



Spring 2016

# Rhetoric vs Reality: Public Opinion on Immigration in the United States

Elizabeth M. Belair '16, Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: [http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship](http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship)

 Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [Immigration Law Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [Social Welfare Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Belair, Elizabeth M., "Rhetoric vs Reality: Public Opinion on Immigration in the United States" (2016). *Student Publications*. 428.  
[http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/428](http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/428)

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: [http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/428](http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/428)

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Rhetoric vs Reality: Public Opinion on Immigration in the United States

## **Abstract**

The United States has a rich and interesting history of immigration. The country itself was created by waves of immigrants who came from across the globe. Although immigration has always existed in the U.S., the number of immigrants coming to the United States has increased during the 21st century, and as a result, a controversial debate surrounding the consequences of immigration has emerged. In this paper I examine how Americans view the debate on immigration, specifically focusing on what affects public opinion on this topic. I find that shifts in public opinion do not reflect changes in immigration patterns but rather are influenced by major events portrayed in the media such as security threats, national elections, the status of the economy, etc. Immigration is an essential part of the culture and character of the United States which is why it is important to understand how Americans view and react to this topic.

## **Keywords**

Immigration

## **Disciplines**

American Politics | Immigration Law | Political History | Race and Ethnicity | Social History | Social Welfare | United States History

## **Comments**

Globalization Studies Senior Honors Capstone

## **Rhetoric vs Reality: Public Opinion on Immigration in the United States**

Elizabeth M. Belair

Globalization Studies Capstone

Professor Caroline Hartzell

April 19, 2016

**Abstract:** The United States has a rich and interesting history of immigration. The country itself was created by waves of immigrants who came from across the globe. Although immigration has always existed in the U.S., the number of immigrants coming to the United States has increased during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and as a result, a controversial debate surrounding the consequences of immigration has emerged. In this paper I examine how Americans view the debate on immigration, specifically focusing on what affects public opinion on this topic. I find that shifts in public opinion do not reflect changes in immigration patterns but rather are influenced by major events portrayed in the media such as security threats, national elections, the status of the economy, etc. Immigration is an essential part of the culture and character of the United States which is why it is important to understand how Americans view and react to this topic.

*MLA Citation Format*

## **Introduction**

“I will build a great wall – and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me – and I’ll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words.” -Donald Trump

Immigration is a key process of globalization and is one that not only affects our global community but affects our national and local communities as well. Globalization is a complex phenomenon that makes the world more interconnected by bringing together materials, ideas, as well as people from across the globe. However, what is interesting regarding the history of globalization is that while the movement of material goods and ideas has been allowed and even encouraged, the movement of people is often restricted and very much controlled. The quote above by Donald Trump is a great illustration of this. In the United States a debate is currently heating up regarding how this country should deal with the issue of immigration, meaning discussions are taking place to figure out who should be allowed to enter the country and who should not. While a debate regarding who should be accepted into the United States is taking place there are no such debates happening regarding what products or ideas should be imported from abroad. This shows how globalization is often asymmetrical, meaning that it is unequal in certain situations. Why do we allow the free flow of goods and ideas yet not human beings? The debate surrounding immigration in the United States can also be seen as a debate surrounding globalization, with our country trying to decide whether we are ready to fully embrace global influences and movement or whether we are threatened by this and want to ensure that we protect our national identity.

There are many parts of the immigration debate in the United States to be studied but what I am most interested in and what I investigate in this paper is what affects public opinion on this

topic. Immigration is vital for the survival of our country as well as for the growth of our global community and as such we cannot simply reject people from our borders. However, much of the rhetoric that is currently taking place in the U.S. (particularly as a result of the 2016 election) has been exactly that. As we saw from the quote above, Donald Trump has mentioned countless times that he believes the U.S. should build a wall around its border to stop immigration to the country. What is significant about this is that many Americans agree with Trump on this point. Do they agree with him because it is an election year? Will they change their minds on this in 2017? Is this opinion influenced by other factors? These are all questions that I believe are important to answer in order to fully understand the immigration debate in the United States.

In this paper I examine a few different areas on the subject of immigration. First, I give my discussion some context by examining the current situation of immigration in the United States as well as summarizing some of the history regarding America's relationship with immigration. I then dive into current public opinion trends on the subject of immigration before discussing factors that influence these trends. I focus on demographic factors, actual migration trends, the impact of the media, security concerns, economic conditions, and election cycles. From the data I have collected I conclude that public opinion on immigration is influenced by many factors, excluding actual facts or changes in migration patterns. However, this subject is not written about extensively so I believe more research needs to be done in order to fully understand the complex topic of public opinion on immigration.

There is a lot of rhetoric on the subject of immigration both across the globe as well as within the U.S. We need to be able to look past this rhetoric not only to understand how Americans truly feel about immigration in this country but to also understand why and how those

feelings develop. This systemic understanding is necessary not only to fully grasp the current immigration debate but also to hopefully change the debate as well as the system itself.

## **Conceptual Framework**

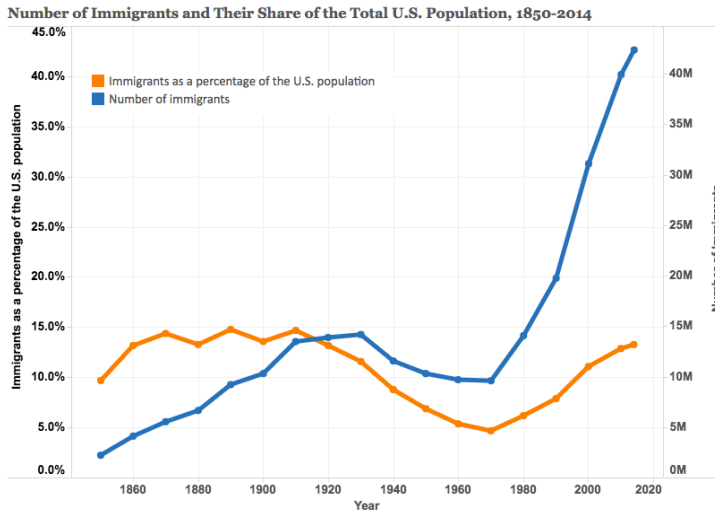
### *Current Immigration Trends in the United States*

Before examining how Americans view the topic of immigration it is important to understand the role that immigration plays within the United States. The U.S. is truly a country of immigrants. President John F. Kennedy said this back in 1958 and President Barack Obama continues to say this today. Immigrants have been coming to the U.S. since the territory was “discovered” in 1492. In fact, less than 2% of the current U.S. population has Native American ancestors which means that the remainder of the population (98%) are descendants of migrants or are migrants themselves (Kuzoian 1).

From the table and graph below it is clear that immigration has always been a part of the history of the United States although migrants have not always come from the same part of the globe. The period from 1850-1920 saw high levels of immigration from Europe but restrictive legislation in the 1920’s, combined with the impacts of World War II and the Great Depression, caused a sharp decrease in immigration during the period 1930-1970 (Zong and Batalova 2). Since 1970 there has been an increase in immigration levels to the U.S. However, these migrants now mainly come from Latin America and Asia rather than from Europe (Zong and Batalova 3).

What is important to take away from both past as well as current immigration levels is that immigration is not a new phenomenon in the United States, as we can see from the table below, the percentage of immigrants in the U.S. is similar today to what it was back in the year 1860. While this is not a new process, immigration has changed significantly over time. What is

particularly interesting to note is that since the 1970's/1980's the number of immigrants coming to this country has continued to rise. This data shows how immigration is an essential part of the history and identity of the United States and will continue to be so in the future.



Migration Policy Institute

|      | Number of immigrants | Immigrants as a percentage of the U.S. population |
|------|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 1850 | 2,244,600            | 9.7                                               |
| 1860 | 4,138,700            | 13.2                                              |
| 1870 | 5,567,200            | 14.4                                              |
| 1880 | 6,679,900            | 13.3                                              |
| 1890 | 9,249,500            | 14.8                                              |
| 1900 | 10,341,300           | 13.6                                              |
| 1910 | 13,515,900           | 14.7                                              |
| 1920 | 13,920,700           | 13.2                                              |
| 1930 | 14,204,100           | 11.6                                              |
| 1940 | 11,594,900           | 8.8                                               |
| 1950 | 10,347,400           | 6.9                                               |
| 1960 | 9,738,100            | 5.4                                               |
| 1970 | 9,619,300            | 4.7                                               |
| 1980 | 14,079,900           | 6.2                                               |
| 1990 | 19,767,300           | 7.9                                               |
| 2000 | 31,107,900           | 11.1                                              |
| 2010 | 39,955,900           | 12.9                                              |
| 2011 | 40,377,900           | 13.0                                              |
| 2012 | 40,824,700           | 13.0                                              |
| 2013 | 41,348,100           | 13.1                                              |
| 2014 | 42,391,800           | 13.3                                              |

Migration Policy Institute

### *History of Immigration in the United States*

In addition to looking at current immigration patterns and trends it is also important to understand how views towards immigrants have changed over time. A good way to do this is to analyze immigration laws in the United States as laws seek to reflect public opinion of the majority. Although immigration is at the core of our nation's history and character, many of our national policies are contradictory to this fact in that they restrict the number of migrants entering this country rather than welcoming them. It is important to understand this general ambivalence towards immigrants that can be seen in our immigration policies before delving further into this subject. Despite the fact that immigration policies have changed over time and sometimes restrict

immigration while other times favoring it, the general theme that migrants are not welcome in the U.S. has remained pretty well intact throughout the history of this country.

Immigration policies in the U.S. have been, and continue to be, very complex. Most immigration laws seek to limit or control immigration but there have been times when laws were put in place that actually encouraged immigration to the United States. In this section I will look at some of the restrictive as well as some of the more welcoming laws in order to understand the complicated relationship between the U.S. and immigration.

The European colonization of the New World was an interesting time with regards to immigration as migrants were not only welcomed to this new territory but were highly desired as a result of the desire to have a growing population. However, things began to change during the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the first immigration law was passed in the United States. This law, the Naturalization Act of 1790, stated that any “free white persons of good moral character” could become citizens after two years of residence” (Ewing 2). Although this law did not determine who could or could not enter the country it does illustrate the beginning of this idea of controlling and regulating the movement of certain individuals within the U.S. It is also important to note that this law, as well as many other immigration policies, can be viewed as racist in that it only allows white people to become citizens.

Laws that focused on managing immigration continued to be passed throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, in 1798 the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed, giving the President of the United States the power to deport any foreigner who was deemed dangerous to the state (Ewing 2). Laws such as these were highly subjective because the process of determining who was dangerous and who was not was not based on a fair system. Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century several laws were created, among them, The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, that



excluded specific groups of people from entering the United States, again raising the question of race within U.S. immigration policies (Ewing 3). A racist country, the U.S. preferred to have immigrants come from Europe rather than from areas such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As a result, the country passed several additional laws throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which sought to control where people were immigrating from, thus ensuring that the high levels of immigrants would be white individuals from Europe. During this time many laws were passed in order to continue immigration from Europe but deny entry to migrants from other parts of the world (Cohn 1). Another important restrictive law was the Quota Law of 1921 which limited immigration to 350,000 people per year and also restricted immigration from any country to be only 3% of the number of people from that country who were currently living in the U.S. at that time (Ewing 4). This is another way in which the U.S. favored European immigration and did not allow the dynamics of the migration patterns to change mainly due to an uneasiness about non-European migrants.

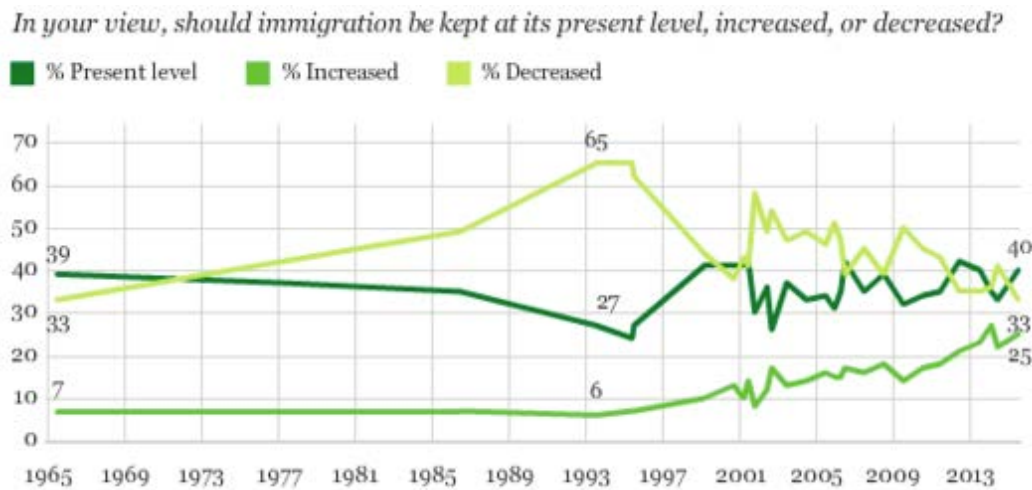
There have been times during which the U.S. has actually desired immigration. For example, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the country was expanding westward there was a demand for both workers and settlers in the western territory. As a result, the U.S. passed the Homestead Act of 1862 which encouraged immigration by offering plots of land in the west to families who were willing to move there (Ewing 3). Another example of a desire for immigration is the Bracero Program which allowed for the temporary immigration of thousands of agricultural workers from Mexico to the U.S.. However, this policy did not last for long as in 1954 Operation Wetback was put in place which rounded up and deported approximately one million Mexican immigrants (Ewing 5).

Progress on immigration has been made over time as can be seen with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. This law eliminated the discriminatory quota system while maintaining the numerical restrictions on immigrants (Ewing 5). The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 is another example in that it allowed for millions of undocumented immigrants to become legalized (“The Nation’s Immigration Laws” 4). Finally, the Immigration Act of 1990 was another significant and progressive law in that it increased the annual cap on immigration and created the H-1B visa for highly skilled workers as well as the H-2B visa for seasonal workers (“The Nation’s Immigration Laws” 4). These programs illustrate how although the U.S. occasionally favors immigration policies it continues to have a complex view on the subject of migration.

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 more restrictive immigration laws were once again put in place as a response to the threat of national security. These laws reduced government benefits to immigrants, increased border security, and tightened admission to the country (Ewing 7). For example, the REAL ID Act of 2005 required states to demand proof of citizenship before issuing driver licenses. The Secure Fence Act of 2006 is another example as it called for building 850 more miles of fence along the U.S./Mexico border (Ewing 7). President Obama has attempted to create immigration laws that assist immigrants rather than make their lives even more difficult and he has had some success with that. For example, in 2012 and 2014 Obama implemented Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) as well as Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) which allow young adults who came to this country illegally to apply for deportation relief as well as a work permit (Cohn 2). All of these immigration policies and programs shows how views on immigration are constantly changing. Simply put, the U.S. is conflicted when it comes to the issue of immigration.

## Public Opinion on Immigration

### Current Public Opinion Trends



Gallup Poll

As we can see from the graph above public opinion on the subject of immigration is a complicated topic that has many different viewpoints. According to the data presented in the graph above, 40% of the population currently wish to see immigration decreased in the United States. At the same time close to 33% of the population wish to see immigration stay at its current level and 25% of the population believe that immigration to the country should be increased (Newport). This data can be summarized to say that more Americans hold unfavorable views regarding immigration, although not by a large margin. However, when the question regarding immigration is phrased a bit differently it is interesting to see how the results differ. For example, when asked if immigrants are improving or hurting the country 45% of the population say they are improving American society while 37% say they are making it worse (“U.S. Public has Mixed View of Immigrants and Immigration” 1). In this case it looks like more Americans hold a favorable view of immigration but again this is not by a large margin. Overall, on the subject of immigration the American public is divided relatively equally, meaning that approximately half of

the population believes that immigrants should be welcomed to the U.S. while the other half believes that immigration should be more restricted. With this in mind we can now analyze various factors that influence how the American public thinks of immigration.

### *Factors that Influence Public Opinion*

Views on any topic (such as immigration) can be influenced by many factors such as major news events, public policy debates, economic decline, etc. (Suro 1). In general, views regarding immigration have remained relatively stable since 2001 which supports the theory that there exists a general ambivalence on the subject of immigration in the United States. However, research shows that various factors do have some influence on opinion on this subject. In addition, significant rhetoric exists in this country that indicates which of these factors actually influences opinions on migration. In this section I will examine six major potential causes of shifts in public opinion, showing how they either affect or do not affect opinion on this subject.

### Demographic Factors

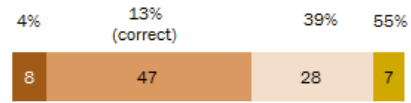
When studying public opinion it is vital to examine the demographic factors of individuals as one's background and personal experiences greatly affect how they view a specific topic. Several studies have been conducted over the years that analyze how age, race, level of education, and political affiliation affect people's views on the subject of immigration. For example, research shows that younger individuals have a more favorable view of the subject compared to their older counterparts. 54% of people age 18-29 believe that immigrants benefit the U.S. while 44% of people age 30-49, 41% of people age 50-64, and 39% of people age 65 and up hold that view ("U.S. Public Has Mixed Views of Immigrants and Immigration" 5).

It has also been found that views on immigration differ by race. For example, overall Hispanics have a more positive view of immigration than White or Black individuals. 61% of Hispanics believe that immigrants benefit the U.S. compared to 44% of Blacks and 41% of Whites (“U.S. Public Has Mixed Views of Immigrants and Immigration” 5). Although this difference is not extreme it still indicates that race impacts how one thinks about this subject.

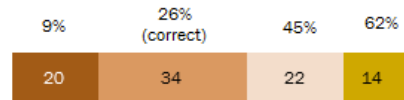
When investigating why various opinions exist on the subject of immigration, the topic that often arises is level of education as this plays a major role in the public opinion on immigration. For example, 64% of people with a college degree believe that immigrants benefit the U.S. whereas only 32% of people with a high school diploma believe that immigrants benefit the U.S. (“U.S. Public Has Mixed Views of Immigrants and

**Americans and U.S. Immigration Facts**

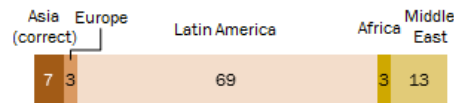
*What percentage of today's U.S. population was born in another country?*



*What percentage of immigrants in the U.S. today are living here illegally?*



*Over the last five years, the largest group of immigrants to the United States has come from...*



Pew Research Center

Immigration” 5). This difference is very substantial and it illustrates how public opinion can be greatly impacted by education. What can be inferred by these statistics is that many people view immigration in a negative light due to the fact that they do not fully understand what immigration is or how it affects our country. The table above supports this as it shows how the U.S. public is generally not knowledgeable regarding the subject of immigration.

Finally, several studies look at whether political affiliation impacts how people view immigration in the United States. Surprisingly the difference is not large as 55% of Democrats and 53% of Republicans believe that immigrants benefit the U.S. (“U.S. Public Has Mixed Views of Immigrants and Immigration” 5). The main reason that these numbers are surprising is because

the media portrays immigration as a very split political issue with Democrats favoring immigration and Republicans against it. However, the truth is that this is not true nor that simple.

I want to take a moment here to again address the fact that immigration is a vast and complex issue. As such, it is important to understand that when we use the term “immigrants” this term encompasses many different groups of people. It is interesting to look at public opinion polls which group immigrants as one complete entity but when one looks at studies that differentiate groups of immigrants, the results are quite interesting. For example, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that people view immigrants from various regions of the world very differently:

47% of the population believes Asians benefit the U.S.

44% of the population believes that Europeans benefit the U.S.

26% of the population believes that people from Latin America benefit the U.S.

20% of the population believes that people from the Middle East benefit the U.S.

This data shows that it is not only important to try to understand the demographic factors of individuals in order to discover how and why people feel the way they do about immigration but it is also important to understand that people have different opinions about different groups of immigrants (“U.S. Public Has Mixed Views of Immigrants and Immigration” 7). Furthermore, this shows us that not only is it important to understand where people are coming from when examining public opinion but it is also vital to understand what information (or what lack of information) people have been exposed to as this will greatly shape their view on the issue.

## Actual Migration Trends

As mentioned above research has shown that, in general, the U.S. population is not very knowledgeable regarding the subject of immigration (“U.S. Public Has Mixed Views of Immigrants and Immigration” 16). For example, more people are currently leaving the U.S. to

return to Mexico than are leaving Mexico to enter into the United

States (Krogstad 2). While it is true that the number of foreign-born in

the U.S. is currently in decline, the current rhetoric implies that “swarms” of immigrants are trying to come to this country to threaten our culture, our economy, and our national identity

(Krogstad 2). Most Americans do not understand that as a result of increased border patrols, increased dangers of illegal border crossing, the economic downturn in the U.S., as well as

changes in countries of origin, patterns of immigration are beginning to change (Krogstad 2). If

we compare a graph of immigration into the U.S. with a graph of public opinion on immigration, we would see that the two do not often line up. Although shifts in public opinion do not directly

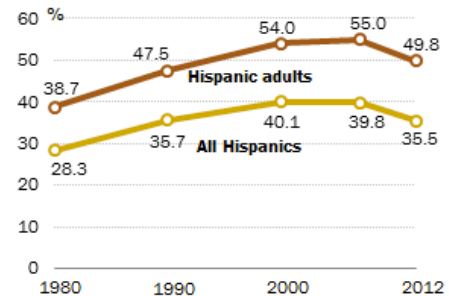
follow shifts in immigration trends, there is some connection between the two. For example, when

there is a surge in immigration to the United States there is also a surge in negative opinions on the subject of immigration. However, my research suggests that this is more a reflection of how

the media portrays immigration in this country rather than a direct response to the numbers of people arriving in the U.S.

### **The Share of U.S. Hispanics Who Are Foreign Born is in Decline ...**

*% foreign born among ...*



Pew Research Center

## Impact of the Media

Research shows that the way in which the media frames important issues or events can have major consequences on public opinion and this is no different in the case of immigration (Merolla, Ramakrishnan, and Haynes 750). For example, there is a tendency in the media to portray whites in a favorable way whereas nonwhites are depicted in a more negative light. One way in which this is seen is that many news outlets cover violent crimes committed by nonwhite individuals at a volume disproportionate to their occurrence within society (Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano 362). Furthermore, the media often presents immigration as a problem rather than presenting it in a more neutral or even positive manner (McKeever, Riffe, and Carpentier 1). As a result of this tendency to depict immigration in a negative light, opinions regarding immigration tend to conform to be more negative in nature. For example, when immigration becomes a national focus because of a large event such as the passage of a new immigration law, the negative opinions that white individuals have towards migrants increase (Abrajano and Lundgren 72). At the same time it is interesting to see that this increase in attention to immigration results in Latinos having a more positive view of their own social group (Abrajano and Lundgren 72). While an entire book could be dedicated to the role of the media within the immigration debate, I simply want to draw attention to the fact that the media does play an important role when discussing public opinion of immigration. What the media focuses on in addition to how it presents information greatly affects how the population views immigrants and immigration issues.

## Security Concerns

National security is often cited as the main factor behind changing views regarding immigration. September 11, 2001 is one of the most significant days in American history not only



because it is the day tragedy struck the nation but also because the United States began to change after 9/11. As a result of this attack the country made national security one of its top priorities. This can be seen in the ongoing wars in the Middle East, the increase in the use of surveillance, additional airport security, as well as changes in immigration policies. The U.S. does everything in its power to protect its territory and its citizens. Unfortunately, this means that in terms of immigration the country has become more restrictive in terms of letting migrants enter the U.S. Not only that, but rhetoric often suggests that immigrants and refugees are terrorists and are not only dangerous to our culture and our economy but are a direct threat to our lives. For example, the program Secure Communities, implemented in 2008, mobilized local law enforcement to check the citizenship status of every individual in jail, thus deporting thousands of immigrants from the U.S. even if they had committed only minor offenses (Kohli, Markowitz, and Chavez 1). These actions are a clear example of measures to enforce national security that are violations of basic human rights.

Statements claiming that immigrants are terrorists and blaming immigrants for high rates of crime can be heard today. For example, Presidential candidate Donald Trump stated that “the Mexican government is forcing their most unwanted people into the United States. They are, in many cases, criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc.” It makes sense that comments such as this, combined with a negative representation of immigrants in the media, lead to a surge in fear of immigration. As a response, people cite national security as a reason not to allow immigrants to enter the country. We can see this in the change in public opinion after 9/11. After the terrorist attacks, public opinion on immigration became extremely negative while support for border spending and more restrictive immigration policies increased (Muste 413). This shows how events directly connected to national security have a great impact on immigrant sentiments,

especially when the media links these issues of national security to issues of immigration such as were discussed above.

### Economic Conditions

Another often heard piece of rhetoric that exists in the United States concerning immigration is that immigrants hurt our national economy. How many times have we heard the argument that immigration is bad because immigrants steal our jobs? As a result, one would think that the status of the economy would greatly impact how individuals view immigration. However, the truth is that this is actually not often the case. National economic concerns do not always trigger opposition to immigration. For example, it has been found that optimism about the national economy during the 1990's actually coincided with an increase in opposition to immigration, which is not what one would expect (Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 1). Furthermore, economic problems in 1991-1992, 2001, and 2008-2010 did not increase opposition to immigration (Muste 413). However, the connection between economic conditions and public opinion is highly discussed, particularly within the political system. For example, 71% of Republicans and 34% of Democrats say that immigrants have a directly negative impact on the economy (Krogstad 3). Although the status of the economy is often to blame for changes in public opinion, this is more a common rhetoric in the U.S. rather than a proven fact as we can see from the information above. Other variables such as the media and national security impact public opinion on immigration to a greater extent than do changes in the national economy.

## Election Cycles

One thing that I find fascinating about the topic of immigration is that discussions of immigration are not present in the U.S. on a daily basis but rather surge during national/global events such as Presidential elections. It has been shown that more people are interested in, as well as participate in, the subject of immigration when it is being discussed/debated in Washington (Suro 1). National elections are a time when many topics arise and are given significant attention, among them immigration. For example, during the mid 1990's anti-immigration feelings surged as a result of the anti-immigrant discussions present in the 1994 election (Muste 1). During the 2008 election immigration was not a huge focus as it was overshadowed by issues connected to the economy; as a result, there was not a major change in public opinion on immigration during this time (Suro 2). The 2016 election has proven to be one of the most interesting elections in terms of immigration as Donald Trump has brought immigration back to the forefront of the national agenda (Newport). Although Americans do not believe immigration is the most pressing issue facing our country today it is at the top of the list being the fourth most frequently mentioned problem (Newport). In today's political climate it is interesting to see that over half of Americans (63%) do believe that immigration is a good thing although the media frequently highlights the negative sides of immigration as opposed to the positives (Newport). It is important to analyze the current immigration debate taking place in order to understand both past and present views on immigration within the United States as well as to understand the future of immigration in this country.

## **Discussion**

I found this research project to be particularly interesting primarily because the conclusions that I drew from my data were not the ones that I expected. It is clear that public opinion shifts over time. However, I thought this had more to do with changes in demographics rather than global/national/local events and issues. As it turns out, major events, including those relating to security or politics, greatly affect how people view the debate on immigration. One of the most important takeaways from this research project is the effect that the media has on public opinion regarding immigration. We are all aware that the media is a powerful tool, particularly in this age of globalization where there are increased technological advancements every day. However, I do not think I truly understood the power of the media until investigating this topic. While many people think they can identify bias, this is not often the case; frequently the way in which information is presented greatly impacts how one views that subject.

I was very surprised to see that there was not a strong connection between the economy and public opinion as the economy is one of the most focused on issues in our nation. This, combined with the fact that immigration issues are often portrayed through an economic lens, made me shocked to see that the status of the economy does not have a significant effect on how Americans view the topic of immigration.

Another thing that I found surprising was how little information exists on the topic of public opinion on immigration. As I have said, immigration is a core part of both our national as well as global community; this means we need to understand the various dynamics of this subject, including how and why various views on this topic develop. In order to fully understand immigration within the United States further research needs to be done on the factors that influence public opinion. Are there other factors that play a role in shaping how the public views

the subject of immigration? These are the questions that need to be asked and answered. Furthermore, I believe that there should be a stronger effort to teach individuals how to understand the bias that exists within the media. The media is one of the largest factors that influence public opinion. If individuals knew how to identify when the media was using tools of persuasion rather than fact to present information, I think views on immigration would be vastly different. Additionally, there is a large difference regarding immigration between the views of college graduates compared to high school graduates. As a result, I believe a program or curriculum should be incorporated into high schools that teach children about the complex media system in our country and allow them to learn how to differentiate between fact and non-fact presented in the news.

## **Conclusion**

“My fellow Americans, we are and always will be a nation of immigrants...we are here only because this country welcomed [our forebears] in, and taught them that to be an American is about something more than what we look like... what makes us Americans is our shared commitment to an ideal-that all of us are created equal, and all of us have the chance to make our lives what we will.” -President Barack Obama

Immigration is not simply a politically and emotionally charged term, it is not simply something that we hear about on the news or read about in the paper, but rather it is part of the core of the United States of America. In terms of who we are and how we act, immigration plays a major role whether we recognize it or not. However, as the debate regarding immigration continues to grow and the country is divided on the question of immigration being an asset or a burden for the country, it is time to take a step back and understand the immigration debate on a

larger scale. Immigration is a part of the past, present, and future of the U.S. One vital aspect of the immigration debate, to understand is the two sides of the debate meaning why some Americans are in favor of immigration while others disapprove of it. These two sides of the debate is something that is often discussed in the media- we know that some people believe immigration enriches our culture and benefits our economy while other individuals think that immigrants threaten our way of life and sense of security. As a result I wanted to draw attention to a part of the immigration debate that has not been sufficiently studied, in my opinion; the reasons why public opinion on the subject of immigration changes. It is very important to fully understand what causes these shifts in public opinion in order to understand the full scope and effect of the immigration debate that is taking place in the United States.

## Works Cited

Abrajano, Marisa, and Lydia Lundgren. "How Watershed Immigration Policies Affect American Public Opinion Over a Lifetime." *International Migration Review* 49.1 (2015): 70-105.

Cohn, D'Vera. "How U.S. Immigration Laws and Rules have changed throughout History." *Pew Research Center*. (2015).

Dunaway, Johanna, Regina P. Branton, and Marisa A. Abrajano. "Agenda Setting, Public Opinion, and the Issue of Immigration Reform\*." *Social Science Quarterly* 91.2 (2010): 359-378.

Ewing, Walter A. "Opportunity and Exclusion: A Brief History of U.S. Immigration Policy." *Immigration Policy Center*. (2012).

Krogstad, Jens Manuel. "Hispanic Nativity Shift: U.S. Birth Rates Drive Population Growth as Immigration Stalls." *Pew Research Center* (2014).

Krogstad, Jens Manuel. "On views of immigrants, Americans largely split along party lines." *Pew Research Center* (2015). Web. 03 Feb. 2016.

Kuzoian, Alex. "Animated Map Shows the History of Immigration to the US." *Business Insider*. (2015). <<http://www.businessinsider.com/animated-map-shows-history-immigration-us-america-2015-9>>.

McKeever, Brooke Weberling, Daniel Riffe, and Francesca Dillman Carpentier. "Perceived hostile media bias, presumed media influence, and opinions about immigrants and immigration." *Southern Communication Journal* 77.5 (2012): 420-437.

Merolla, Jennifer, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, and Chris Haynes. "'Illegal,'" "Undocumented," or "Unauthorized": Equivalency Frames, Issue Frames, and Public Opinion on Immigration." *Perspectives on Politics* 11.03 (2013): 789-807.

Muste, Christopher P. "The Dynamics of Immigration Opinion in the United States, 1992-2012." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 77.1 (2013): 398-416.

Newport, Frank. "American Public Opinion and Immigration." *Gallup Polls*. (2015).

"Number of Immigrants and Immigrant as Percentage of the U.S. Population, 1850 to 2014." *Migration Policy Institute*.

"U.S. Public has mixed views on immigrants and immigration" *Pew Research Center* (2015).

Suro, Roberto. "America's Views of Immigration: The Evidence from Public Opinion Surveys." *Migration Policy Institute*. (2009).

"The Nation's Immigration Laws, 1920 to Today." *Pew Research Center*. (2015).

Valentino, Nicholas A., Ted Brader, and Ashley E. Jardina. "Immigration opposition among US Whites: General ethnocentrism or media priming of attitudes about Latinos?." *Political Psychology* 34.2 (2013): 149-166.

Zong, Jie and Jeanne Batalova. "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States." *Migration Policy Institute*. (2015).