Trump's Appeals to Populism in Immigration Tweets: Content Analysis using "Immigrants as Victims, Heroes, and Threats"

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As president, Donald Trump wore the mantle of the Republican party; but as a populist, he rejected the party establishment in a feat of "double differentiation" as he enticed through social media a following of discontented Americans for whom populist appeals provided a perceived panacea. Drawn from his tenure as president, this study undertook content analysis of tweets related to immigrants and immigration—a regular target of Trump's populist framing strategies. During periods leading up to the national midterm election in 2018 and the general election in 2020, Trump portrayed immigrants as threats to America, an approach important for appealing to his populist base. Consistent with that strategy, the former president normalized the practice of negatively framing immigrants to his Twitter audience and bound the topic of immigration to partisan activities that included online campaign endorsements and political attacks.

Keywords: framing, immigration, populism, double differentiation, Trump, Twitter

L anguage used by former President Donald Trump to describe immigrants to this country include the labels: illegal aliens, criminal aliens, and bad hombres. An analysis of statements about immigrants made by Trump throughout his presidency indicated what are often negative depictions of immigrants to the United States. What has not been as evident up to this point is Trump's use of immigrant depictions in social media for reinforcing his political goals. Using content analysis, this study categorized Trump's social media statements about immigrants and revealed patterns aligning those statements with strategic political outcomes. Using immigrants as a constant theme throughout his presidency, Trump managed the topic for appealing to his popular base of support. Further facilitated by a strategy of double differentiation (Hutter, 2011; Groshek & Engelbert, 2012), Trump operated within the Republican party, but carved his own path outside the party establishment, aided by a populist appeal directed to disenchanted voters via his unprecedented social media habits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Immigration and Immigration Policy

The United States is home to more immigrants than any nation in the world according to the Pew Research Center (Budiman, 2020). Lending itself further as an important research topic, polls show an increase among Americans who believe immigration should be a major policy priority (Pew Research Center, 2022), and it was said early in Trump's first term as president that disparate opinions of immigration within the electorate could signal "the most prominent wedge issue in America" (Thompson, 2018). Research affirms the potential for immigration as a wedge given that individuals' perspectives about the issue tend to align with their ideologies on the political spectrum, with liberals viewing it through a lens of fairness and conservatives viewing it as a burden on the in-group (Mendelsohn et al., 2021).

During the 2016 presidential election, candidate Donald Trump stated his intentions, if elected, to deport undocumented immigrants, ban Muslim immigration, and build a border wall with Mexico (Corasaniti, 2016). Trump's array of policy-related actions as president included travel bans, increased vetting, and intensified enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border (Cowger et al., 2017). Within days of taking office in 2017, Trump issued three immigration-related executive orders including those aimed at constructing a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border, restricting asylum opportunities (Executive Order 13767), and reducing federal assistance to U.S. municipalities known as "sanctuary cities" that did not cooperate with federal immigration agencies (Executive Order 13768). In 2018, Trump's Department of Justice announced a zero-tolerance policy in which illegal border crossers were arrested and children were separated from parents (Famulari, 2020). The topic of immigration continued to garner attention leading up to the re-election campaign of 2020 when Trump, if elected, offered to finish building the wall at the U.S.-Mexico border (Moore, 2020).

Despite Trump's loss in the 2020 general election, both his enduring influence on national politics and his strongly stated interest in running again for president of the United States in 2024 continued to keep immigration front and center as a political and public policy priority. President Trump's immigration policies and how he spoke about the topic over the course of his presidency affected millions of people and continued to impact the public dialogue that arguably nurtured antagonism toward immigrants. In research by Eshbaugh-Soha and Barnes (2021), Java-based software

Lexicoder—which tallies words by positive or negative sentiment—was used to evaluate Trump's overall tone on the subject of immigration. That evaluation pegged Trump's immigration narrative just above neutral, and his use of the term "border" was assessed as positive overall. Other research examining Trump's immigration tweets from 2011 through 2020 suggested that Trump predominantly used a villain character type, but toward the end of his administration used the hero character with greater frequency than villain (Merry, 2022).

The current research sought to further categorize Trump's immigration tweets on social media, to classify those tweets as pro- or anti-immigration, and to identify how the tweets were used for political purposes during pre-election periods. This study applied framing theory for analyzing the related content of Trump's tweets leading up to the 2018 midterm election and 2020 general election. Evaluated in those tweets were political and campaign references and evident frames aligning with immigrants as victims, heroes, and threats as presented in Rodney Benson's *Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison* (2013). Benson derived his typology from extensive framing analysis conducted on more than 30 years of immigration coverage of news editorials and articles, policy papers, academic studies, and activist proposals. This study illuminates quantitatively how the topic was treated by our former president and adds to the research of presidential use of social media relative to the discourse on immigrants and immigration.

Frames of Immigration

"Framing constitutes one of the most important concepts in the study of public opinion" (Druckman, 2001, p. 1041). First developed by sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), micro-level framing analysis is described as an approach for applying context to issues and enhancing our ability to ascertain their intended meaning. In communications, frames are consequential because they impact the audience's behaviors and their attitudes of the matter at hand (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Entman (2007) offered that "it is through framing that political actors shape the texts that influence or prime the agendas and considerations that people think about" (p. 165).

Because the manner in which immigrants are depicted publicly has the potential to influence how people think about them and how they are treated in public policy (Schmidt, 2022), it is important to understand what messages elite government voices promote. As news sources, their messages are likely to be replicated by the media and appear in the stories we consume, including those stories on immigration.

Using framing theory, Bravo and De Moya (2021) analyzed how Mexican migrants were portrayed in narratives used by Trump and by former president of Mexico, Enrique Peña Nieto. They suggested that language typically spoken by Trump and framed in U.S. news articles impeded progress on U.S.-Mexico diplomatic relations. Emotional language used by the U.S. president was seen as an effort to appeal to voters' fears of immigrants.

Alamillo et al. (2019) studied the effects of framing on immigration news during the Trump presidency and offered that negative frames have stronger impacts on public opinion than positive frames. The researchers cited the use by Trump of the expression "illegal" to refer to immigrants and the possibility that the negative connotation had a spillover effect on perceptions of immigration among those in his political party. Fernandes and De Moya (2021) described Trump's proposed plan of building the wall along the southern border and habit of "vilifying immigrants" as a "marked difference in the existing immigration debate" (p. 3).

Through extensive analysis and coding of immigration news stories, Benson (2013) identified a typology having 10 frames that have been applied to stories of immigrants or immigration and that broadly speak to immigrants as victims, immigrants as heroes, or immigrants as threats. Under the broad category of Benson's immigrants as victims, frames address global economy, humanitarian frames, and racism/xenophobia. Under the broad category of immigrants as heroes, frames address cultural diversity, integration, and good worker. These six frames are considered largely pro-immigration or empathetic toward immigrants. Included under generally anti-immigration advocacy—immigrants as threats—are jobs, public order, fiscal, and national cohesion, which is to say, immigrants take our jobs, break the law, cost taxpayers money, and disrupt our culture. For purposes of comparative analysis, Benson encouraged the use of this construct by the media, advocates, and ordinary citizens for studying activities of immigration or immigrants.

Trump's Populism Enabled by Twitter

"For politicians, the framing and use of direct messaging on social media are increasingly important because the material they generate reaches their electorate unfiltered, and frequently instantly" (Gonawela et al., 2018, pp. 293-294). For social media messages of highly influential users, such as U.S. presidents, the communications are immediately amplified and proliferate throughout the platform (Minot et al., 2021). Lopez-Garcia and Pavia (2019) described a new trend in political messaging in which "new media and new politicians" through populism defy the dominant and established "boundaries of political discourse" (p. 8).

Abts and Rummens (2007) define populism as "a mobilization characterized by a politics of personality centered on a charismatic leader" (p. 407) who appeals to and represents the interests of ordinary people. Trump's profile, not as an entrenched politician but as an outsider and celebrity of sorts, reinforced his populist approach as he led those who "challenged the Republican elite—including the old guard, neoconservatives, and the power brokers in charge" (Heiskanen & Butters, 2017, p. 4). Put simply, Ott and Dickinson (2019) described Trump's Twitter conduct as "aimed at uncrowning political elites" (p. 66). Trump rode a populist swell while avoiding substantive topics, choosing instead to fix his attention on a variety of subjects, one of which concerned immigrants.

Although President Obama was the first U.S. president to have an established Twitter account while occupying the White House, he issued only 212 tweets during his first year as president in 2009, whereas Trump in his first year issued 2,105 tweets (Fontaine & Gomez, 2020). As a means for communicating directly with Americans, Obama tended to apply the use of social media for more traditional forms of presidential messaging; but according to Fontaine and Gomez, Trump's social media communications were considered more negative than Obama's with tweets exhibiting higher levels of emotions—anger and fear. Trump's use of Twitter disrupted traditional norms of political behavior. Fiona Hill, an advisor to three former U.S. presidents, including President Trump, offered that Trump was especially proficient in his use of Twitter "as a direct (and nonstop) means of communication with voters. As president he invented 'policy by tweet,' bypassing formal press releases and other presidential messaging norms. His tweets were devoid of complicated language and often verifiable facts" (Hill, 2021, p. 174). In a study of Trump's Twitter behavior, Ott (2016) offered that Twitter's imposed succinctness and potential for incivility—as users endeavor to reap more attention and more likes—were well-suited for Trump.

Gonawela et al. (2018) suggested that those political figures who personalize ideological affronts using Twitter derive benefits from its use that include increased leverage with the medium. Trump already had a green light when it came to his social media demeanor during his presidency, considering that those most inclined toward uncivil social media communications were more likely to support Trump in the 2016 election (Groshek & Koc-Michalskal, 2017). Using insult politics that appealed to Trump supporters, central "was not what was said, but how it was said" (Heiskanen & Butters, 2017, p. 2), a style characterized as a kind of toxic masculinity (Pizarro-Sirera, 2020).

Immigration Rhetoric and Trump

Analyses of presidents' speeches from 1953 to 2017 by Eshbaugh-Soha and Juenke (2022) suggest that presidents' rhetoric regarding the topic of immigration increased—and increased in negativity—since a defining 1994 California ballot initiative that sought to limit public services for immigrants and since the terrorist actions on U.S. soil of September 11, 2001. Immigrants and the changes they posed to the United States inspired for President Trump a narrative that Americans' identity and way of life were in danger. Rhetoric on immigration, tracked in Trump's public speeches during his term in office returned regularly to the topic of the border (Eshbaugh-Soha & Barnes, 2021), and his negative tone on the topic of immigration was directed toward appealing to his political base (Eshbaugh-Soha & Juenke, 2022). Consistent with a right-leaning "triad" of populism involving the three entities of the people, the elite, and the scapegoat (Hodges, 2019), Trump warned that Americans' "traditional place at the center of U.S. society was being taken away—stolen—by left-wing interlopers, alien immigrants, and all kinds of other deviants" (Hill, 2021, pp. 291-292).

Further, Trump posited that he alone could fix the problem. While he portrayed himself as an "outsider candidate to his own party," an "anti-establishment figure" (Gonawela et al., 2018, p. 318), he still leaned on and looked to the Republican party and its leaders as needed—although at arms-length—in a manner of double differentiation (Hutter, 2011; Groshek & Engelbert, 2012). Groshek and Engelbert (2012) described this as a behavior in which "populist outside positioning is pursued by politicians with explicit inside ties to the political establishment" (p. 189). Referring to the 2016 presidential election, Heiskanen and Butters (2017) suggested that voters tired of mainstream politics were already prepped to respond to a rise in populist politics and politicians. For Trump, outside positioning as a populist was enhanced by communicating directly, unmediated, via Twitter to a sizeable and growing following of millions of social media devotees looking to his leadership.

Advised by this literature, the present research gathered immigration-related social media statements of President Trump, made in the lead-up to both the 2018 midterm and 2020 general elections, and examined the following:

RQ1: What were the prevalent immigration frames used in President Trump's tweets, and did prevalence of those frames differ leading up to the 2018 midterm and 2020 general elections?

RQ2: Did some tweets resonate more with social media users, and if so, what were their characteristics?

RQ3: In what proportion of immigration-related tweets did Trump utilize political or election rhetoric?

RQ4: To what extent did Trump use immigration-related tweets for endorsing or opposing political candidates?

METHODS

This study uses quantitative content analysis to analyze frames related to the topic of immigration during the Trump presidency. The method is appropriate for identifying the framing of this topic by Trump himself and for examining his immigration-related tweets in the months leading up to the midterm election in 2018 and general election in 2020.

Twitter statements by President Trump that referenced immigrants and immigration during these time periods constituted the population for this research. In order to identify the most potentially pivotal periods of time to study, the research focused on the lead-up to major elections during the Trump presidency—the 2018 midterm elections which could impact party dominance in Congress, and possibly of more importance to Trump, the 2020 general election in which Trump himself was a candidate. Thus, the entire corpus of Trump's tweets were analyzed when heightened attention was paid to the November elections. For the 2018 midterm election period, immigration-related tweets by Trump were retrieved from August 1, 2018, through and including the midterm election on November 6, 2018. For the 2020 general election period, Trump's tweets were retrieved from August 1, 2020, through and including the general election on November 3, 2020.

Trump's statements were identified through a digital search conducted of Public Papers of the President from *The American Presidency Project* (Woolley, 2022) and of the Trump Twitter Archive. *The American Presidency Project* (APP) resource is supported by the University of California at Santa Barbara and offers the ability to conduct online searches for public records of presidents' public statements, including presidential speeches, addresses, executive orders, interviews, news conferences, debates, interviews, and more recently, tweets. For purposes of reviewing Trump's tweets, records were retrieved with a digital advanced search of the following 25 terms using keyword stemming followed by "*":

> migra* Migra* MIGRA* immigra* Immigra* IMMIGRA* wall* Wall* WALL* border* Border* BORDER* alien* Alien* caravan* Caravan* cartel* Cartel* illegals* Illegals* sanctuar* Sanctuar* refugee* Refugee* REFUGEES*

Because the retrieval for APP is case sensitive, and because Trump frequently used all capital letters with words, or capitalized the first letter of some words, a separate search was required to retrieve those tweets. Note that a search for some all-capitalized words (ALIEN*, CARAVAN*, CARTEL*, ILLEGALS*) had no occurrences throughout these time frames, so they were excluded from the final retrieval. A search of immigration-related tweets was further cross-validated by incorporating the terms crim* Crim* CRIM* but produced no additional tweets beyond those already retrieved with the previous 25 terms.

An additional search for Trump's tweets was conducted for the same time periods from the online Trump Twitter Archive using the same stem terms:

> migra*| immigra* | wall* | border* | alien* | caravan* | cartel* | illegal* | sanctuar* | refugee* |

This secondary step returned seven additional tweets not captured with APP, which were added to the total body of tweets under analysis. Duplicates between sources were eliminated.

For the midterm election period, the keyword searches from the two sources produced 99 relevant tweets. For the general election period, the keyword searches produced 59 relevant tweets. All 158 tweets or re-tweets that met the keyword search criteria were reviewed for purposes of this study.

Once collected, all tweets were coded for the frame evident in each record, as originally formulated by Benson (2013), or as having a political frame that did not fit neatly into the Benson typology. The 10 frames constituting Benson's immigrant typology describe immigrants as victims, immigrants as heroes, and immigrants as threats. Under the frame of immigrants as victims are: 1) global economy (widespread poverty and inequality); 2) humanitarian (everyday hardships of a social, political, and economic nature); and 3) racism/xenophobia (assaults or discrimination premised on ethnic, cultural, or religious background). Under the frame of immigrants as heroes are: 1) cultural diversity (positive differences offered to society); 2) integration (adaptive civically or culturally); and 3) good worker (support jobs others will not do). Under the frame of immigrants as threats are: 1) jobs (take jobs from or lower wages of others); 2) public order (law-breaking or pose threat to health or environment); 3) fiscal (cost taxpayers for required services); and 4) national cohesion (threat to national unity or societal harmony).

The additional, political-only frame was identified in those tweets which contained no frame from Benson's typology but were political in nature by virtue of referencing Democrats, Republicans, an election, a campaign, candidates for office, political endorsement or opposition, or voting in an election.

Once the tweets were collected, two coders (one of which is the author) undertook a period of training and test coding through which the coders reviewed and amended definitions, refined categories, and revised a codebook. As practice, the two coders independently coded 20 immigration-related tweets outside the analysis time frame (using 10 tweets from July 2018 and 10 tweets from July 2020). From that exercise, additional clarifications were made to the codebook, and a second test coding was performed. Once completed, Cohen's Kappa returned agreement among sample tweets of:

- 1.0 for tweets coded as political only, victim/humanitarian, and fiscal threat;
- .898 for tweets coded as threat to public order; and
- .725 for tweets bearing a code of threat to national cohesion.

No other frames appeared among the sample tweets used for the coder agreement exercise.

FINDINGS

This study examined the immigration-related tweets issued by President Trump in the three months leading up to both the 2018 midterm election and the 2020 general election in an effort to determine the prevalence of certain immigrant frames among those tweets and how Trump also used social media and the topic of immigration for political purposes.

The first Research Question focused on classifying the frames prevalent in President Trump's tweets and to compare those frames used in 2018 against those used in 2020. Results offered that immigrants as threats was the frame from Benson's typology that occurred most often; however, tweets that were predominantly political in nature, without a Benson-related frame, prevailed in number.

As shown in Table 1, of the total 158 tweets analyzed, 59.5% (N = 94) were "political only" with no dominant frame from Benson's typology. Overall, immigrants as threats (includes jobs, public order, fiscal, and national cohesion) constituted 39.8% (N = 63) of tweets. In that category, 53 tweets contained the specific frame of immigrants as a threat to public order; eight tweets categorized immigrants as a fiscal threat to the nation. The remaining two tweets included one mention each of immigrants as a threat to jobs and a threat to national cohesion. Only one tweet fell under immigrants as victims, and no tweets were categorized from the Benson typology that describe immigrants as heroes.

Table 1

Frequency of Frames Total and Split by Year, 2018 & 2020

Benson Typology or Political Only	Frequency Total	Percent Total	Frequency 2018	Percent 2018	Frequency 2020	Percent 2020
Political Only	94	59.5	54	54.5	40	67.8
Threats						
Jobs	1	0.6	0	0.0	1	1.7
Public Order	53	33.5	39	39.4	14	23.7
Fiscal	8	5.1	5	5.1	3	5.1
National Cohesion	1	0.6	0	0.0	1	1.7
Victims						
Global Economy	0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0
Humanitarian	1	0.6	1	1.0	0	0.0
Racism/Xenophobia	0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0
Heroes						
Cultural Diversity	0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0
Integration	0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0
Good Worker	0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	158	100.0*	99	100.0	59	100.0
* Rounded						

Also examined were Trump's immigration-related tweets leading up to the 2018 midterm election compared to those leading up to the 2020 general election. In 2018, of Trump's 99 tweets that were immigration-related, 54.5% (N = 54) were described as political only, whereas 44.5% (N = 44) of Trump's tweets fell in the broad category of immigrants as threats. Of those, 39 tweets were specific to immigrants as a threat to public order, and five tweets suggested a fiscal threat to the nation.

In 2020, 67.8% (N = 40) of tweets were described as political only, and 32.2% (N = 19) were considered immigrants as threats, with 14 of those categorized as immigrants as a threat to public order and three tweets considered a fiscal threat to the nation. A chi-square test did not indicate statistical significance between time periods 2018 and 2020 relative to the use of these frames, (χ^2 (2, 158) = 4.1, $p > .05$).
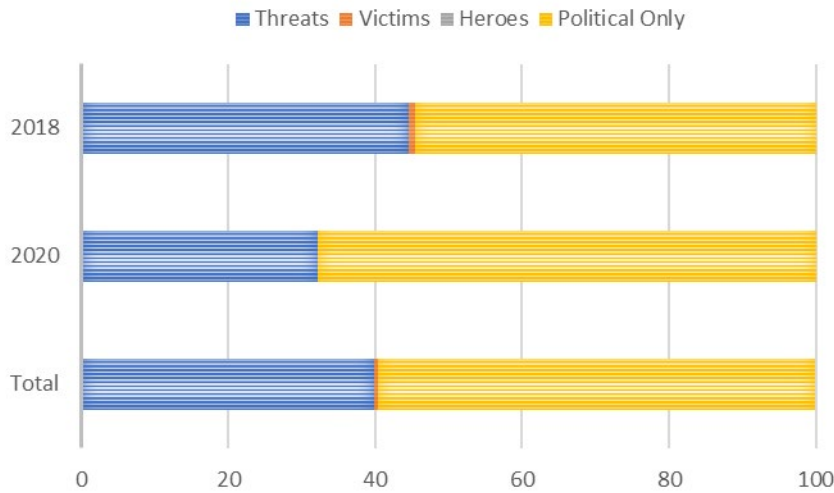
Figure 1. Summary of frames by year in Trump's immigration tweets.
Frames and political only prevalence (%).

The second Research Question addressed how tweets leading up to the midterm and general elections resonated with social media users. Among the total 158 tweets analyzed, the 10 tweets garnering the highest number of likes were posted within three weeks before the elections. Trump's 61 immigration-related tweets in the immediate 30 days before the 2018 election attracted a total of 4.59 million likes, averaging more than 75,000 per tweet. In the 30 days before the 2020 general election, Trump's 28 immigration-related tweets drew 2.02 million likes, averaging more than 72,000 per tweet.

As those elections grew near, Trump's Twitter following appeared to pay more attention to immigration messaging. Among all the immigration-related tweets under analysis, those tweets with the greatest number of likes, as exhibited by the two large spikes in Figure 2, corresponded to Trump's political tweets issued in 2020 that were critical of Biden. Tweets from those dates garnered more than 182,000 likes on October 17 and nearly 197,000 likes on October 23, and read as follows:

| Oct 17th 2020 - 10:25:05 PM EST
↻ 54k ♡ 182k 🐦 Show | Joe Biden is the living embodiment of the corrupt political class that enriched itself while draining the economic life and soul from our Country. For the last 47 years, Joe Biden shipped away your jobs, shut down your factories, threw open your borders, and ravaged our cities... |
| Oct 23rd 2020 - 2:40:29 PM EST
↻ 37k ♡ 197k 🐦 Show | Joe Biden was very disrespectful to President Obama at last night's debate when he said that he, Joe, "was Vice President, not President," when trying to make excuses for their failed immigration policies. I wonder what "O" was thinking when he heard that one? |
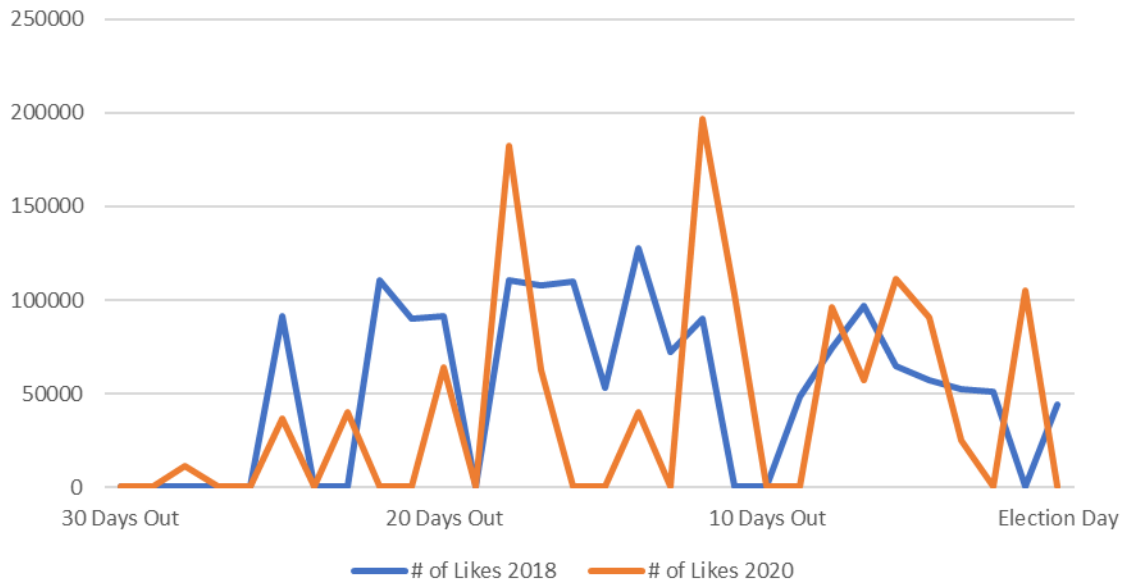
Figure 2. Average daily number of likes in response to Trump's immigration tweets 30 days before 2018 and 2020 elections.

The third Research Question examined the proportion of immigration-related tweets in which Trump utilized political or election rhetoric, as shown in Table 2. The tweets in which Trump endorsed or opposed candidates were counted in this category, but did not always exhibit a frame from Benson's typology. Other tweets that exhibited a frame consistent with the Benson typology were considered to be political in nature and included in this count if they also referenced a political party, an election or campaign, a candidate for office, or voting in an election. Overall, 82.9% (N = 131) of Trump's immigration tweets were considered political, election, or campaign-related. In 2018, 79.8% (N = 79) fell in that category, and in 2020, 88.1% (N = 52) were overtly political in nature. A chi-square test did not indicate statistical significance for these differences between time periods, (χ^2 (1, 158) = 1.27, *p* > .05). Political tweets in this category—which did not endorse or oppose candidates—included the following examples:

Nov 3rd 2018 - 9:46:00 PM EST
13k   48k   Show

If you want to protect criminal aliens – VOTE DEMOCRAT. If you want to protect Law-Abiding Americans – VOTE REPUBLICAN! https://t.co/0pWiwCHGbh https://t.co/2YoXSWT0Px

Sep 25th 2020 - 7:22:54 AM EST
11k   43k   Show

Working hard in New Mexico. I built the Wall (security) and will totally protect your Second Amendment (The Dems want to obliterate it!). Will be there soon! https://t.co/feRRkLFM9a

Table 2

Frequency of Tweets with Political References, including the "Immigrants as Threats" Frame

Response	Total		2018		2020	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Evident	131	82.9	79	79.8	52	88.1
Absent	27	17.1	20	20.2	7	11.9
Total	158	100.0	99	100.0	59	100.0

Finally, the fourth Research Question involved comparing Trump's use of immigration-related tweets for endorsing or opposing political candidates. Leading up to the midterm election in 2018, Trump regularly directed his anti-immigration tweeting for the purpose of endorsing congressional or gubernatorial candidates with language in which he often extended his "total endorsement" and often labeled a candidate as "strong on the border."

Aug 29th 2018 - 8:52:05 AM EST
11k 52k Show

Martha McSally is an extraordinary woman. She was a very talented fighter jet pilot and is now a highly respected member of Congress. She is Strong on Crime, the Border and our under siege 2nd Amendment. Loves our Military and our Vets. Has my total and complete Endorsement!

Nov 4th 2018 - 6:05:44 PM EST
11k 45k Show

Thank you Macon, Georgia! Get out on Tuesday, November 6th and VOTE for @BrianKempGA as your next Governor to protect your jobs, defend your borders, fight for your values, and continue MAKING AMERICA GREAT AGAIN! https://t.co/Hzbqw35oNM

Shown in Figure 3 are the frequencies with which candidates running for office were either endorsed or opposed by Trump in immigration-related tweets. In 2018, Trump trained his candidate-focused tweets overwhelmingly on endorsements, at 45%, and opposed candidates in only 9% of tweets; but in 2020 his tweets became more oppositional in nature with 33% of his tweets expressing opposition to candidates, while 37% endorsed candidates.
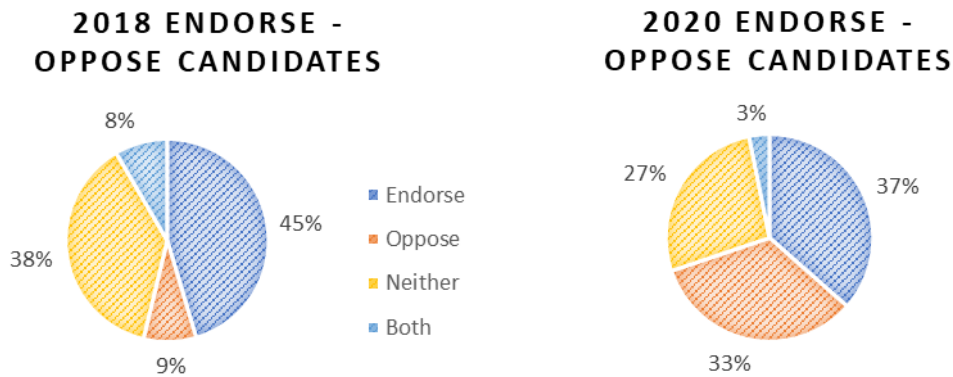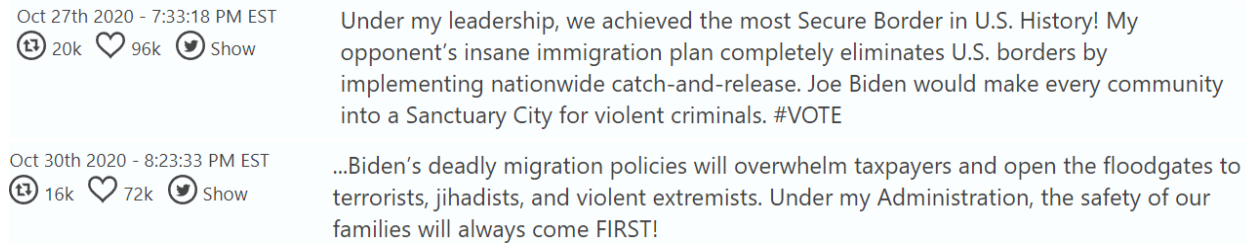

Figure 3. Frequency of Trump candidate endorsements and opposition by year.
Note. Some tweets contain statements of both endorsement and opposition.

During the pre-election period of 2020, in 23 tweets Trump endorsed candidates by name who were running for office, and in 21 tweets, he opposed candidates by name. Of the 21 tweets opposing candidates, 14 of those were issued in the final 30 days leading up to the general election and were directed at Biden in language that regularly used Benson typology, such as these that employed the frame immigrants as threats to public order:

Oct 27th 2020 - 7:33:18 PM EST
🔁 20k 🤍 96k 🐦 Show
Under my leadership, we achieved the most Secure Border in U.S. History! My opponent's insane immigration plan completely eliminates U.S. borders by implementing nationwide catch-and-release. Joe Biden would make every community into a Sanctuary City for violent criminals. #VOTE

Oct 30th 2020 - 8:23:33 PM EST
🔁 16k 🤍 72k 🐦 Show
...Biden's deadly migration policies will overwhelm taxpayers and open the floodgates to terrorists, jihadists, and violent extremists. Under my Administration, the safety of our families will always come FIRST!

A chi-square test was conducted on all tweets in the three months leading up to the midterm and general elections to assess whether Trump's use of endorsement and oppositional tweets differed between the two periods. This test indicated a statistically significant difference such that 2018 is distinctive from 2020 along the dimensions of tweets that endorsed or opposed candidates, (χ^2 (3, 182) = 18.92, $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

Trump used social media to stoke Americans' fears about immigrants—a tactic undertaken to appeal to his populist base and to bolster his political ambitions. With 82.9% of analyzed tweets considered political, election, or campaign-related, a compelling observation of this study is the constancy with which Trump as president politicized immigration and linked its references in tweets to partisan topics. He regularly used immigration as a litmus test with political candidates—whom he endorsed or whom he opposed—and signaled to his political base to vote for those candidates he considered strong on the border. "Strong on the border" implied that a candidate, if elected, would support building the border wall, tighten border security, and limit access to the country by those he called criminal or illegal aliens. In many of his endorsement tweets, Trump often referenced the topic of immigration with only a few words or even just one word—border; and he often named it in a list of issues that resonated with his political base including the Second Amendment, crime, the military, and veterans.

The key statistically significant finding of this study addressed the major shift by Trump in his role of endorsing and opposing candidates using immigration-related tweets. From 2018 to 2020, he became much more oppositional, using his tweets far less for the purpose of endorsing candidates by name, and much more intentionally for opposing candidates by name. His main target in 2020 was Joe Biden, and most of Trump's anti-Biden immigration-related tweets also employed the Benson typology of immigrants as threats. An explanation for this shift in Trump's Twitter strategy relative to endorsements and oppositional tweets could be attributed to a stronger personal desire for the success of his own re-election effort in 2020 and less so for the success of others' campaign outcomes.

Trump's oppositional tweets in 2020 also attracted the highest number of likes for both time periods analyzed. The two highest responses for likes represented on Figure 2 are tweets that attacked Joe Biden, Trump's 2020 general campaign opponent. In the case of an October 17 tweet that received

more than 182,000 likes, Trump accused Biden of "throwing open your borders" and "draining the economic life and soul from our country." In an October 23 tweet that received nearly 197,000 likes, Trump repeated criticism from the previous night's presidential debate with Biden regarding the "failed immigration policies" of the Obama-Biden administration. In that debate matchup, Trump accused the former administration of being responsible for the cages in which children separated from their families at the border were being held. Despite being president for nearly four years by that time, Trump sidestepped the responsibility for that practice, suggested they were working to fix it, and added that Biden "did nothing except build cages to keep children in" (Presidential Debate, October 22, 2020). With that approach, Trump essentially sustained his populist credentials by offering his leadership to address the problem that he alleged other political elites had created.

For Trump, social media played a critical role in reinforcing his political strategy. Twitter provided the opportunity to imbue urgency and emotion into his unmediated communications. On Twitter, Trump posted populist messages that appealed to his followers and deviated from his party's conventional dialogue on the subject of immigration. Through double differentiation, Trump led—and drew support from—the Republican party, aligning as needed with traditional party positions on immigration; but Trump also played protagonist to that portion of America which was energized by his polarizing political stances on immigration and was readily accessible via tweet.

Using Twitter, Trump was able to deliver on a populist style of communicating. He challenged policy experts, aligned his sympathies with those who felt left behind by government, and offered himself as the solution in tweets such as this:

Oct 24th 2020 - 10:42:10 PM EST
22k 103k Show

This is the most important election in the history of our Country. With your vote, we will continue to bring back your jobs, lower drug prices, support our police, protect the #2A, defend our borders, and ensure more products are proudly stamped with the phrase MADE IN THE USA! https://t.co/M0Ba8QR7Nl

Similarly in immigration tweets, Trump double differentiated, stiff-arming his party leadership (referencing then-Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan) and wrapping himself in the cloak of the party:

Oct 31st 2018 - 12:43:19 PM EST
26k 106k Show

Paul Ryan should be focusing on holding the Majority rather than giving his opinions on Birthright Citizenship, something he knows nothing about! Our new Republican Majority will work on this, Closing the Immigration Loopholes and Securing our Border!

Sep 22nd 2020 - 9:43:48 PM EST
19k 67k Show

With your VOTE, we are going to lift our nation to extraordinary new heights – we are going to turn the page forever on the failed political class – and we are going to Defend our Jobs, our Families, our Borders, and our treasured way of Life! https://t.co/WwzdPhlJcp https://t.co/kyNuebdLcT

Through his tweets, Trump often tied the act of immigrating or immigrants to a criminal act, likely seeking to activate politically conservative Americans who also were more likely to describe immigrants as threats to the public as defined by the Benson typology (Mendelsohn et al., 2021). Trump's language was intended to reinforce Americans' fears of "some of the most vicious and dangerous people on earth!" (from Trump tweet, August 6, 2018). His language also was intended to remind his political base that he was working hard as their president to fix the problem of immigration and reverse the erosion by immigrants of the American way of life. While this danger from immigrants manifested itself as the potential for crimes or threats to the public order, Trump occasionally reminded

his Twitter following that immigrants cost taxpayers money and threatened American jobs. In these references, Trump used the Benson typology in social media communications to alert Americans to the supposed threat presented by immigrants, cast himself as the outsider who could fix immigration, and cement his presidential political future beyond 2020.

Besides promoting conflict expansion (Merry, 2022) and political polarization, Trump's immigration tweets prompted several other negative outcomes. Trump's language promoted false information about the topic that simply confused the immigration narrative (Merry, 2022). Relying on emotional appeals using uncivil and dehumanizing language, his communications toxified discourse and intensified racial bias (Ott, 2016). According to Heuman and Gonzalez (2018), for people navigating immigration's liminality—the in-between stage of living in this country and still caught in an unresolved immigrant status—Trump's public rhetoric prompted substantial fear and anguish. The resulting ripple effect from his language impacted the lives of millions of people who were fearful of or faced intensified discrimination and violence. As a result of Trump, anti-immigrant discourse—while not new— was mainstreamed and normalized on social media by the leader of a major political party who also happened to be this nation's president and the leader of the free world.

Eshbaugh-Soha and Barnes (2021) studied all of President Trump's immigration-related public comments, including speeches and addresses, made during his presidency. They noted that the number of Trump's public comments overall declined in 2020, which also was observed among tweets in the months preceding the 2020 election. An explanation they offered is that the overall decline by Trump in attention to immigration prior to the 2020 election could be attributed to intense attention required for addressing the federal COVID-19 response.

Previously referenced Lexicoder research by Eshbaugh-Soha and Barnes (2021) suggested Trump's overall immigration references were neutral or even slightly positive in sentiment. For example, Trump's comments that included "we will build a great border wall" (remarks on March 21, 2017) were coded as positive by Lexicoder in their study. Similar phrases, however, evaluated through the lens of immigrants and for purposes of this study, were coded as "immigrants as threats"—a negative, anti-immigrant frame—since construction of the border wall was intended to keep out what Trump tweets referred to as criminal or illegal aliens.

Immigration references throughout the full Trump presidency may have tended toward a less negative tone than those analyzed in this study that were drawn exclusively in the politically critical months leading up to the major elections of 2018 and 2020; but analyzed by human coders, the preponderance of Trump's pre-election tweets that were assigned a frame from Benson's typology netted a negative "immigrants as threats" frame. Future research would benefit by comparing outcomes using Lexicoder software on this specific body of tweets against the outcomes derived by human coders who viewed the human interest topic through the framework of Benson's typology.

Similarly, research by Merry (2022) that examined Trump's tweets from 2011 to 2020 warrants additional clarification. In that study, Trump's tweets were classified with a typology somewhat similar to Benson's, but that used characters of victim, hero, villain, ally, and beneficiary. Merry's findings suggested that Trump's use of the villain character was most frequent for much of the period of study, but was largely replaced by the hero character later in the Trump administration. This is inconsistent with the current study which found virtually no use by Trump of immigrants as heroes using Benson's

typology. The current study, however, did find very high use of immigrants as threats (similar to Merry's terminology for villain).

It is important to appreciate that Merry's description of hero applies not only to immigrants, but any "individual, organization, or governmental entity that is praised in some way" (Merry, 2022, p. 760). By virtue of this application, immigration tweets by Trump that praised his own perceived accomplishments would be coded in the hero column. For example, Trump tweeted this message on October 27, 2020: "Under my leadership, we achieved the most Secure Border in U.S. History!" Under Merry's coding strategy, that tweet would be coded as hero, but it would not be coded as hero under the Benson typology since the tweet did not reference immigrant as hero. Similarly, Merry's use of villain (or threat) may be any "individual, organization, or government entity that is blamed for some type of wrongdoing or harm" (p. 760). The villain character, Merry offers, could be applied to actors that include the news media, other countries, and a variety of Democrats, as well as immigrants. Simply put, for understanding Trump's tweets, readers should closely examine the constructed typologies applied in research in order to discern the difference between Trump's social media treatment of the topic, generally, and Trump's treatment of immigrants, specifically.

CONCLUSION

This study advances framing theory relative to treatment of immigration by a U.S. president using social media in the lead-up to the 2018 and 2020 elections. The research builds on Benson's framing typology in two ways: 1) by applying it to analysis of social media communications about immigration; and 2) by applying it specifically to social media communications of a U.S. president in the context of political elections and campaign strategies. Furthermore, with the addition of a frame that is expressly political in nature, we contribute to Benson's already significant and valuable work in this field.

As observed in the body of tweets analyzed for this study, anti-immigration perspectives endured in certain political circles, and a litmus test for party inclusion and electability was a deliberate willingness to politicize and weaponize immigrants, including on social media. Critics of this tactic will observe with interest if the phenomenon slows the further we get from Trump's first term as president, or if others will take up the baton and continue down this path in future electoral races.

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