Open and Shut: 
The Immigration Debate in the Twenty-First Century

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Brief Description

Taken as a whole, the book offers a broad interdisciplinary thesis on recent changes in the U.S. immigration debate. Our story accounts for multiple factors, including history (the events of 9/11), culture and politics (media representations and political rhetoric), power (political economy), organizations (interest groups), technology (internet-mediated extremism), social psychological processes (media effects), and political change (immigration policies). The relationship between immigration law, human emotion, social cognition, organizational behavior, political economy and fateful historical events is as complex as it is abstract. Examining this relationship in the contemporary context will require a lengthy voyage across academic disciplines, a synthesis of seemingly contradictory assumptions about human thought and behavior, and a grasp of research traditions so vast and confusing that an accurate rendering may seem implausible. And yet, to tell the story of the twenty-first century’s immigration debate in any other way is to tell it in part. Our goals may be ambitious, but they are also supported by a growing interdisciplinary tradition in the social sciences. A nation’s reaction to foreigners has as much to do with sociology as it does with political science, economics and psychology. Without drawing on knowledge from each of these disciplines, our understanding of the immigration debate will remain mundane, partial and imperfect. For a full description of how we avoid this pitfall, read on.

Full Description

The immigration debate in the United States has always been about openness. Two questions in particular – how open should the door be and what type of immigrant should walk through it – have characterized policy disputes for well over a century. In the current debate, expansionists want to see more legal immigrants in the U.S. and greater tolerance, if not respect, for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants
in the country. Restrictionists favor lower levels of immigration, stronger borders and
tighter law enforcement measures to stop the stream of ‘illegal’ or undocumented
migration. One aim of this book is to describe how these opposing views materialized
in public opinion, the news media, political rhetoric and ultimately in immigration law
at the start of the twenty-first century. Our second and more formidable task is to
explain how and why the restrictionists rose to prominence during this period.

Much of our argument rests on the idea that history matters, that the dominant
narrative about immigration is in constant flux, and that the winner of the immigration
debate is determined by a vector of contextual elements: the joint impact of current
events, enduring traditions, and political-economic forces. For this reason, we focus our
analysis on a rather modest historical snapshot that begins in 2000 with President
George W. Bush’s first election campaign and concludes during the run-up to the
presidential election in 2016. Stamped indelibly by the tragic events of 9/11, this was a
period of national insecurity, an anxious decade when the threat of terrorism loomed
higher in the public mindset than during any prior period in U.S. history. The nation
also experienced its worst economic crisis since the great depression. For many
Americans, financial worries lingered throughout much of this period. While imagining
job loss and violence on a grand scale, Americans also learned about record increases in
the undocumented immigrant population. In fact, policy-makers and media venues
linked immigration policy to the threat of terrorism, an argument of ‘border security.’

Meanwhile the internet solidified its position as a dominant media outlet,
decentralized the debate over immigration and gave extreme anti-immigrant
organizations the opportunity to build their networks, make inroads to the mainstream
debate, and voice their opinions directly to a growing number of Americans. These
conditions helped the restrictionists reactivate certain longstanding beliefs and cultural
orientations and gain a number of victories in the realms of media, public opinion,
politics and policy.

For us, the “big picture” – historical context, macro-social and -economic
processes, technological change – represents only one, ever-changing part of the story.
Our approach to the immigration debate avoids deterministic claims and grand-scale
projections. Although we argue with conviction that a climate of fear played an
important role in shaping the debate, the fear itself and its effects on social attitudes and
public policy were neither inevitable nor necessarily long lasting. In fact, in the final
chapter of the book, we point to a new shift in the debate after President Barrack
Obama’s second victory in 2012 when it became clearer that the Democrats had a
considerable advantage over Republicans among Hispanic voters. Aware of the
landmark demographic shifts in the U.S. citizenry, many politicians, Republicans and
Democrats alike, became weary of alienating the Hispanic population. Without taking a
strong position here, we suggest that the circumstances now seemed ripe for an
expansionist correction in the dominant narrative on immigration.

In essence, our argument at once denies economic determinism, progressivism
and universalistic claims about intergroup conflict. There is no single resounding force
that pushes the debate in a particular direction. And, there is no straightforward theory
of human nature that properly explains the rise or fall of either side. The debate is
rooted in preconceived notions, longstanding prejudice and historical reflection, but it
also responds to the moving pieces of everyday politics, propaganda, and current events. For this reason, we can see both similarities and differences between today’s debate and those of the distant past.

Consider, for instance, the public discussion of immigration in the late nineteenth century. The social and economic conditions of the day – the turmoil of post-Civil War race relations, rapid industrialization, urbanization and the continued westward expansion – were no doubt unique. The communication systems that mediated the debate were far removed from today’s fast-moving information technology. There was no radio or television, no twenty-four hour news cycle, no websites, no blogs, no online social networks, no internet. Unlike its current position, the federal government played a limited role in regulating immigration. The federal government did not take control of immigration until 1890 when it developed the nation’s first federal immigration station on Ellis Island. California, which is now home to more foreign-born residents than any other state, had only recently joined the union. The immigrant groups that were most feared by the non-immigrant public, denounced in the press and targeted for prohibition did not look or sound like today’s targets.

However, in spite of these obvious differences, the politics of exclusion of the late nineteenth century were also similar in some ways to the contemporary context of exclusion. Back then the debate reached a poignant climax when Congress put forward the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Upheld by the Supreme Court in 1889, the law restricted immigration from China by placing heavy fines and the threat of jail time on ship captains carrying Chinese immigrants to the United States. A single immigrant group dominated the discussion during this period, particularly in the American West where Chinese immigrants had initially been recruited to work as laborers in the minerals and railroad industries.

The central argument against Chinese immigration rested on a vivid immigrant threat narrative involving a mix of social and economic hazards. These risks were dramatized and widely disseminated in news reports, editorials, political speeches and other elements of popular culture. The Chinese would steal jobs from Americans rather than contribute to economic growth. They would alter mainstream traditions, culture and values rather than embrace them. Chinese immigrants would add to the nation’s problems of drug abuse, crime and neighborhood disorder rather than promote hard work, innovation and democracy. At the end of the day, the Chinese would remain loyal to the old country and undermine the new one. Future commentators and scholars would demonstrate that most of these worries and concerns were unfounded. But at the time, fears of Chinese immigration had a profound influence on voting patterns and served as a storehouse of political capital for those who could tap and convert it into political change. The Chinese Exclusion Act itself states in its opening line that newcomers from China “endanger the good order of certain localities within the territory.”

The current debate is dominated by similar pessimistic prognostications and appeals to fear, uncertainty, and risk. A single immigrant group – this time Latinos – has been identified as the main source of the danger. Perceived threats to the economy, culture and national security are still deeply woven in the social consciousness and political atmosphere surrounding the debate. As in the past, ominous claims about
Latinos and Mexicans are being voiced louder and with greater regularity in news media and politics than careful reasoning and scientific assessments. The majority of non-Hispanic Americans harbors negative attitudes toward the influx of immigrants from Mexico. A number of prominent politicians and other officials have gained popularity for their fiery support of restrictionist policies, including reducing legal immigration, tightening border security, and creating harsher law enforcement measures for dealing with undocumented immigrants. The laws governing immigration, particularly at the state level, have reflected a similar authoritarian tendency, while expansionist projects have been quashed or put on hold.

The politics of exclusion of the past, notwithstanding its anachronistic components, represents the cultural backbone of the current debate. The idea that immigrants negatively affect the country comes to mind so easily today partly because it came to mind so often in the past. Put differently, the worries and concerns about immigration at the start of the twenty-first century were not new. They were built upon a foundation of stereotypical beliefs, errors in attribution, and prejudice that formed far before the events of September 11 or the financial crisis of 2007-2008. However, the specific characteristics of this cognitive framework were in some ways novel and unique. The detailed meanings that people attach to the key issues of immigration depend, in the aggregate, on which side of the debate has the upper hand. Following this line of reasoning, we now return to the main goal of this book: to explain, in far greater detail, how and why the restrictionists prevailed in the early 2000s.

Chapter Outline

The Art of Getting it Wrong

We examine the political economy of the debate. One of the most interesting facets of the ongoing battle over immigration policy resides in the fact that almost all of the nation’s most powerful social actors promote the expansionist position, and yet restrictionists have still found a strong voice in American politics, media and public opinion. This contradiction only becomes more surprising when we scrutinize the three most common restrictionist claims about the effects of immigration on American society. Although much has been written and spoken about the negative influence of immigrants on the economy, security and culture, we find these claims wanting when tested by the findings of peer-reviewed studies and scientific investigation. Even if anti-immigrant rhetoric is based more on myths than on empirical observations, the restrictionists’ positions became more attractive to many Americans and played a greater role in politics after the devastating terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

The Restrictionists Take their Argument to the States

This chapter outlines the post-9/11 changes in immigration laws. While the few immigration-related laws that were passed at the federal level were indeed restrictive in
nature, new state laws, particularly those regulating undocumented immigration, were the broadest and strictest anti-immigration measures to be passed in the decade following the tragedy. In addition to revealing the effects of 9/11 on state and federal immigration legislation, this chapter also offers a model to explain why some states passed restrictionist laws while others did not. We show that the probability of a state passing such legislation depended on a number of factors other than 9/11, including: the state legislature’s ideological spectrum as well as the party of the Governors, its level of social inequality, the size of the Latino population in the state as well as the projected growth from the 2000 Census to the 2010 Census, the dominance of the Republican Party in state politics and the participation of the Democratic Party, and the changing content of presidential rhetoric. The restrictionist swing in state and federal immigration legislation was accompanied by parallel trends in political rhetoric, the media, and public opinion. These shifts are described in detail in the next four chapters.

The President Goes Negative on Immigration

This chapter examines the changes in presidential immigration rhetoric after 9/11. Particularly, this chapter analyzes the disconnect between the positivity about immigration in Party Platforms with the negativity about immigration in presidential rhetoric. We, essentially, argue that the content of presidential rhetoric is typically determined by the context in which it is given rather than an autonomous entrepreneurial policy exposition.

The Conversation in Congress

This chapter looks at the increase in negative framing in Congressional hearings. More specifically, this chapter allowed us to ascertain if external factors that members of Congress often encounter influence how they address immigration. Rather than determining if congressional rhetoric effects change in the immigration policy narrative, as an entrepreneurial mechanism of power, we think that understanding the dynamic as a way for members to capitalize on the public mood provides a more enriching assessment of congressional responsibility in the immigration debate.

The Authoritarian Turn in Newspapers

This chapter carries out a similar task with a focus on the mainstream news media. This chapter uses articles from the opinion-leading press to investigate how the news media’s repertoire of negative portrayals changed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, using two, high-circulation newspapers—one known for its liberal slant (New York Times) and one known for its conservative slant (Wall Street Journal). We find that the percentage of negative frames involving not only terrorism but also other non-terrorist threats increased significantly in the post-9/11 period. The elevated frequency of negative frames in press coverage of immigrants was found in both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, but the increase was significantly greater in the latter periodical.
The Public’s View

In this chapter we demonstrate that the rise of the restrictionist position was not only reflected in policies, rhetoric, and media representations, but also in public opinion, particularly after 9/11 and during the economic crisis of 2007-2008. Using the NES Data and a meta-analysis of various public opinion data, we demonstrate the shift in how the public views immigration.

Framing Immigration

This chapter attempts to establish a link between public opinion on immigration and the content of the media and political speeches. An experimental framing effects study reveals how ethnic frames, crime frames, and terrorism frames influence people’s views of immigration-related policies.

Interest Groups and the Power of New Media

This chapter argues that the internet has allowed small organizations to play a relatively big role in the immigration debate. The chapter examines the impression management tactics of one interest group (the Center for Immigration Studies), investigates the validity of its claims by comparing them to those of the mainstream press, and determines the extent to which it has spread its messages across different news outlets.

A New Turn?

In this chapter, we offer a brief overview of changes in the immigration debate in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election.

Comparable Books

We maintain that there is no one book that does what this book seeks to accomplish. There are many books that address one aspect of our argument, through various institutions, but fail to comprehensively address this multifaceted topical issue. Having said that, there are a couple of books that closely resemble our topic and thus provide a valuable comparison. The most closely related book is Frontiers of Fear: Immigration and Insecurity in the United States and Europe (Cornell University Press, 2012). This text provides a concise argument that relates the securitization of immigration, particularly the perceived threats that are constructed around the inclusion of immigrants into civic life. Her argument rests upon extant policy and the ramifications of those policies for immigrants. More specifically, how those policies have failed in ascertaining their goals and have increased the very activities they were intended to mitigate. The second comparable book is Immigration Phobia and the Security Dilemma (Cambridge University Press, 2005). This book realistically shows the data pertaining to the securitization of the
immigration debate, particularly the differences between actual threats and perceived threats. The results suggest that there is no empirical evidence to justify framing the immigration debate in terms of securitization, as no true threat can be ascertained. Our treatise, however, accounts for multiple factors that are potentially the impetus for that securitization and changes in institutional approaches to immigration, including history (the events of 9/11), culture and politics (media representations and political rhetoric), power (political economy), organizations (interest groups), technology (internet-mediated extremism), social psychological processes (media effects), and political change (immigration policies). Primarily, our book offers a comprehensive look at the immigration debate in the United States before and after September 11th and offers insight into those changes by way of elite discourse.

Potential Market
Clearly, the most appropriate market for this book would be sociologists and political scientists, those who teach and research as well as those who are simply interested in such a salient subject. Professors who used this text in graduate seminars (Sociology of Power, American Politics/Policy, American Political Behavior, Sociology of Culture, Race Relations, Media, Interest Groups) would substantially enhance their discussions by including our text.

The book should also be of interest to communications studies scholars and historians, both political historians and historians of culture. Moreover, the interest in this book should be more broad than the academy; it deals with a highly topical subject—immigration.

Additional Information
A variation of the chapter addressing the negative presidential rhetoric has already been published in a highly regarded journal, Presidential Studies Quarterly – Permissions Pending. A variation of the chapter addressing how the news media’s repertoire of negative portrayals changed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, using two, high-circulation newspapers—one known for its liberal slant (New York Times) and one known for its conservative slant (Wall Street Journal) will be published in the highly regarded journal, Sociological Spectrum in October 2014.

This book will be approximately 75,000 words in length. Moreover, it will contain nearly 25 figures and 25 tables. A draft of the manuscript can be presented by August 2015.