigrants to populist political messaging. The son of poor Irish immigrants him-

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- 2 Henry Winter Davis, “The Teachings of the Late Election,” in *Speeches and Addresses Delivered in the Congress of the United States, and on Several Public Occasions* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1867), 81.
  - 3 Marius M. Carriere, *The Know Nothings in Louisiana* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 57–58.
  - 4 Ron Eyerman, *The Making of White American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 134.
  - 5 Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8.

self, Andrew Jackson made significant inroads with these groups with his veneration of the common man, his fight against elitism, and his vocal, albeit selective, egalitarianism. His plainspoken, straightforward speeches tapped into the aspirations of the white lower classes and garnered him support, especially among impoverished and disenfranchised immigrants, who warmed to his promise to protect their interests against various ‘others’ who were even less ‘white’ than themselves, including Blacks and Indigenous people. In his Farewell Address of 1837, Jackson solidified the tripartite division of the U.S. American society into wealthy elites, the patriotic, hardworking middle-class majority – “the bone and sinew of the country” to which white immigrants strove to belong – and an underclass of social parasites.<sup>6</sup> Driven by a desire for economic opportunity and social mobility, many naturalized immigrants aligned their voting preferences with those of native-born citizens.



Figure 1: Know-Nothing Party Flag, circa 1850.<sup>7</sup>

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- 6 Thomas J. McInerney and Fred L. Israel, eds., *Presidential Documents: The Speeches, Proclamations, and Policies that Have Shaped the Nation from Washington to Clinton* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 86. See also Takis S. Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 87.
- 7 “Know-Nothing Party Flag,” circa 1850. Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Digital\\_Reproduction\\_of\\_the\\_Know-Nothing\\_Party\\_Flag.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Digital_Reproduction_of_the_Know-Nothing_Party_Flag.jpg).

Yet the intersection of whiteness and anti-immigration rhetoric on the eve of the Civil War was more nuanced than Henry Winter Davis' xenophobic fear-mongering might suggest. An ardent abolitionist, Davis rejected the South's claim that slavery was a divinely ordained practice. He recognized the moral bankruptcy of the institution and worked tirelessly to prevent the expansion of slavery to new territories.<sup>8</sup> His postwar support for extending voting rights to African Americans underscored his commitment to civil rights and marked him as a progressive figure in Reconstruction-era politics. However, Catholic Irish and German immigrants remained outside the scope of his democratic vision. These immigrant groups instilled in him and many of his contemporaries fears of economic competition and undue political influence in ways beyond the reach of the already excluded and ostracized African American population.

After all, the path towards citizenship, the ballot box, and political participation were all readily available to white immigrants. Prior to the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, the Black codes had effectively denied suffrage to Blacks in most Southern legislatures. In Davis' view, African Americans posed less of a danger to the social and political order. Nativists, like Davis, could envision a marginal place for African Americans in the nation's political fabric, which would be shaped by their purported racial inferiority and history of enslavement. Yet the same Nativists feared Irish and German immigrants as an unassimilable, disruptive force. The Irish, in particular, were seen as inclined to incite riots. The distinction that was made between African Americans and Irish persons highlights how perceptions of 'otherness' have not always hinged on skin color on the U.S. political stage, but also on factors such as religion, class, and economic competition.

Contemporary political discourse witnesses similar outcries about the alleged illegal influence of immigrants on election outcomes, most notably in Donald J. Trump's claims of voter fraud following his loss in the 2020 election. Trump insisted that between three and five million illegal votes had been cast in 2016, a narrative that was echoed by his supporters despite a complete lack of evidence. Research has found that illegal voting by noncitizens is extremely rare. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University looked at forty-two jurisdictions that accounted for 23.5 million votes in the 2016 presidential election. It found only thirty incidents of possible noncitizen voting,

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8 Michael D. Robinson, *A Union Indivisible: Secession and the Politics of Slavery in the Border South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 206.

or 0.0001% of the total votes cast.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in May 2024, Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives unveiled a bill to ban noncitizens from voting in federal elections, thereby explicitly prohibiting something that had already been illegal since 1996. Although the legislation initiative is unlikely to pass in the Democratic-led Senate, it draws attention to Trump's unsubstantiated allegations of widespread voter fraud.

House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters in a press conference on the Capitol steps: "We all know – intuitively – that a lot of illegals are voting in federal elections. But it's not been something that is easily provable," without presenting any evidence.<sup>10</sup> The proposed Safeguard American Voter Eligibility, or SAVE Act, requires prospective voters to submit documentation of U.S. citizenship in order to be able to cast a ballot and demands that states purge foreign nationals from their voter rolls. Democrats have blasted the bill as a non-issue and a stunt designed to sow confusion ahead of the 2024 election rematch between Trump and Joe Biden. But such measures raise serious concerns among voting rights advocates, who fear that many citizens do not have passports, birth or naturalization certificates on hand, documents that can be expensive to obtain and create barriers to accessing the ballot box.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter situates the 2024 election within a long history of U.S. anti-immigrant campaign discourses that criminalize foreign-born populations. Reflecting on the shifting configuration of these narratives from the 1860s onward until Trump, I want to address the following questions: What myths about immigration and crime animate campaign discourses and platforms? How have these cultural and legal frameworks emerged and evolved over time? What do these framings tell us about the ever-changing intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and religion along the borders of the United States? And, how do recent election cycles mobilize earlier imaginaries of immigrant crime, and the trope of immigration as a criminal act?

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9 Douglas Keith, Myrna Pérez, and Christopher Famighetti, "Noncitizen Voting: The Missing Millions," Brennan Center for Justice, May 5, 2017, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/noncitizen-voting-missing-millions>.

10 David Morgan and Nathan Layne, "US Republicans Target Noncitizen Voting, as Trump Keeps Up False Voter Fraud Claims," Reuters, May 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-republicans-target-noncitizen-voting-trump-keeps-up-false-voter-fraud-claims-2024-05-08/>.

11 Ian Vandewalker, "The Effects of Requiring Documentary Proof of Citizenship," Brennan Center for Justice, July 19, 2017, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/effects-requiring-documentary-proof-citizenship>.

My argument is that anti-immigrant U.S. election campaign rhetoric is not solely driven by racial animus and xenophobia, although these factors constitute its bedrock. Rather, specious claims about the inherent criminality of immigrants have thrived on a temptation that U.S. conservatives have faced since the mid-nineteenth century. The temptation is to react to demographic shifts by fabricating dystopian scenarios to whip up fear and gain political power. The goal of this strategy is not to secure political majorities, which are rarely attained through anti-immigrant campaign rhetoric. Instead, the aim is to mobilize a militant minority to the degree necessary to bolster a broadly exclusionary agenda on social issues such as welfare and labor rights that will win electoral victories, and, ultimately, control of the White House.

## 2. The Barrel and the Ballot Box

After the demographic watershed of 1860, widely circulated xenophobic caricatures dehumanized and ‘othered’ Irish immigrants as violent brawlers with subhuman features in a practice of “othering” that served to legitimize policies aimed to discourage or deter them from voting. A recurring stereotype of the Irish was that they were prone to drunken violence, as illustrated in a notorious 1867 *Harper’s Weekly* illustration, “The Day We Celebrate,” by cartoonist Thomas Nast (Figure 2). Despite the festive occasion, the scene looks turbulent and bloody. In March 1867, Irish immigrants from all over New York City converged on Broadway and Grand Street for the annual Saint Patrick’s Parade. The streets were still slick from a spring snowfall, and at the intersection of Pitt Street, members of a Brooklyn branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians were blocked by a stranded wagon. The unlucky wagon driver was attacked, and when the Metropolitan Police came to his aid, a full-scale riot broke out, injuring more than twenty police officers before the crowd was dispersed.<sup>12</sup>

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12 The New York Times, “Serious Affray Between the Police and One of the Brooklyn Societies,” March 19, 1867, <https://www.nytimes.com/1867/03/19/archives/st-patricks-day-the-celebration-of-the-daymilitary-and-civic.html>.



Figure 2: “The Day We Celebrate”<sup>13</sup>

The inflammatory image suggests that the presence and conduct of Irish immigrants undermine the social order and political stability of U.S. American cities. The focal point of the cartoon is an ape-like caricature of an Irishman wielding a club in a menacing pose that reflects nativist fears, while the background shows scenes of disorder and unrest, with mobs fighting and buildings in flames. Like many of the magazine’s readers, Nast was likely still haunted by the clashes of the New York City draft riots of 1863. Irish Americans, many of whom had been recently naturalized, protested the Enrolment Act passed by Congress that year forcing them to fight in the Civil War, which they felt affected them disproportionately. Irish working-class men had taken to the streets to express their resentment that they could not afford to avoid the draft by hiring a substitute or paying a fee. Wealthier men, including many better-paid African Americans, were able to do so, while enslaved Blacks living in Northern states were not being drafted as they were denied citizenship. The subsequent ransacking of Black homes led to a demographic shift in Manhattan, with many Black residents relocating to Brooklyn. After uncomfortably

13 Thomas Nast, “The Day We Celebrate” [illustration], *Harper’s Weekly*, April 6, 1867: 212. Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

sharing the same dilapidated social and economic spaces with African Americans and competing with them for the same low-wage jobs, the Irish became the ‘new Blacks’ in the 1860s. As historian Leslie Harris points out: “Occupying the jobs formerly the domain of blacks, jobs to which associations of servility and dependence still clung, the Irish experienced a prejudice akin to that blacks had endured for so long.”<sup>14</sup> The public image of the Irish, epitomized in Nast’s illustration, was at this point inextricably linked with representations of violent and degraded behavior.

Another engraving by Thomas Nast, “The Usual Irish Way of Doing Things,” published in *Harper’s Weekly* on September 2, 1871 (Figure 3), depicts a bestial Irishman with exaggerated features in a manner typical of Nast and other contemporary cartoonists, newspaper editors, writers, and opinion makers. Nast positions his grotesque figure atop a barrel of gunpowder, giving a concrete, destructive shape to the perceived volatility and danger associated with the Irish population. The message is that the Irish presence in America is a literal powder keg of imminent violence that is ready to explode at any moment. Adding to the image of danger, the Irishman brandishes a bottle of “demon rum,” highlighting that the link between the Irish and alcohol went beyond mere stereotype and revealed the intersection between nativism and the temperance movement gaining momentum during this period. As sociologist Joseph Gusfield has argued, temperance legislation served as a way to address the unrest and social upheaval caused by the immigrant urban poor whose culture ostensibly clashed with U.S. American Protestant morality.<sup>15</sup> Alcohol was seen as a malignant force, much like the newcomers themselves.

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14 Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 251.

15 Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 6.



Figure 3: "The Usual Irish Way of Doing Things"<sup>16</sup>

Violent Irish involvement in the Philadelphia riots of 1844, in which Nativists clashed with Irish immigrants over which version of the Bible should be used in public schools, and in the draft riots of 1863 fueled perceptions of a potential imported insurgency. The image of an Irishman perched on a barrel of gunpowder evokes the Fenian raids of the 1860s and 1870s, as well as various other Irish uprisings against British rule. It also references the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, whose use of explosives is embedded in the Anglo-American cultural memory as a hallmark of treason and subversion. In the U.S., riots often sprang from economic hardship and social injustice. Yet they were painted as evidence of an innate Irish unruliness. It bears mentioning that the perceived Irish propensity for excessive drinking, brawling, and political resistance in

16 Thomas Nast, "The Usual Irish Way of Doing Things" [wood engraving], Harper's Weekly, September 2, 1871. American Social History Project/Center for Media Learning, City University of New York.

fact stemmed from socioeconomic factors such as poor wages, low social status, and the trauma of the Great Famine. Negative stereotypes were also rooted in traditions of ritualized violence in rural Ireland, particularly the so-called faction fights, which were not uncommon in the pre-famine era as a form of sport or entertainment designed to defuse community tensions.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 4: Cartoon of Irish and German Immigrants Stealing American Elections.<sup>18</sup>

The Irishman's anger in Nast's illustration is inflamed by pro-Irish political broadsides, suggesting that Irish rebelliousness was a threat to U.S. political stability. This played into a broader fear of immigrant revolt at the ballot box,

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- 17 Jonny Geber and Barra O'Donnabhain, "Against Shameless and Systematic Calumny: Strategies of Domination and Resistance and Their Impact on the Bodies of the Poor in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," *Historical Archaeology* 54 (2020): 160–183.
- 18 John H. Coater, Cartoon of Irish and German immigrants Stealing American Elections, circa 1850. Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Screen-Shot-2021-02-16-at-1.webp>.

where increasing Irish and German turnout was met with suspicion and hostility. Building on this image of Irish disorder, other political cartoons directly tied immigration to election integrity. In a cartoon from the 1850s attributed to John H. Goater, two stereotypical immigrants, one Irish and one German, make off with a ballot box, while pandemonium ensues outside the building labeled “Election Day Polls” behind them (Figure 4). The Irish man is armored in a wooden barrel labeled “Irish Whiskey” and raises a club ominously, embodying the trope of the Irish as prone to disorder and criminality. Next to him, the German man is encased in a keg marked “Lager Bier,” with a pipe in his hand, rehashing the stereotype of the German immigrant as a heavy drinker. The carrying away of the ballot box positions the Irish and German voters as a threat to the nation’s democracy, while the chaotic scene at the polling station in the background adds to the sense of anarchy attached to immigrant participation in politics. As already noted, the familiar imagery of Irish and German voters as thieves and lushes owes much to the temperance movement, whose advocates linked drinking to crime. The even more pernicious message is that these immigrant groups are not only unfit to participate in democracy but are actively working to undermine it.

The incendiary appeals represented in these caricatures were highly effective tools of political propaganda, driving the base instincts of Nativist mobs to fever pitch, particularly on Election Day. After investigations had revealed that some immigrant Democrats could neither read nor name the candidates for whom they voted, American Party leaders urged supporters to “defend the purity of the ballot box.”<sup>19</sup> In the municipal election of April 1855, rumors of German immigrants tampering with ballot boxes prompted a riot in Cincinnati, Ohio. Know-Nothing mobs attacked the German section of the city and destroyed ballots to prevent them from being counted.<sup>20</sup> On August 6, 1855, in Louisville, Kentucky, the Know-Nothings formed armed groups to guard the polls in Irish and German neighborhoods, determined to use violence and intimidation to deter immigrants from casting ballots. Election violence also rocked Henry Winter Davis’ home state of Maryland on November 4, 1856, when Baltimore Democrats and Know-Nothings tried to drive each other out

19 Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 117.

20 William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 197.

of the polls and clashed with the police, many of whom were Irish American themselves.

Tensions had risen over whether the results of the election would be fairly polled. This had as much to do with anecdotal cases of Democrat voter fraud as with the gullibility of Know-Nothing agitators. Rabble-rousing rhetoric in newspapers, whose editors sometimes ran for office themselves, added fuel to the fire of anti-immigrant speculations. The American Party attracted many previous nonvoters to the polls who, unfamiliar as they were with the routines of elections, easily gave credence to the claims that Democrats were systematically conniving with immigrants to steal elections with illegitimate votes.

Cartoon portrayals of the Irish and Germans as bestial others, inflamed by alcohol and political agitation, reflected broader nativist sentiments that sought to criminalize and marginalize immigrant populations. But they also underscore the enduring power of visual media in steering public perceptions and policies toward immigrant groups. As we shall see, more recent electoral messaging also draws on visual clichés to stir up anxieties about supposedly delinquent minorities.

### **3. Legislative Criminalization: The Chinese Exclusion Era and the Immigration Act of 1924**

Election rhetoric that stigmatizes immigrants has often been accompanied by legislative measures barring immigrants from the workforce. In the late nineteenth century, economic protectionism led to a nation-wide Chinese scare and the institutionalization of anti-Chinese sentiment in U.S. American law, politics, and public discourse. This exclusion was especially harsh considering the exploitation of Chinese laborers throughout the expansion era. California's transition from a mining economy to industrial capitalism benefited greatly from their contributions and work ethic. During the California Gold Rush and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, the U.S. adopted an expedient open-door policy with China to meet the demand for foreign manpower. Yet when recession hit in the 1870s, U.S. American workers found themselves competing with Chinese immigrants and began to call for stricter regulations. During Rutherford B. Hayes' one-term presidency (1877–1881), he faced pressure particularly from his West Coast constituents to address the 'Chinese nuisance.' Hayes' veto of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1879 was motivated by polit-

ical pragmatism. Because the act violated a treaty with China, the veto did not express an endorsement of Chinese immigration.

The racially fueled panic over Chinese immigration went hand in hand with white workers' protest against capitalist corporations and industrial monopolies, with political candidates quickly adopting racist demagoguery to secure the working-class vote. As historian Alexander Sexton observed in his landmark study *The Indispensable Enemy*, "racial identification cut at right angles to class consciousness."<sup>21</sup> Nowhere was this entanglement more apparent than in the platform of the Workingmen's Party of California and in the speeches of its firebrand founder and advocate, Denis Kearney, who famously campaigned under the slogan "The Chinese Must Go!" A manifesto issued by the party bleakly proclaimed: "To an American, death is preferable to life on a par with the Chinese."<sup>22</sup> During cross-country tours that drew tens of thousands to his speeches, Kearney, himself an Irish immigrant, urged his supporters to arm themselves. These tensions culminated in a rally in San Francisco in 1877, after which his followers rampaged through Chinatown, smashing windows and setting buildings on fire.<sup>23</sup>

After Hayes declined to seek reelection, Republican James Garfield defeated Democratic candidate Winfield Hancock only by the smallest of margins in the popular vote. Both parties had made the restriction of Chinese immigration a centerpiece of their platforms, depicting Chinese immigrants as an economic and criminal menace. An 1880 cover illustration in *Puck* magazine visualizes the bipartisan political maneuvering over Chinese exclusion with particularly cavalier imagery (Figure 5). The two candidates, James Garfield on the left and Winfield Hancock on the right, are shown nailing a Chinese immigrant between two identical planks, indifferent to the man's imploring cries and outstretched arms.<sup>24</sup> Garfield and Hancock could take up the anti-Chinese cause without having to worry about alienating a key constituency. The U.S. Supreme Court had declared Chinese immigrants ineligible for naturalized citizenship in 1878 and therefore unable to vote. As the caption to the

21 Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 1.

22 Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11.

23 Mark Stein, *American Panic: A History of Who Scares Us and Why* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 75.

24 Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 191.

*Puck* illustration caustically quips, “where both platforms agree – no vote – no use to either party.” When President Chester Arthur finally signed the Chinese Restriction Act into law in 1882, thereby suspending Chinese immigration for ten years, it was the first time that the U.S. had barred immigrants based on their race or nationality. It would not be the last.

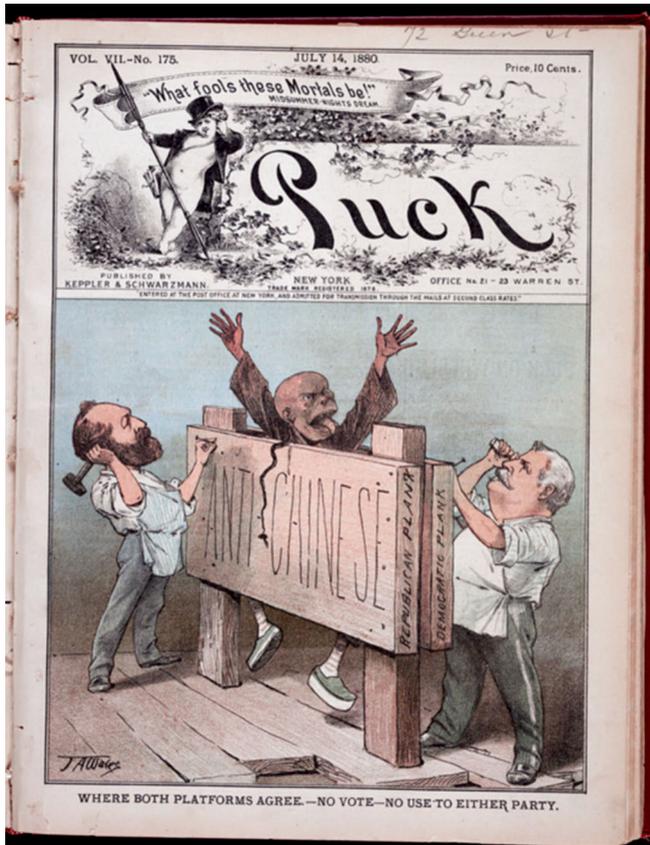


Figure 5: James Albert Wales, “Where Both Platforms Agree – No Vote – No Use to Either Party”<sup>25</sup>

- 25 James Albert Wales, “Where Both Platforms Agree – No Vote – No Use to Either Party” [cover], *Puck*, July 14, 1880. Library of Congress, Item 90707286. Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Where\\_both\\_platforms\\_agree-no\\_vote-no\\_use\\_to\\_either\\_party\\_-\\_J.A.\\_Wales.\\_LCCN90707286.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Where_both_platforms_agree-no_vote-no_use_to_either_party_-_J.A._Wales._LCCN90707286.jpg).

Concerns about the country's changing demographics also prompted the Immigration Act of 1924, which attempted to preserve an elusive ideal of U.S. American homogeneity by imposing quotas on immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and almost entirely excluding Asians. Calvin Coolidge, who was running for reelection in 1924, framed the Act as a necessary measure to prevent the saturation of the labor market and the suppression of wages caused by the surge of foreign workers. But he also portrayed immigrants from these countries as a social threat because of their alleged inability to assimilate into U.S. American culture. Drawing on pseudoscientific theories of eugenics that were popular at the time, Coolidge and other proponents of the law contended that the United States was fundamentally a nation of Western European descent and that immigrants from other regions would dilute the country's racial identity.

In 1921, while serving as Warren G. Harding's vice president, Coolidge wrote an essay for *Good Housekeeping* entitled "Whose Country Is This," in which he defended the 'right' kind of immigration: "Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides."<sup>26</sup> Accepting the Republican presidential nomination at the convention on August 14, 1924, Coolidge revealed his motivations while trying to stifle the racism that bubbled underneath:

Restrictive immigration is not an offensive but a defensive action. It is not adopted in criticism of others in the slightest degree, but solely for the purpose of protecting ourselves. We cast no aspersions on any race or creed, but we must remember that every object of our institutions of society and government will fall unless America be kept American.<sup>27</sup>

Coolidge adopted a strategy of criminalizing immigration itself rather than individual immigrants, which allowed him to cloak his xenophobic stance in a more palatable form than the blatant nativism of the nineteenth century. His coded language about the supposed failure of assimilation among non-

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26 Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 121.

27 John Bond Trevor, *Japanese Exclusion: A Study of the Policy and the Law* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1925), 1.

Western ethnic groups and his emphasis on Americanization reflected an association between immigration and national security that would not have been lost on his supporters. The cap on arrivals from Southern and Eastern Europe and from Asia forced people from these regions to enter the U.S. under false pretenses, adding to their stigmatization and creating a criminal aura around foreigners. Fear of foreign ideologies and the violence they might bring also played a role in the passage of the Immigration Act in 1924.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Bolshevism, concerns mounted that Eastern European immigrants would introduce radical communist ideologies into the United States and spark similar uprisings. The hysteria was exacerbated by the Red Scare of 1919–1920. Numerous bombings in New York, Washington, D.C., and other cities were attributed to anarchist groups, many of which included foreign nationals. In response, federal agencies conducted mass roundups and deportations, with little regard for civil liberties and due process. A controversial 1921 murder conviction and the 1927 execution of two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, triggered an outpouring of disapproval from writers and intellectuals, including Edna St. Vincent Millay, Upton Sinclair, Muriel Rukeyser, and John Dos Passos, who accused the justice system of punishing the two men for being foreign labor radicals.

Donald Trump's populist diatribes against undocumented Mexican workers as a mass of exploitable and disposable labor that can be criminalized at will for political gain echoes the exclusion rhetoric of the Gilded Age, revealing deep fault lines in the United States' racialized democracy. From his vulgar racist invective against immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, and African nations, or what he called "shithole countries" in 2018, to his lament about the lack of immigrants to the U.S. from "nice," that is, majority-white countries like Norway, Denmark, and Switzerland in his 2024 speeches, Trump has leaned into racially charged rhetoric that is reminiscent of past nativist sentiments. This discourse reflects a historical continuity in which xenophobic sentiments are exploited to mollify a base wary of demographic change.

Much like Denis Kearney, Trump uses the media to transform his often hyperbolic, vitriolic rhetoric into a spectacle. While many may not take him seriously as a traditional politician, his perceived willingness to say the unsayable produces a media event that thrives on provocation, making him both a polarizing and disturbingly riveting figure. Trump's continued opposition to Muslim immigration and his hostile language toward the Chinese community during the COVID-19 outbreak harken back to early twentieth-century anti-

immigrant messaging. Meanwhile, Trump's racially divisive rhetoric – against affirmative action or in support of perceived anti-white sentiment – is rooted in the historic appeals to white supremacy that permeated U.S. presidential campaigns in the second half of the twentieth century.

#### 4. Southern-Style Negative Campaigning: Bush, Dukakis, and Penal Populism

In the 1960s and 70s, amid backlash to the Civil Rights Movement, anti-immigrant sentiments gave way to hostility toward African Americans, and the Republican Party responded with a tailor-made Southern Strategy. Confronted with Black revolt and a Democratic Party that was beginning to question the Jim Crow laws, Southern states embraced candidates who capitalized on white racial angst. By subtly appealing to white voters' fears and prejudices, Republicans were able to weaken the Democratic Party's stronghold in the region without resorting to explicit racism.<sup>28</sup> Coded language played an essential role in the Southern-style negative campaigning. Political candidates turned to phrases like “law and order” and “states' rights” to implicitly associate minority communities, particularly African Americans, with crime and civil disorder. The narrative that African Americans were responsible for rising crime rates was used to justify harsher law enforcement policies and to reshape electoral dynamics.

The legacy of the Southern Strategy is still visible today. Trump has made frequent use of coded messages to appease voters who feel threatened by ostensibly dangerous minorities. The slogan “America First” supposedly emphasizes U.S. interests in trade and foreign policy. However, it also carries nationalist and isolationist overtones that resonate with xenophobic attitudes. Furthermore, Trump's references to “inner cities” when discussing crime and poverty rely on his audience to fill in the blanks and associate urban crime with African American communities.

The 1988 presidential campaign stands out as a prime example of Southern-style negative campaigning, most notably in the infamous “Willie Horton”

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28 See, for instance, Angie Maxwell and Todd G. Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

ad. Rather than merely promoting the strength of one's own policies, this campaign strategy relies on portraying the opponent as weak or ineffective, especially on the critical issues of crime and national security. The tactic has historical precedent among both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates. John F. Kennedy won the presidency in 1960 by exploiting fears of a fictional "missile gap" between the United States and the USSR, effectively blaming the Republican administration for perceived national security failures.<sup>29</sup> Richard Nixon's pioneering use of television ads in his 1968 campaign nourished the view that his Democratic opponent Hubert Humphrey was weak on law and order amid the civil unrest of the time, promising a return to stability.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1988 presidential race between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, Republicans adopted a version of the Southern Strategy that criminologists have called "penal populism," in which candidates play up supposedly rising crime rates and promise tougher punitive measures.<sup>31</sup> Borrowing from the Nixon playbook, the 1988 Bush campaign successfully stoked white fears of Black crime through a series of targeted television ads and strategic attacks in stump speeches. Polling of Democratic voters conducted in Paramus, New Jersey, in May of that year revealed that the failed furlough program in Massachusetts, where Michael Dukakis was governor, was a major issue turning voters away from the candidate. The furlough system, which allowed convicted felons to be temporarily released from prison on weekend passes, had resulted in numerous cases of reoffending. Among these, the crimes of African American convicted murderer William Horton received significant media attention. Horton, who was serving a life sentence for murder without the possibility of parole, was granted a weekend furlough, during which he kidnapped a young white couple, assaulted the man, and raped and stabbed the woman. His case put a graphic face on the failures of Dukakis' policies. Sensing an opportunity, the Bush campaign, which was orchestrated by prominent Republican strategist Lee Atwater and Fox News founder Roger Ailes, made Horton's crimes a

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29 W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Real Making of the President: Kennedy, Nixon, and the 1960 Election* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 24.

30 Michael A. Cohen, *American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and the Politics of Division* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 32.

31 Tim Newburn and Trevor Jones, "Symbolic Politics and Penal Populism: The Long Shadow of Willie Horton," *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 1, no. 1 (2005): 72–87.

cornerstone of their attack strategy. Bush was already framing Dukakis as a “tax-raising liberal who let murderers out of jail” on the campaign trail, but it was the TV ad focusing on Horton that drove the point home.<sup>32</sup>

The Willie Horton ad was independently funded and released by the National Security Political Action Committee (PAC), first airing on October 3, 1988. Dark and disturbing in tone, the ad featured a grainy photograph of Horton looking wild-eyed and disheveled. The words “kidnapping,” “stabbing,” and “raping” flashed across the screen for sensational effect. Although Horton was commonly known as William, the Bush campaign referred to him as “Willie.” Political discourse scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson argues that the nickname was deliberate: “One might trace the familiar ‘Willie’ to the naming practices of slave-masters, to our patterns of talk about gangsters, or to the sort of benign paternalism that afflicts adults around small children.”<sup>33</sup> The ad blatantly linked crime to racial minorities in an attempt to undermine Dukakis’ credibility and portray the Democratic candidate as soft on crime and incapable of protecting U.S. American citizens.

Just weeks after the “Willie Horton” ad garnered national attention, the Bush campaign released “Revolving Door,” another attack ad on Dukakis’ record on crime and the Massachusetts furlough program. The timing was strategic. While the ad does not explicitly mention Horton by name, the connection was unmistakable to the public, reinforcing the association between Dukakis and a policy of dangerous leniency. The ad opens with the image of an armed guard climbing a prison watchtower, followed by another guard patrolling a prison wall topped with razor wire. The camera settles on a revolving door in the bars of a prison fence as a line of inmates enters and immediately exits again facing the viewer. Several of them visibly belong to minority groups (Black, Hispanic, and Asian). A somber voice-over warns that under Dukakis’ leadership, hardened criminals have repeatedly been released, only to commit more crimes:

As Governor Michael Dukakis vetoed mandatory sentencing for drug dealers, he vetoed the death penalty. His revolving-door prison policy gave weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers not eligible for parole. While

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32 Tanya Melich, *The Republican War against Women: An Insider’s Report from Behind the Lines*, updated ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 263.

33 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 129.

out, many committed other crimes, like kidnaping and rape, and many are still at large. [This last sentence appears on the screen.] Now Michael Dukakis says he wants to do for America what he's done for Massachusetts. America can't afford that risk.<sup>34</sup>

The message is unequivocal: Not only has Dukakis unleashed criminal forces on the unsuspecting public, but he himself must be kept at bay for the safety of the U.S. American people. The visually hard-hitting imagery of the “Willie Horton” and “Revolving Door” ads caught the attention of television news programs, which analyzed them extensively in the final month of the campaign. This coverage ensured that criticism of Dukakis’ crime policies reached a wide audience. And while there are multiple reasons why Bush managed to overcome a double-digit polling deficit against Dukakis in the months leading up to the election, the ads were instrumental in damaging Dukakis’ candidacy irreparably.

To expose weaknesses in Bush’s tough-on-crime rhetoric and prove his own commitment to law and order, Dukakis ran a counter ad of his own featuring Angel Medrano, a Hispanic heroin dealer, in a manner that echoed Nixon’s war on crime and Reagan’s war on drugs narratives. Dukakis’ decision to single out a Hispanic criminal was an alternative version of ‘penal populism’ that differed from Bush’s only in that it shifted the electorate’s out-group hostility from Black to Brown crime. Accentuating Hispanic crime funneled public fears toward a marginalized group more closely associated with immigration than African Americans. For the Democratic campaign, indirect anti-immigrant sentiment served as a more politically acceptable substitute for outright racism.

Dukakis’ strategy did not resonate as strongly with the public as did Bush’s adaptation of the Southern Strategy. In part, that is because the cat was already among the pigeons, with the Horton ad siphoning off white votes. In addition, fears of demonic Black criminality trumped concerns about the narcotics trade or the cross-border infiltration of Latin American cartels. The underperformance of Dukakis’ counter ad also speaks to an important political dynamic. As criminologist Michael Tonry has noted, “it is easy to provoke voters’ fears,

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34 New York Historical Society, “Presidential ad: ‘Revolving Door’ George HW Bush (R) v. Michael Dukakis (D) (1988),” June 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZToNffF1z8,%20,00:30>.

... it is difficult for others to dampen them.”<sup>35</sup> It was a challenge to counter the anti-Black slant of Republican anti-crime campaigning with an equally race-baiting, anti-Hispanic rhetoric. Though conservative campaign politics have gradually shifted away from the Black-crime narrative, Dukakis’ Medrano ad presaged the “bad hombres” rhetoric of MAGA Republicans today.<sup>36</sup> Trump introduced this phrase into the political vernacular of the post-Obama era at a time when blatant anti-Black racism stopped featuring in Republican political advertising.

Above all, in 1988, Republicans understood and harnessed the power of symbolic politics. The iconic images of Horton and the revolving door in the prison fence quickly turned the tide of the race in Bush’s favor. What Dukakis’ then-campaign manager Susan Estrich said about Bush vs. Dukakis applies to Trump vs. Biden today: There is no competing Democratic iconography, as Democrats tend to campaign on policy rather than symbolism. In campaign rhetoric, they argue technocratically rather than emotionally.<sup>37</sup> With the exception of Obama, who aptly couched his presidential bid in sharp imagery rooted in the historical significance of his candidacy, Democrats still refuse to recognize the potency of symbolic politics, of using figurative language that sticks in voters’ minds.

There are few memorable images associated with Biden’s tenure, and what voters do remember does not bode well for Democrats in the 2024 election. The decline of the United States’ power after a shambolic withdrawal from Afghanistan, reminiscent of the fall of Saigon, flashes through voters’ minds as they take in Biden’s speeches and press conferences. The policy proposals for the Southern border may be sound, but the border itself presents a chaotic picture. The triumph over COVID-19, a virus many U.S. Americans denied existed, is not tangible or visible. The frozen face of an incoherent Biden has seared itself into the United States’ cultural memory, but not to the Democrats’ advantage.

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35 Michael H. Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime, and Punishment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press), 34.

36 Christine A. Kray, Hinda Mandell, and Tamar W. Carroll (eds.), *Nasty Women and Bad Hombres: Gender and Race in the 2016 US Presidential Election* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018).

37 Susan Estrich, *Getting Away with Murder: How Politics Is Destroying the Criminal Justice System* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 66.

The emphasis on Black and other minority criminality not only secured George H.W. Bush's presidential victory, but also had a profound impact on the development of Southern-style negative campaigning in presidential elections. The Democrats, too, learned from Dukakis' defeat and revamped their approach, with candidates like Bill Clinton projecting a toughness akin to the Republican Southern Strategy.

## 5. Make America First Again: Pat Buchanan's Alien Nation

National security-centered approaches to immigration are a late twentieth and twenty-first century phenomenon. Yet they stem from the same tradition of antipathy toward immigrants that compromised fairness and justice in the U.S. immigration system in the 1860s and 1920s. In addition to being framed as lawbreakers on U.S. territory, immigrants have been inherently criminalized by physical and administrative barriers to admission since the 1990s. Similar to prisons, walls and fences reinforce the notion that immigrants are violating sovereign territory and must be contained by armed forces. Given that legal entry remains elusive, desperate individuals resort to unauthorized routes, marking them as felons and feeding into a broader narrative that equates immigration with anarchy and crime.

Among the conspiracy-driven, far-right agitators on the extreme fringes of the political spectrum, Pat Buchanan is notable for pushing mainstream party candidates toward radical 'Fortress America' positions. After an early career in journalism, Buchanan served as an advisor to both Nixon and Reagan and was a key architect of the Southern Strategy. He co-founded *The American Conservative* magazine and gained a reputation for his populist, confrontational style, especially on the issue of immigration. Like Trump, Buchanan was a member of the so-called punditocracy – a cable news star who bounced between conservative TV and the presidency. "No other American," he boasted upon announcing his first candidacy in 1991, "has spent as many hundreds of hours debating the great questions of our day on national television."<sup>38</sup> Reacting to the lack of a unifying external enemy in the post-Cold War era, Buchanan filled the void left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union by reshaping the ideological dichotomy of capitalism vs. communism into an opposition between native-

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38 Eric Alterman, *Sound and Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 8.

born U.S. Americans and immigrants. Like Trump in 2015 and 2016, Buchanan used his direct access to the U.S. American people through TV shows to make xenophobic statements that would otherwise have sunk the campaign of any candidate seriously aspiring to win a major party nomination.

Buchanan advocated for strict immigration controls in his three presidential campaigns (in 1992 and 1996 as a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination and in 2000 as the Reform Party candidate). He framed these policies in terms that attempted to thread the needle between mobilizing extremist support and maintaining a veneer of political respectability. With dwindling subtlety, Buchanan used coded language to mask race-baiting while implicitly targeting non-white populations. Terms like “third world countries,” which prefigured Donald Trump’s “shithole countries” comment, stoked fears of cultural decline and economic displacement without directly invoking race.<sup>39</sup> Instead of embracing the country’s changing demographic and reaching out to the growing Hispanic community, Buchanan realized that he could get more political capital by fomenting anxieties about skyrocketing immigration levels and white U.S. Americans’ impending minority status. At his campaign events, he waved a copy of Peter Brimelow’s 1995 book *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America’s Immigration Disaster* and sought allies in states like California and Florida who shared his aims of restricting immigration.<sup>40</sup>

One of Buchanan’s most memorable political maneuvers was his 1992 press conference at the U.S.-Mexico border, where he warned of an “illegal invasion” and made the case for the construction of the “Buchanan Fence,” a diminutive euphemism for a massive system of trenches and barriers patrolled by the U.S. military designed to seal the border.<sup>41</sup> His proposal foreshadowed what would become a central theme in U.S. American conservative politics: the physical fortification of national borders to prevent undocumented immigration. Another flashpoint of Buchanan’s doctrine was his call to alter the Fourteenth

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39 Patrick Buchanan, *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2007).

40 On the extreme right white minority representing itself as the “silent majority,” see Ari Berman, *Minority Rule: The Right-Wing Attack on the Will of the People – and the Fight to Resist It* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024).

41 Jeremy W. Peters, *Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party and Got Everything They Ever Wanted* (New York: Crown, 2022), 166.

Amendment to deny citizenship to children born in the United States to undocumented immigrants, currently referred to as “anchor babies” by Trump and his surrogates in right-wing media.

Buchanan’s views on immigration differed from the compassionate Reaganism that dominated conservative politics during the Cold War and was later embraced by George W. Bush and John McCain, both of whom maintained that assimilation was a two-way street. For immigrants, it meant adopting U.S. American values and norms; for the host country, it meant upholding those values and norms to facilitate integration. Buchanan never succeeded in his bids for the presidency, but his ideas left their mark on immigration policy on both sides of the political aisle. One notable influence was on California’s Proposition 187, a 1994 ballot initiative aimed at denying public services to undocumented immigrants, which marked a significant moment in the politicization of immigration issues at the state level.

Buchanan’s ideological legacy is most evident in Trump’s immigration infrastructures. The wall and deportation camps are tangible political symbols that resonate with the electorate. Likewise, it is visible in Trump’s strategic nativism, the notion of building a coalition of law-abiding native-born U.S. Americans, both white and Black, against the common threat of illegitimate intruders, to galvanize a broader base of support at a time when the Black vote is up for grabs. As historian Nicole Hemmer has observed, in Trump’s campaigns, anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy proposals continue to serve as effective tools for “injecting enthusiasm” into his solid conservative base.<sup>42</sup> Like Buchanan, Trump is also tapping into entrenched fears about the crime of immigration by using partisan punditry in ways that are increasingly “thinning the line between extremism and presidential politics.”<sup>43</sup>

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42 Nicole Hemmer, “The Man Who Won the Republican Party Before Trump Did,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/08/opinion/pat-buchanan-donald-trump.html>.

43 *Ibid.*

## 6. Donald Trump's Migrant Crime Narrative and Beyond

The heir to this dog-whistle politics – what political communication scholar Mary E. Stuckey has called “despicable discourse”<sup>44</sup> – is Donald Trump. In 2016, 2020, and 2024, Trump targeted Mexican immigrants whom he described as delinquent, framed border control as a criminal justice issue, emphasized the need for a border wall, and brought ethnic profiling into mainstream politics. The aim of this xenopolarization tactic has been not only to support restrictive immigration measures, but also to encourage voter turnout by perpetuating a cycle of fear and misinformation.

I use the term xenopolarization to describe campaign strategies that capitalize on an already polarized political environment. These strategies aim to exploit existing divisions, emotional investments, and media echo chambers to reinforce fear and mistrust of outsiders, especially immigrants. By driving the electorate even further apart on immigration, Trump unites his supporters around a common external threat, while alienating other demographic groups. The tactic deepens the loyalty of conservatives, who feel their views are being validated. More importantly, it drives them to the polls to express both their suspicion of immigrants and their disagreement with immigration-friendly Democrats.

Trump's migrant crime narrative singles out incidents involving migrants, blurring the line between individual cases and systemic problems. The result is a skewed perception of widespread migrant crime, even though immigrants are statistically less likely to be offenders than native-born citizens. Language about alleged illegal invaders streaming across the border reinforces this narrative and obstructs discussions about the factors that drive migration flows. Crippling poverty and rampant gang violence in Central America compel migrants to head north in search of safety and opportunity. Trump turns this situation on its head by falsely equating immigrants themselves with crime, thereby conditioning his audience into a state of terror about Hispanic noncitizens. In an effort to rile up his base, Trump has used explosive language, with crude and unsavory terms thrown in as an accelerant. He infamously referred to Mexican immigrants as “rapists.”<sup>45</sup> His portmanteau “bigrant crime” (Biden

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44 Stuckey, Mary E. *Deplorable: The Worst Presidential Campaigns from Jefferson to Trump* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2021).

45 For example, Amber Phillips, “‘They’re Rapists.’ President Trump’s Campaign Launch Speech Two Years Later, Annotated,” *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2017, <https://www>

migrant crime) propagates the myth of crimes committed by immigrants living in the country illegally under Biden's overly permissive policies.<sup>46</sup> With its connotations of bisexuality and non-binary identities, "bigrant crime" is another example of dog-whistle linguistic priming. Not only does this tactic demonize migrants, but it also associates their presence with broader underlying fears about social diversity. Ironically, it was Republicans who spurned the opportunity to pass a comprehensive border bill supported by the Border Patrol union in 2024, opting instead for a fear-mongering strategy they believe will secure votes in an election year.

A notable feature of Trump's anti-immigrant discourse is how it overlaps with other exclusionary patterns in his intersectional politics of hate, including race, gender, sexuality, religion, and social status. Trump makes use of border imagery and metaphors – such as the central rallying cry about building the wall – to summon up an imperiled U.S. exceptionalism that only he, as a paternalistic savior figure, can restore to greatness. In the words of Joshua D. Martin, "Trump's disparaging comments pit an imagined Anglo body politic against a criminally invasive brown specter, contrasting the civic duty and law-and-order respectability of the former against the alleged malice, criminality, and sexual predation of the latter."<sup>47</sup>

Trump's anti-immigrant stance reinforces patriarchal narratives of protection and control. At the same time, he also targets Islam by fomenting fear of terrorism. He has tethered immigration to economic status, casting immigrants as a drain on public resources and a threat to the livelihoods of native-born citizens in the face of rising inflation. While this multi-layered "us-versus-them" discourse may seem new or over-the-top, it condenses a long history of multi-exclusionary rhetoric in U.S. American politics. Nativists portrayed single male Chinese workers as violent, predatory dangers to white

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.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/06/16/theyre-rapists-presidents-trump-campaign-launch-speech-two-years-later-annotated/.

- 46 For example, Althea Legaspi, "Donald Trump Claims His 'Persecution' Will Make the U.S. 'Truly Become a Third World Country,'" *Rolling Stone*, February 17, 2024, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/donald-trump-michigan-rally-legal-rulings-complaints-1234970666/>.
- 47 Joshua D. Martin, "The Border, Bad Hombres, and the Billionaire: Hypermasculinity and Anti-Mexican Stereotypes in Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign," in *Nasty Women and Bad Hombres: Gender and Race in the 2016 US Presidential Election*, eds. Christine A. Kray, Hinda Mandell, and Tamar W. Carroll (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018), 60–73, 60–61.

U.S. American women and children. In an effort to balance immigration enforcement with compassion, Obama prioritized the deportation of convicted criminals while trying to protect law-abiding immigrant families from being torn apart. Unfortunately, the distinction between criminal men and saintly families in Obama's ill-advised slogan "felons, not families" suggests a direct correlation between undocumented status and criminal behavior.<sup>48</sup> Such misguided messages inadvertently feed into the narrative that immigrants are disproportionately involved in criminal activity. A persistent bipartisan pattern thus becomes apparent in U.S. political discourse, in which marginalized groups are constructed as a threat to an idealized white U.S. American family. This trend also illustrates how immigration rhetoric often draws on anti-Black prejudices, especially regarding the alleged criminal conduct and predatory behavior attributed to Black masculinity.

The criminalization of immigrant communities looms large in U.S. electoral rhetoric and serves as a powerful tool for manipulating public opinion – and thus election outcomes. In the current election cycle, Republicans have followed this playbook with renewed vigor, tapping into deep national anxieties about the country's changing demographics. Reactionary white U.S. Americans are responding enthusiastically to the mythology I have traced throughout this chapter, which I call demographic dystopia. This fiction encapsulates the ongoing national struggle to reconcile ideals of equality with the realities of racial and ethnic diversity. In this elaborate fantasy, immigrants illegally manipulate the electoral process to their advantage, attack democratic processes, go on crime sprees, and take jobs from U.S. Americans, including Black Americans, as Trump pointedly asserted in his debate with Biden in 2024.<sup>49</sup> Further, migrants supposedly drive down wages, fail to pay taxes, and nonetheless benefit from public services. Anxieties about this "American carnage," to use a particularly grim phrase from Trump's 2017 inaugural address, fuel draconian re-

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48 For example, Sarah Stillman, "Obama's Failed Promise to Immigrant Families," *The New Yorker*, June 30, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/obamas-failed-promise-to-immigrant-families>.

49 For example, Abha Bhattarai, "Trump Says Immigrants Are Taking 'Black Jobs.' Economists Disagree," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/06/28/trump-black-jobs-economy-immigration/>.

sponses at the border and in border states, including calls to build deportation camps for migrants and force them to carry immigration papers.<sup>50</sup>

Often referred to as the “show me your papers” law, Arizona’s SB 1070 mandates that immigrants carry identification proving their legal status at all times. It also authorizes law enforcement to demand documentation based on reasonable suspicion, which has led to widespread concerns about racial profiling and discrimination against Hispanic communities. The heightened scrutiny faced by documented and undocumented migrants today is chillingly reminiscent of earlier practices of control and surveillance that marginalized selected groups have had to endure. In antebellum United States, free African Americans in many states were required to carry ‘freedom papers’ to avoid being captured and sold into slavery. In the 1920s, immigration laws imposed extensive documentation requirements, thus reinforcing immigrants’ status as outsiders who had to continually prove their right to be in the United States. Whether in the era of slavery, in the 1920s, or today, forcing individuals to carry proof of their status is a mechanism of social control designed to perpetuate a hierarchy that favors white and native-born citizens.

But what do the entwined campaign politics of immigration and crime control augur for the future of moral panics in U.S. election discourse? First, it is not just the United States. Immigration and crime are wedge issues and core currency in political communication in Europe as well. The issue topped the agenda in Italy in 2024. The far-right nationalist Brothers of Italy party, which came to power on an anti-immigration campaign, drummed up fears about immigration ahead of the EU vote. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni accused non-EU citizens of fraudulently obtaining work visas and blamed criminal gangs for facilitating this process, reinforcing the criminal image of foreigners. Most EU states are tightening border security and speeding up the return of migrants. Much like the United States, the EU is pursuing a ‘Fortress’ agenda, incentivizing countries of origin to curb illegal immigration and empowering ‘third’ countries outside the EU to hold people back. The U.S. and Europe are also escalating the criminalization of immigration worldwide by implementing punitive measures against immigrants, such as detention and deportation. These policies not only deter asylum seekers, but also embolden

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50 Politico Staff, “Full text: 2017 Donald Trump inauguration speech transcript,” Politico, January 20, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907>.

other nations to adopt similarly harsh measures, exacerbating the global crackdown on immigration.

Despite the progressive optimism that has been ignited by Labour's electoral success in the UK, there is no end to this fearmongering in sight. In his inaugural speech, Prime Minister Keir Starmer included mentions of "secure borders" and "safer streets" alongside promises to revitalize the NHS and provide affordable housing, thereby cementing the link between public insecurity and immigration.<sup>51</sup> If the U.S. and its allies are sending a message to the world right now, it is that aspiring political leaders must adhere to the most widely accepted fundamental values of any political majority, which are, in Bill Clinton's words, "the ability to defend the nation and the strength to enforce its laws."<sup>52</sup>

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51 Civil Service and The Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer KCB KC MP, "A message from Prime Minister Keir Starmer to the Civil Service," GOV.UK, July 8, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-message-from-prime-minister-keir-starmer-to-the-civil-service>.

52 Quoted in Kenneth S. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 126.

