
POLITICAL RESPONSES TO IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES: INSTITUTIONS, POLARIZATION, AND POLICY VOLATILITY

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Immigration has emerged as one of the most contested and politically salient issues in contemporary democratic governance. In the United States, immigration debates intersect with questions of national identity, economic competition, security, humanitarian responsibility, and democratic accountability. This paper critically examines political responses to immigration in the United States by analysing historical legacies, institutional arrangements, party polarization, securitization, and the role of media and public opinion. Rather than focusing solely on policy outcomes, the study emphasizes political processes and institutional dynamics that shape immigration governance. The paper argues that U.S. immigration policy is characterized by chronic instability driven by partisan polarization, legislative paralysis, executive overreach, and judicial intervention. By situating the U.S. case within a broader comparative framework, the study provides analytical foundations for understanding similarities and contrasts with migration politics in India and other democracies.

Keywords: *Immigration politics, United States, policy polarization, border governance, refugee policy, comparative politics*

INTRODUCTION

Immigration has become a defining issue in the political life of the United States, shaping electoral competition, public discourse, and governance strategies. Despite its historical identity as a nation built by migrants, the United States has struggled to reconcile this foundational narrative with contemporary anxieties surrounding national identity, economic security, border control, and social cohesion. Immigration therefore occupies a paradoxical position simultaneously celebrated as a source of national strength and contested as a perceived threat. This paper examines political responses to immigration in the United States by focusing on the institutional, ideological, and socio-political forces that shape immigration governance. Immigration is approached not merely as a demographic or economic phenomenon, but as a deeply political issue shaped by power relations, institutional constraints, electoral incentives, and ideological contestation. Such an approach enables a more nuanced understanding of why immigration governance in the United States remains volatile, fragmented, and highly polarized. The U.S. case is particularly instructive for comparative analysis due to its long history as a major destination country, its federal and separation-of-powers system, and the increasing politicization of migration. When compared with India—where migration politics are shaped by different historical trajectories and institutional logics—the U.S. experience offers valuable insights into how democratic systems respond to migration pressures under conditions of polarization and institutional fragmentation.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF IMMIGRATION POLICY

The evolution of immigration policy in the United States reflects shifting economic needs, racial ideologies, and political priorities. In the early republic, immigration was largely unregulated, although access to citizenship was racially restricted through the Naturalization Act of 1790. This early racialization of citizenship established enduring boundaries of national belonging. The nineteenth century witnessed mass migration from Europe and Asia, triggering nativist reactions and exclusionary policies. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 marked the first federal law explicitly barring immigration based on race and nationality, institutionalizing exclusion and expanding federal authority over immigration control. These restrictive tendencies culminated in the national origins quota system introduced by the Immigration Act of 1924, which sought to preserve the country's perceived racial and cultural composition. A major transformation occurred with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished national origin quotas and introduced a system prioritizing family reunification and skills. Although initially viewed as modest reform, this legislation dramatically reshaped the demographic profile of immigration and intensified political debates over diversity and integration. Subsequent decades introduced new challenges, particularly undocumented migration and security concerns. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 attempted to balance enforcement with legalization but failed to address structural drivers of migration. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, immigration policy became increasingly securitized, leading to expanded enforcement, surveillance, and detention under the newly created Department of Homeland Security.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF IMMIGRATION GOVERNANCE

Immigration governance in the United States is shaped by a fragmented institutional framework involving Congress, the executive branch, the judiciary, and multiple federal agencies. Congress holds constitutional authority over immigration law, yet persistent partisan divisions have prevented comprehensive legislative reform. This legislative paralysis has created a vacuum filled by executive action. Presidential authority has expanded through executive orders, administrative rulemaking, and enforcement discretion. While this enables rapid policy responses, it also produces instability as policies shift dramatically across administrations. Federal agencies—including DHS, USCIS, ICE, and CBP—play central roles in enforcement and administration, further reinforcing an enforcement-oriented governance structure. The judiciary acts as a critical check on executive authority, frequently adjudicating disputes over asylum procedures, detention practices, and constitutional protections. Judicial intervention, while essential for rights protection, also contributes to legal uncertainty and policy delay. The interaction among these institutions produces cyclical conflict rather than coordinated policymaking, making immigration governance inherently unstable.

Immigration has evolved into one of the most polarizing issues in U.S. party politics. The Democratic Party generally frames immigration through a rights-based and humanitarian lens, emphasizing inclusion, family reunification, and legal pathways. In contrast, the Republican Party increasingly emphasizes border security, enforcement, and national sovereignty. Electoral incentives have intensified these divisions, with immigration serving as a mobilizing issue for core constituencies. Legislative compromise has become increasingly rare, and immigration votes now largely follow strict party lines. As polarization deepens, immigration policy has shifted from bipartisan reform to symbolic politics, reinforcing legislative gridlock and executive-driven governance. The securitization of immigration has profoundly shaped U.S. political responses, particularly in relation to border governance. Immigration has increasingly been framed as a national security issue, justifying expanded enforcement, surveillance, and detention. The U.S.–Mexico border has become a symbolic site of sovereignty, where political narratives often conflate migration with crime and terrorism. While security-based approaches prioritize deterrence, they have also contributed to the criminalization of migration and the erosion of humanitarian protections. The reliance on emergency powers and executive authority raises concerns about democratic accountability and civil liberties, highlighting tensions between security objectives and constitutional principles.

The United States maintains a formal framework for refugee and asylum protection, institutionalized through the Refugee Act of 1980. However, humanitarian commitments have been consistently shaped by political priorities, foreign policy considerations, and public opinion. Refugee admission levels and asylum procedures fluctuate widely across administrations, undermining policy predictability. Asylum governance, particularly at the border, has become a focal point of political conflict. Deterrence-based measures, procedural restrictions, and third-country agreements have raised serious concerns regarding due process and international obligations. Temporary humanitarian programs further illustrate the executive-driven and unstable nature of U.S. protection mechanisms.

Media narratives, public attitudes, and organized interest groups play a decisive role in shaping immigration politics. Media framing influences public perception by portraying immigration as either a crisis or a humanitarian responsibility. Public opinion remains ambivalent, combining support for legal immigration with concerns about border control. Interest groups translate these attitudes into political pressure, with advocacy organizations promoting inclusion and restrictions groups emphasizing enforcement. Social media has intensified polarization by amplifying emotional narratives and misinformation, reducing opportunities for nuanced policy debate.

The contrast between the Trump and Biden administrations illustrates the extent to which U.S. immigration policy is contingent on partisan control. The Trump administration emphasized restriction, deterrence, and immigration reduction, while the Biden administration sought to restore humanitarian protections and expand legal pathways. Despite rhetorical shifts, structural constraints and political opposition limited substantive reform under both administrations. These oscillations underscore the absence of a stable, long-term immigration strategy and highlight the dominance of executive authority in the context of legislative failure.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

U.S. political responses to immigration reveal a pattern of reactive policymaking driven by polarization, institutional fragmentation, and short-term electoral incentives. While the system provides strong legal safeguards and civil society engagement, it struggles to produce coherent and sustainable migration governance. The securitization of immigration further narrows policy discourse, often at the expense of humanitarian and economic considerations. From a comparative perspective, the U.S. case demonstrates how democratic

pluralism can both enable accountability and exacerbate policy instability. These insights are essential for comparative analysis with India, where migration politics follow distinct institutional and historical trajectories.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has demonstrated that immigration governance in the United States is shaped by deep historical legacies, polarized party politics, fragmented institutions, and competing security and humanitarian priorities. Despite significant administrative capacity and democratic safeguards, U.S. immigration policy remains volatile and contested. Without sustained legislative reform and bipartisan engagement, immigration is likely to remain a cyclical and destabilizing issue in American politics. These findings provide a critical foundation for comparative analysis with India and contribute to broader debates on migration governance in democratic systems.

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