

Article

The Ideational Stigmatization of Immigration Detainees, Their Advocates, Captors, and Their Apologists in the Commentary Section of U.S. Newspapers

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Received: 15 September 2020; Accepted: 14 October 2020; Published: 18 October 2020



Abstract: Although the United States has long been criticized for its treatment of migrants, the family separations that resulted from the Trump administration's "Zero Tolerance" policy drew particularly intense approbation and much media coverage in June 2018. One way to understand the conflict over this policy is to view it as a stigma contest where the status of a number of identities (migrant, immigration advocate, captor, policy apologist) are subject to a liminal stigma. Recent scholarship has documented how internet commenters disparage certain identities as they defend others. Through a qualitative content analysis of 172 opinion articles published in U.S. newspapers between 2009 and 2020, this article examines the ways that ideational stigmatization of immigrant detainees, captors, and nativists has and has not varied by time and arena of the public sphere. We find that many of the condemnations and denials found online are also prominent in editorials and op-eds. (e.g., detention as cruel, detainees as noncriminals, captors as racist, detainees as nonvictims.). The commentary section of U.S. newspapers, however, tended to defend the detainees and condemn their captors and nativist citizens. These findings provide a fuller record of how immigration detention and family separation were constructed during the Trump administration and a deeper understanding for the fervor of U.S. nativists.

Keywords: immigrant detention; family separation; stigma; aligning activity

1. Introduction

The draconian treatment of migrants entering the U.S.–Mexico border by the United States' Federal Government briefly dominated the news in June 2018. Reports of Border Patrol agents separating children from their mothers and of detained children packed into cages inspired fierce condemnation of the Trump administration. Both immigration advocates and apologists for the Trump administration, however, argue that previous presidential administrations also pursued harsh policies towards unauthorized immigrants. This moment might well have been different, yet the event exposed the social selves of those who present diametrically opposed views around immigration. While undocumented immigrants have long been denigrated, those who support their vilification felt the need to defend themselves against accusations of cruelty and racism. Both unauthorized immigrants and supporters along with their oppressors faced ideational stigmatization as their moral worth was debated in the public sphere (Silva and Flynn 2020).

To further understand this moment in history, as well as the politics of U.S. immigration more generally, we conduct a qualitative content analysis (see Altheide and Schneider 2013) of the opinion

sections of U.S. newspapers (e.g., letters to the editor, op-eds, and editorials) in order to examine how immigrant detainees were constructed in the public sphere in the years preceding Trump's family separation policy, during the policy, and after it was ostensibly rescinded. Through this analysis, we hope to demonstrate the points of stability and variation in the ways that unauthorized immigrants and their opponents are stigmatized or defended after the rise of Trump.

That immigrant detainees suffer stigmatization is an uncontroversial social fact. What might be somewhat less obvious is that those who support the punitive-based immigration policy exemplified by the Trump administration, resulting in family separations, also confront vilification. [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#), through an analysis of comments made on *YouTube* in response to *CNN* and *ProPublica*, explored the ways detainees, their advocates, and also apologists for the Zero Tolerance Policy constructed reality. In this stigma contest ([Schur 1980](#)), both the morality of the practice of detention and the relative status of those involved faced scrutiny. That is, the social identity of participants in the debate suffer transitory discrediting attacks while simultaneously being defended by various allies, resulting in what we call "liminal stigma". Although [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#) provide a detailed list of the commenters' accounts, the emotionally charged discursive construction of immigrants' supporters and attackers may differ due to forum or venue ([Snow 2008](#)). It is possible their findings are not generalizable beyond the often-toxic world of internet discourse ([Phillips 2015](#)). By adding to their account of how family separation was contested in online comments, we can further develop our record of how immigrant detention and family separation were defined during the Trump era.

To improve the record of how this policy was constructed, it is necessary to examine how the social construction of immigrant detention occurred in various multiple arenas of the public sphere. The editorial and op-ed pages of major newspapers represent an important point of contrast from the lightly (if at all) regulated realm of the *YouTube* comments section. The filtering system of major news outlets could possibly express a more politically correct tenor compared to the relatively anonymous and unfiltered posts commentators make on social media. Still, there may be similarities in the ideational processes found in both venues. This article contributes to our understanding of the social construction of immigrant detention by addressing the following research question: How do frames of immigrant detainees compared between the opinion section of U.S. newspapers and *YouTube* comments (as reported by [Silva and Flynn 2020](#))? Beyond contributing to the documentation of how immigrant detention was justified in the public sphere, it might shed some light on the liminal stigma of detainees and Trump supporters. Evidence of vilification of immigration detention in mainstream newspapers might help to further explain the sense of stigmatization reported by Trump's seemingly advantaged supporters. It is one thing to be insulted online, it is perhaps another thing to be condemned in more esteemed venues.

A second concern of this paper is the degree to which the construction of immigrant detention has been altered by the rise of Donald Trump. While nativism is a longstanding thread of American culture ([Perea 1997](#)), to what extent was the uproar over family separation culturally novel? A transition of government, for example, could potentially produce a backlash within stigma contests or movement across the boundaries of acceptability that would inform our understanding of degrees of liminality. Trump's ascendancy has influenced the context in which people construct immigrant detention ([Estrada et al. 2020](#)). From a political economy perspective, [Robinson \(2019\)](#) argues that the Trump administration's practices towards immigrants and other subordinate groups is emblematic of a broader far-right response to the contradictions of global capitalism. That is, immigrants and others become scapegoats for underlying economic problems "through a discursive repertoire of xenophobia, mystifying ideologies that involve race/culture supremacy, an idealized and mythical past, millennialism, a militaristic and masculinist culture that normalizes, even glamorizes war, social violence and domination, and contempt toward rather than empathy for those most vulnerable" ([Robinson 2019](#), p. 168). Contrary to this materialist view, [Manza and Crowley \(2018\)](#) argue that most of Trump's support did not come from the poorest segments or economically threatened but

instead exemplifies growing ethnonationalist sentiment—anti-immigrant, anti-government spending, racial resentment, and anti-affirmative action—that has consolidated in the Republican party. Survey data on US attitudes towards immigrants (Pew Research Center 2020) partially support the view of political party divides. While in recent years there has been a jump in support to increase legal immigration among Democrats and concerns among Republicans about the identity of the nation if the US is too open to foreigners, these polls suggest that little has changed concerning views on unauthorized immigrants except for increased support to take in refugees escaping violence. Thus, our second research question: to what extent did the construction of immigrant detainees in the opinion section of U.S. newspapers change after the inauguration of President Trump? Both discourse on immigration and Trump's political career are potentially a consequence of factors that are not being measured here. An answer to this question, however, will improve our understanding of how this chapter in U.S. immigration policy is and is not unique.

The first section of this paper provides the background political issues and policies that inform the presidential administrations of the Obama and Trump presidencies. Given the lack of action by congress, they have used their executive authority to pursue their policy goals. We then provide the theoretical backdrop to our analysis. Specifically, two bodies of symbolic interactionist (Blumer 1969) concepts guide the analysis: stigma (Goffman 1963) and aligning activity (Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Next, we describe the research steps pursued in collecting and analyzing the data. The data include op-eds, columns, editorials, and letters to the editor published in U.S. newspapers from 2009 to 2020. The subsequent section presents the findings in relation to our research questions. We conclude with a discussion of the significance for our understanding of the stigmatization of detainees, their advocates, and their oppressors.

1.1. Executive Discretion on Immigration during the Obama and Trump Years

There are elements of continuity and change in Obama and Trump's approaches towards immigration policy. In lieu of Congress not passing any substantive legislation to change U.S. immigration laws, both presidents have used executive orders and deployed the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), the office responsible for policing U.S. borders, and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the agency focused primarily on interior operations, to achieve their political objectives regarding immigration.

Due to his failure to achieve comprehensive immigration reform and to pass the Dreamers Act, Obama signed the "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" (DACA) executive order in 2012 that allowed migrant children who arrived under the age of 16 without proper authorization to avoid deportation and obtain a work permit. His administration also attempted to provide protection from deportation for another four million unauthorized migrants, but the courts overruled the executive order. During Obama's presidency, border apprehensions hovered between 337,117 and 556,041, numbers typically lower than his predecessor, and deportations at the border (known as "returns") fell dramatically (USAFacts 2020). Despite his favorable view towards immigration, he gained the moniker "Deporter-in-Chief" from rights groups who cited that the number of "removals"—deportations occurring in the interior of the country—actually increased dramatically to a total over 3 million people under his watch.

Trump campaigned on an unambiguously anti-immigrant platform based on xenophobia and white supremacy ideals (Campos Ramales 2019). Accordingly, his administration has rolled out an unprecedented number of executive orders and budget appropriations in an effort to curtail immigration flows. The more than 400 executive actions, identified by the Migration Policy Institute (Pierce and Bolter 2020), include the "Muslim" travel ban from seven countries with predominantly Muslim populations; attempts to end Obama's actions on DACA; cancelling temporary protective status of immigrants from countries with national emergencies; restricting the number and scope of asylum claims; limiting access to "Green Cards" for applicants likely to need federal assistance; reducing the number of refugees for resettlement in the U.S.; a "Remain in Mexico" order for refugees

to await the adjudication of their asylum claims; and funding to build a border wall. Many of these efforts have faced judicial appeals and injunctions but several have been implemented, even if partially.

The Trump administration has also ratcheted up enforcement actions in a stated effort to deter further immigration. The budgets for CBP and ICE have increased from \$17–18 billion annually during the Obama years, to a high of \$25 billion for the 2020 fiscal year (American Immigration Council 2020). While Obama targeted unauthorized immigrants with criminal felonies for deportation, ICE has widened the dragnet under Trump. As a consequence, the number of people at detention facilities increased from a low of 25,780 in March 2015 to a high of 55,654 in July 2019, of which the percentage with no criminal record increased from 38.8% to 70.0%, respectively (TRAC 2020). The number of detainees with a serious criminal offense had remained around 10% of the detainee population during this period (TRAC 2020). Moreover, the administration began a record number of detention proceedings that has also contributed to a backlog in pending asylum processing cases.

One of Trump's most polemical initiatives has been the family separation policy (Silva and Flynn 2020). While the problem of how to address entire families crossing the border also plagued the Obama years in office (see Schriro 2017), Trump's administration specifically articulated the policy as part of his "zero tolerance" approach to deter illegal immigration and criminally prosecute suspected border crossers. The practice of family separation officially began in April 2018 until domestic and international criticism along with court orders forced the administration to backtrack in June 2018, but reports found that the policy began prior to that date and continues to be employed on a discretionary basis. As of early 2020, an estimated 4368 children had been taken from their parents and guardians, although the number is likely to be even higher (Davis 2020).

In light of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, Trump has practically sealed the border under the rubric of a public health emergency (Rosenberg 2020). Land borders with Canada and Mexico have been closed to tourist and recreational travel. Furthermore, new rules allow the administration to quickly deport migrants attempting to cross the border that bypasses standard legal processes. Additionally, his administration also suspended immigration courts, visa processing, and refugee resettlement during the pandemic.

1.2. Immigration Debates as Stigma Contests

The subject of immigration represents one instance of the political and cultural struggles occurring in the United States. Donald Trump's campaign and presidency epitomizes the rise of stigma contests where groups clash with each other over definitions of right and wrong (Silva 2019). Such stigma contests (Schur 1980) encompass the terrain of religion's role in society, gender boundaries, and racial identities. Compared to historic marginalization faced by racialized groups, including immigrants, it may be easy to discount the notion that Trump's white base is stigmatized. Regardless, many of his supporters feel that way (Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2018; Lamont et al. 2017; Polletta and Callahan 2017; Schrock et al. 2017; Simmons 2018). Immigration is one issue that has attracted significant attention from this constituency for which Trump's "America first" messaging profoundly resonates. For them, unauthorized immigration is an affront to the country's core values. In contrast, immigrant defenders see mistreatment as equally abhorrent and inhumane.

Enacting and enforcing immigration policies does not exist in a moral vacuum and instead invites criticism and support rooted in contested visions of right and wrong. By articulating righteous condemnation or unmitigated support for policies, people also open themselves to attack. This situation Silva and Flynn term as liminal stigma, that is, "*where an identity is subject to a potentially transitory discrediting as this identity is both ideationally devalued and defended by multiple others*" (Silva and Flynn 2020, p. 129, italics in original). In the case of immigrant family separation, liminal stigma becomes apparent in accounts that support detention policies by vilifying detainees and by extension their proponents. On the flip side, defending detainees also serves to condemn the jailors and their supporters. In this situation, stigma is not mutually exclusive nor one-sided. Both sides articulate feelings and polarized visions of rightful conduct during these stigma contests. However, neither group suffers active

discrimination, in contrast to the immigrant detainees. Liminal stigma thus highlights cases where right and wrong remains contested and thus make opposing sides open to vilification (as well as solidarity) without the loss of social status.

The concept of liminal stigma comes from a much broader scope of sociological work on social stigma, defined by Goffman (1963, p. 3), as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” and that demeans an individual by contaminating their identity. The social processes leading to the construction of stigma, identified by Pescosolido and Martin (2015, p. 91), include both ideational and material components: (1) highlighting salient social differences; (2) linking these differences to negative stereotypes or characteristics; (3) constructing binaries of “us” versus “them”; and followed by (4) the loss of social status and discrimination. Much of the literature on stigma has focused on oppressed populations, and more recent scholarship has examined its relationship to power and social inequality. For example, recent scholarship has argued that stigma serves to justify neoliberal austerity measures in Great Britain (Queirós and Pereira 2018; Paton 2018; Scrambler 2018; Shildrick 2018; Slater 2018).

By examining the ideational construction of stigma, we can avoid reifying the process and, instead, understand how certain identities become acceptable while others fall from grace. Schur’s (1980) work on stigma contests highlights how this process is both political and contingent. Stigmatizing attributes are not a cultural given but the outcome of competitive discursive processes. Contemporary society has seen stigma contests over matters such as marijuana use, tobacco use, racism, or same sex attraction. The cultural diversity in society results in stigma contests wherein the social statuses remain emergent and fluid. In the process, participants in stigma contests, though not necessarily facing material deprivation, are compelled to defend their social selves. They often do so by denigrating the identities of others.

Stigmatization can be facilitated via a “soft repression” in the civil sphere. While the state has the option of repressing activists with violent repression, political activity among non-state actors in civil society involves soft repression, or “non-violent means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas” (Ferree 2004, p. 88). At the macro level, soft repression occurs through silencing. Media companies act as gatekeepers who could prevent certain points of view from gaining widespread distribution. A second type of soft repression occurs at the meso level in the production of stigmatizing ideologies. Ferree (2004, p. 92) theorizes “Stigma as a form of soft repression is a cultural strategy to prevent collective action by actively discouraging identification with a group that could make claims against an institution”. It is where ideologies such as racism, classism, and sexism are bent to political ends. At the micro level, actors also face ridicule. Ferree (2004, p. 90) explains, that ridicule is a “decentralize[d] weapon” that “is used to secure power and privilege in and for a variety of non-state institutions”. For example, radio personality, Rush Limbaugh’s use of the term “feminazi” applied towards women who advocated for equality. Ferree argues that ridicule is more dismissive than stigma.

The concept of aligning activity can sensitize us to logics that actors use to defend themselves against the soft repression that can occur during stigma contests. Stokes and Hewitt (1976) explain that aligning actions occur when individuals seek to associate their behavior with cultural norms. They (p. 838) define “aligning actions” as “largely verbal efforts to restore or assure meaningful interaction in the face of problematic situations of one kind or another”. Aligning actions are arguments for redefining situations that have become problematic due to “discrepancies between what is actually taking place in a given situation and what is thought to be typical, normatively expected, probable, desirable or, in other respects, more in accord with what is culturally normal” (p. 843). Through communication, actors align their conduct with cultural standards and each other. Much scholarship has outlined these various aligning strategies such as, making excuses to absolve personal responsibility, denying of injury, rejecting an opponent’s claims of victimhood, condemning the condemners (Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957). While much work on aligning activity focuses on micro level social interactions, aligning activity can also involve macro level collective processes as categories of individuals defend their conduct against the stigmatizing accusations of others (Silva 2007; Suarez and Bolton 2018).

Importantly, when there is no normative consensus, actors might opt to engage in disalignment from one group in order to join another (Dellwing 2012; Silva and Flynn 2020).

Silva and Flynn (2020) identified the (dis)aligning actions that commenters on *YouTube* used to account for their support for or opposition to the Trump administration's policy of separating children from their parents. In this case, both opponents and their supporters had their identities attacked as they sought to condemn or condone the policy. For example, critics of Trump's actions asserted that the detainees were innocent and painted the President's defenders as cruel and depraved, racist and xenophobic, or generally shame worthy. Apologists of the president countered that the policy was not cruel and denied the victimhood of the detainees by claiming that they threatened the United States. They would also allege that immigrant defenders were hypocritical, dishonest, foolish, loathsome, or complicit with illegal immigration. While both sides considered the practice shameful, they disagreed over who should be stigmatized because of the situation. The case demonstrates the construction of liminal stigma as each side experiences both validation and rejection of moral worth in the public sphere.

Silva and Flynn's (2020) previous work did not identify how differing elements of the discursive field (Snow 2008) or contexts affect the construction of liminal stigma in normative contests. The moral frames expressed in the opinion and op-ed sections of newspapers may represent a different discourse than the views expressed by commentators on *YouTube*. The structure of online forums may exacerbate conflict (Lin et al. 2018; Tian and Menchik 2016). Despite their decline since the development of the Internet, newspapers have a weekday readership of 28 million and Sunday readership of 30 million (Pew Research Center 2019). While newspaper coverage is often dominated by colorblind frames, opinion pieces (e.g., Ebert et al. 2019) and the op-ed section of the newspaper can be a place where colorblind racism is challenged (Dawson 2018).

1.3. Methods and Data

We conducted a qualitative content analysis (Altheide and Schneider 2013) to analyze how immigrant detention was constructed over the past decade in the opinion section of U.S. newspapers. Our source of data was U.S. News Stream from *ProQuest*. Using the term "immigrant detention", we queried the database for editorials and commentary documents published in English in the United States newspapers between 2009 and 2020. This search yielded 1341 documents.

Of these documents, we randomly selected 200. Since we were interested in looking at how this sector of the public sphere constructed detainees before and after Trumpian nationalism, we used Trump's inauguration as the dividing line between the two periods as it marks the official change from one administration to another. Of the 1341 total documents, 355 dated between 2009 (earliest) and 19 January 2017 (eve of Trump's inauguration) and 986 published between 20 January 2017 (Trump's inauguration) and 11 July 2020 (date of the search). To make for a more manageable analysis, based on the authors' prior experience it was determined that 200 editorials and commentary pieces would be sufficient to answer the research questions. Using the random number generator provided by <https://www.random.org/>, we selected 100 publications published before and after Trump's inauguration. For before-Trump publications, we numbered the publications from 1-355, and used the random number generator to select 100 unique items. For after-Trump publications, we numbered the publications 1-986, and used the random number generator to select 100 items.

In keeping with qualitative methodology, the analysis of the data occurred through many rounds (Charmaz 2014; Lofland et al. 2006). In the first round, we drew upon the categories reported by Silva and Flynn (2020) to analyze the 200 documents. These codes had been developed through open-coding in the previous project, but were being used for focused coding in the opening round for this study. These codes include claims of detainee innocence, condemnations as racist or xenophobic, condemnation as cruel and depraved, condemnation as dishonest foolish, ancillary condemnations, claims of innocence (of separation, detention), denial of immigrants victimhood, condemnation of critics as complicit, condemnation of critics as hypocrites, condemnation of critic as dishonest foolish.

The material was reviewed line by line and the aforementioned codes were applied to sections of text that matched the code. These codes were not mutually exclusive, as a statement could express multiple alignments. The coding was accomplished with NVivo software which allows for the efficient organization of codes. We do not make use of any of the query functions of the software.

This analysis revealed that many, albeit not all, of the basic frames from [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#) could also be found in the Newspaper Opinion section. We excluded 28 documents that were repeated or included the search terms but were not relevant for this study. Of the 172 articles that were selected, 49 were anonymous editorials, 117 signed op-eds and columns, and 6 collections of letters to the editor.

For the next stage of analysis, we sought to refine our coding to make comparisons between authors' constructions of detainees before and after Trump's inauguration and between our data and the findings of [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#). To do so, using NVivo, we combined the varied pro and anti-detention codes into general accounts of detention opposition and accounts of detention support. In this stage we checked for consistency, by reviewing the data to see if any codes were missed or applied incorrectly.

After finding some basic similarities between the justifications used in editorials and the *YouTube* comments, we delved deeper by coding for whether nonelites were included in these castigations and examined how nonelites were condemned. This elite/nonelite distinction emerged from working with the data and then was applied to data coded as pro or anti-status quo. We then used open coding to examine how nonelites were condemned in direct and indirect ways. The results of this analysis are presented below.

2. Results

We find that the commentary section of U.S. newspapers contained alignments that criticized and defended immigrant detention. The commentary discourse, however, tended to favor the detainees. There were 141/172 articles that denied the detainees were criminal or detention as cruel. There were only 11 articles that claimed the captors were innocent, 23 that denied that the detainees were victims, and 15 that condemned critics as dishonest, hypocritical, foolish, or complicit in illegal immigration.

2.1. Criticism of Detention

Critics of detention denied that the detainees had committed any injury and, relatedly, that detention was a part of a gratuitously cruel and unjust response to unauthorized migration. There was some condemnation of the executive branch as motivated by racism or xenophobia.

2.1.1. Cruel Captors and Innocent Detainees

In criticisms of the immigrant detention, detainees were cast as noncriminals who were the victims of the cruelty perpetrated by the U.S. Government. These two accounts, although analytically distinct, were typically bound up with each other.

Lately there have been images on the evening news of gendarmes in ICE jackets knocking on doors, terrified children crying, portly Latin men in handcuffs, Border Patrol agents hydrating migrants in dirty ball caps before escorting them away for processing—the stuff of nightmares for the vulnerable. ([Martinez 2017](#))

... undocumented immigrants, in the great majority of cases, are not criminals. They are human beings and deserve to be treated as such. This is America. Basic human rights matter, regardless of a person's immigration status. In a 19-page report, inspectors found that at the four detention facilities targeted, some detainees had been denied prompt medical care, and been served food that had not been properly handled. ([The Record 2017](#))

Here, immigrants are defined as noncriminals who are worthy of basic rights. In the first quote, the descriptions of the detainees as "terrified children", "portly Latin men", and dehydrated and

“vulnerable”, indicates that they are harmless and innocent. This alignment supports the condemnation of the administration as cruel, which is suggested by describing the situation as “the stuff of nightmares.” In the second quote, detainees are explicitly defined as mostly “not criminals.” The author then argues that the government is failing to uphold “basic human rights”. It is cruelty to deprive anyone, much less “noncriminals” medical care and clean food. Many offered descriptions of the deprivations faced by detainees by their captors:

Those of us who have seen the sites where families are detained and work directly with children and families who have gone through the system know what’s at stake. The children we work with call the Border Patrol processing stations for migrants stopped at the border “iceboxes” (hieleras) and “dog kennels” (perreras). “I was wet from crossing the river and it was so cold I thought I would die”, one child said. Another told us: “The lights were kept on day and night. I became disoriented and didn’t know how long I had been there”. A third said: “I was separated from my older sister. She is the closest person in my life. I couldn’t stop crying until I saw her again a few days later” (Galacatos et al. 2018)

These are not places where we should want more children to go. . . . A 9-year-old girl sought to return to breast feeding. Children clung to their mothers’ legs, fearful of letting them out of sight. Many had night terrors, were depressed or acted out. They could sense their mothers’ worry. (Nazario 2018)

In these two excerpts the depiction of tortured children serves a dual function. As children, they are surely innocent of any wrongdoing and anyone who would harm them is to be shamed. The two quotes above are among those that move from vague accusations of cruelty to vivid and damningly concrete examples of wrongdoing. This type of aligning activity was found in 141/172 articles (74 before Trump’s inauguration and 67 after).

2.1.2. Captors Condemned as Racist or Xenophobic

In addition to condemning detention as cruel and unjust, critics of the practice would cast it as racist:

As they wait for a legalization bill, they are suffering under unjust laws, corrupt policing and a detention and deportation system that routinely suppresses their rights. American citizens who are Hispanic, and are all too frequently victims of racially-driven sweeps, are also suffering. Mr. Obama and his Homeland Security secretary, Janet Napolitano, must do much more to curb those excesses. (New York Times 2009)

Its no secret that Donald Trump views immigrants with disdain. He has called Mexicans “rapists” and referred to immigrants as “animals”. The Trump Administration has embraced nativist dog whistles from day one. Nowhere is this clearer than in the shameful “zero tolerance” policy pursued by President Trump, which has separated families, locked kids in facilities and traumatized innocent children. (Lee 2018)

The first quote refers to “racially-driven sweeps” and the second connects the “zero tolerance” policy to nativism. Detention, then, is not simply unjust it is discriminatory. Condemnations of racism and xenophobia are made but not to the extent of those made against his predecessor, and in fact are less prominent than the condemnations of cruelty or denials of injury. Authors used this type of aligning action in 43 articles (17 before and 26 after Trump’s inauguration).

2.1.3. Detention Advocates Condemned as Dishonest or Foolish

Condemnation of captors and their apologists were complemented with other sorts of stigmatizing language:

In a barefaced lie, [Trump] has repeatedly blamed Democrats for his incredible cruel policy of separating children from their parents at the border. The president told reporters that he hates “to see the separation of parents and children”, but that “Democrats forced the law upon our nation”. (Oleary 2018)

Beyond being cruel, Trump is condemned as dishonest. This type of alignment draws on partisan polarization. In this quote, the author claims Trump is lying about the role of Democrats. It thus has the effect of calling up longstanding cleavages between the left and the right. In 32 articles (6 before Trump’s inauguration and 26 after) members of the executive branch, including ICE and the President are cast as being liars or fools.

2.2. Defense of Detention

Some authors accounted for their support for detention by denying that detainees are victims, denying injury, and/or condemning critics as complicit in illegality, dishonest, or foolish.

Denial of Injury and Denial of Detainees’ Victimhood

The commentary section of U.S. newspapers includes denials of the detainees being victims. A denial of injury identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) in their seminal treatment of how deviants neutralize norms they intend to break, follows the logic that an act cannot be blameworthy if no one was harmed by it. A denial of victimization is another classic neutralization identified by Sykes and Matza (1957). The logic is that if the ostensible victim of a perpetrators act was “deserving of it” then the perpetrator is innocent. For detention, apologists relied on these types of alignments. For example:

On the other hand, many who are coming across seeking asylum do not qualify for it. When they get their hearings, only 20 percent win the right to stay in the United States because they’d face persecution in their home countries. Many come for traditional economic reasons. The murder rate in El Salvador has fallen in half since 2015, while the number of asylum seekers has skyrocketed. (Brooks 2019)

Here David Brooks argues that migrants are not true asylum seekers as asylum seekers are rarely successful and he claims that the conditions in El Salvador have improved in correlation with the raise in such petitions. His accusations undermine their claim to victimhood. The following letter writer also denies the victimhood of detainees:

Our county officials are upset and say the detention of illegal immigrants by ICE undermines immigrants’ trust in our laws. Are they not the criminals? This is going to put fear in our community? Maybe only for those who are here illegally. It may make the rest of us safer. (Kelvie 2020)

The author argues that the detainees are criminals and not victims of a cruel policy. Note the repeated use of the word “our”, as immigrants are cast as a danger to “trust in our laws” and causing “fear in our community”. Detention is thus justified on the grounds that it makes “us safer”.

For another example:

The Democrats ... are obsessed with depicting [Trump’s] immigration policies as either cruel or ineffective, depending on the context. Meanwhile Hispanic law enforcement officers, Border Patrol officials, and activists have done everything in their power to shed light on the trafficking issue and its correlation to the influx of illegal immigrants, especially among Hispanic women and children. (Paulina 2019)

This author denies that the captors are causing injury, in fact, they are protecting the innocent against traffickers who are the real culprits. The reference to Hispanic law enforcement officers and women and children victims of trafficking might be read as a claim that the administration is not motivated by anti-Latino racism. Such denials serve to defend the practice of immigrant detention and the identities of those who enact and support the policy. This was the primary justification used by supporters of detention is a denial of victimhood. Denials of injury were used in 11 articles and denials of victimhood were found in 23 articles. 2.2.2. Condemnation of Immigration Advocates

Critics of the detention policy were condemned as complicit with illegal immigration, hypocrites, dishonest, or foolish in 15 articles (4 before and 11 after the Trump administration). For example:

Democrats agreed, as Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., put it in a 2009 speech, that “illegal immigration is wrong, plain and simple”. Since Mr. Trump took office, Democrats have become the party of illegal immigration. They want to decriminalize illegal border crossings, cut ICE detention beds to force the agency to release illegal immigrants and then refuse to enforce lawful deportation orders. (Thiessen 2019)

Here, critics of detention are accused of hypocrisy for having changed their position as Trump took office and for being complicit in supporting illegal immigration. This alignment defines opponents as merely being politically motivated as their shift in policy corresponds to Trump’s political ascension. It moves on to stigmatize Democrats as opposed to law enforcement “party of illegal immigration.” Not only does this alignment attack the character of Democratic critics, but it also reinforces the denials of detainee victimhood described above. The claim that Democrats “force [ICE] to release” implies that detainees as a threat who must be contained. Another author writes:

Congressional Democrats have reportedly inserted provisions making it easier for purported asylum seekers arriving with children to disappear and augment the illegal population. (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette 2019)

This condemnation aligns the captors with the law and Democrats and asylum seekers with criminality. The author doubts the legitimacy of the asylum seekers victimhood by adding the qualifier “purported” and claims that they will “disappear” suggesting ulterior motives. This threat is assisted by Democrats who have “inserted provisions.”

2.3. Elite vs. Nonelite Condemnation

In general, the opinion section is far more focused on elites than nonelites. There is almost no direct condemnation of nonelite citizens who oppose detention. Citizens who support detention are condemned, but not as severely as institutional actors. The opinion section largely focused on evaluating the actions and character of elite political leaders, such as Donald Trump or Barack Obama, or government agencies such as ICE. For example:

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is disappearing immigrants. ICE must immediately end its dark practice of hiding people in off the radar facilities. (El Diario La Prensa 2009)

The above quote refers to actions taken by those who run detention centers and the Trump administration. No mention is made of the nonelites who support the practice. Elites were subjected to criticism for their role in detention in 133 articles (71 before and 62 after Trump).

Elite detention opponents were condemned in 21 articles (7 before and 14 after Trump):

If the politicians would care about our veterans half as much as they care about illegal immigrant children, maybe the veteran suicide rate would not be so tragic. It disgusts me how liberal politicians lobby and fight for illegal immigrants in order to gain future votes while our veterans are stranded in a VA hospital waiting for treatment. (Miller 2018)

This author argues that elites (“politicians”) have sided with unvirtuous “illegal immigrants” instead of nonelite “veterans.” These politicians have presumed agency and responsibility to help certain nonelites.

Nonelites were condemned to a much lesser extent than elites. One way that nonelites are condemned is through what we term *indirect condemnation*, where an author claims that good people oppose detention, and, by implication, that bad people do not:

This shameful system is driven by a search for profits, not sensible, humane policies. Americans should not stand for it. ([El Diario La Prensa 2010](#))

That’s a stain not just on the presidency, but on the nation. ([Los Angeles Times 2018](#))

Only a mean or rich country spends millions each day detaining nonviolent immigrants, sweeping up the elderly, families, and even children in their net. Instead of treating every noncitizen who has made a mistake the same, we should return to—and learn from—past practices that are fair, cost-effective, and humane. In short, it’s time to be smart on immigration. ([Hong 2015](#))

These quotes indirectly criticize nonelites by attributing blame to the entire nation—“America should not stand for it,” “a stain not just on the presidency, but on the nation,” “only a mean or rich country.” By referencing all of U.S. society, the authors include nonelites in the condemnation. They do not, however, directly recognize that there is a faction of nonelites who support the policy. These alignments, found in 33 articles (15 before Trump and 18 after), imply that nonelite supporters of detention are immoral by leveling critique against the entire nation or claiming that decent people oppose the practice.

A second method used in 35 articles (19 before the Trump and 16 after) was to identify a bloc of apologists for detention that included nonelites or institutional actors:

Despite growing outrage over family separation and detention, many whites do not like undocumented immigrants and believe they have very little in common with them. And while it is tempting to blame President Donald Trump, these feelings existed before he was even a candidate. ([Schachter 2018](#))

Egged on by a hardcore, xenophobic base, Trump has officially embraced cruelty as the national immigration policy. ([Vennochi 2019](#))

One reason for these atrocities is that the Trump administration sees cruelty both as a policy tool and as a political strategy: Vicious treatment of refugees might deter future asylum-seekers, and in any case it helps rev up the racist base. ([Krugman 2019](#))

The above alignments place the administration on the side of bigots and xenophobes. The first quote, notes that White people’s antipathy to immigrants pre-date Trump’s political career. The second and third argues that Trump is responding to his “xenophobic” or “racist base” of supporters. These authors have thus included nonelites within the scope of culpability. While detention apologist would tend to focus on elite opponents, only 8 articles included a bloc of nonelite critics in their aligning activity. For example:

Perhaps no Trump policy has provoked more emotional reaction than the practice of separating illegal border crossers from the children they brought with them to the United States. There’s no need to recount the number of times critics have called the president a Nazi, or a fascist, or just plain cruel. . . . That, of course, will not satisfy the critics, and legal challenges are sure to follow. But if a new poll is correct, it appears the Trump administration, after an enormously damaging few weeks, has ended up squarely on the side of the majority of American voters. ([York 2018](#))

This author acknowledges the critics of Trump's family separation policy but dismisses them as a fanatical fringe of the U.S. population. Because these critics may or may not include elites, we find that nonelites are being indirectly condemned in this statement. This type of alignment was only found in three articles.

2.4. *Constructing Detainees before Trump and after Trump*

Our second question was how has the presidency of Donald Trump changed the construction of immigrant detention? In many ways, it did not change. There were 74 articles defining detainees as innocent or detention as cruel before Trump was inaugurated and 67 after he became president. Condemnation of racism increased from 17 articles to 26. There were 8 articles that denied the detainees victimhood before Trump and 15 that did so afterward. In general, before and after Trump, rather than characterize it as racist, authors preferred to cast the practice as cruel instead of characterizing it as racist. They also preferred accusations of racism to defenses of the detention.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

While nativist discourse is very much a part of U.S. popular culture and politics, anti-immigrant views are not necessarily an elite or mainstream perspective. The opinion section of U.S. newspapers largely aligned detention and family separation with the frames of cruelty and racism. There was some condemnation of immigration advocates and denial of detainees' victimhood. These findings add to [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#) examination of the aligning activity that produces a liminal stigma for detainees, their allies, as well as captors and their apologists. In addition to contributing to the scholarly record of this period in U.S. history, this study also might yield some insights about contemporary U.S. culture.

Our analysis finds that important similarities and differences between the construction of detainees and their captors in the commentary section of newspapers and the comments section of *YouTube* reported by [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#). Despite occurring over a longer period of time and in a different forum, the newspaper opinion articles contained a number of the same basic neutralizations as did the *YouTube* comments. Critics denied that the detainees are criminals and condemned captors as cruel and racist or xenophobic. Apologists argued that detainees were not victims and condemned critics as contributing to criminality. There were some important differences between these findings and those reported by [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#). First, we find that opinion section of newspapers is far more condemnatory of immigration detention than did the study by [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#) of *YouTube* comments. Second, while [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#) found that *YouTube* comments vilify all levels of support for and against immigrant detention, this study shows that the opinion section is more focused on institutional or elite actors than on citizens. It is this second finding that might yield some insights about the relationship between Trump and his supporters. One of the paradoxes of Trump's populism is that it is a field bed of people who are ostensibly not a marginalized or oppressed population. [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#) found that Trump supporters were openly and easily vilified in *YouTube* comments. These findings from opinion and editorial sections show that another more esteemed arena of the public sphere also includes aligning activity that condemns Trump and his supporters. These findings further explicate the mystery of how Trump supporters have come to define themselves as marginalized. By most measures, Trump's base is not particularly oppressed ([Manza and Crowley 2018](#); [Mutz 2018](#); [Smith and Hanley 2018](#)). Nonetheless, a sense of having been drawn into stigma contests over the moral value of their identities has seemingly bolstered Trump's appeal to this constituency ([Silva 2019](#)). For supporters of immigrant detention, who have a substantial presence in Trump's political base, these findings provide further understanding of the source of their grievance. To the extent that supporters of detention are reading the opinion section of newspapers, we expect that they will find minimal validation for their views on immigration. In this particular arena of the public sphere, the stigma contest over immigration is hardly competitive. Nativist sentiments are subject to "soft repression" ([Ferree 2004](#)) as their views are largely excluded from the commentary section of U.S. newspapers while their adversaries' alignments are expressed. As such, nativism has

a counter-hegemonic quality. Perhaps, that sense of being against the status quo is what gives the nativism of the Trump era its verve. Trump's excoriations of the mainstream press as "truly the enemy of the people" further align his supporters with his perceived role as the anti-president.

Another important aspect of this analysis is that it should contribute to future histories written of this period. By taking samples of how detainees were constructed in different sectors of the American public sphere, we can build a picture of the varying cultural understandings of this time and place. The opinion sections of newspapers have largely condemned supporters of immigrant detention as cruel and to a lesser extent racist. Elites and institutional actors have drawn the brunt of the condemnation, but nonelite apologists for detention and family separation did not escape opprobrium. Whether the liminal stigma documented in this study and by [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#) comes to have material consequences is another question entirely.

This qualitative analysis has identified some of the themes that can be found in the opinion section of newspapers. It cannot provide a reliable estimate of the frequency with which some themes occur. We can, however, offer a hypothesis that future research might test: Trump's family separation policy, despite its being heavily criticized, probably led to an increase in defenses of detention. The policy, of course, might be both an independent and a dependent variable. Although this study compares the construction of immigrant detention before and after Trump's inauguration, it is important to remember that there might well be factors that contributed both to Trump's electoral success in 2016 and to changes in the social construction of detainees. Trump's election is a pivotal moment, but future research should assess the extent to which his political trajectory influenced and was influenced by broader conflicts over immigration in the United States. While this paper adds to [Silva and Flynn \(2020\)](#) examination of the liminal stigma of detainees and their advocates and captors and their apologists, there is still much to learn about the intersection of immigration policy and stigma. This analysis is centered on mainstream nonpartisan publications, it would be important to examine other arenas such as television programs or partisan publications. It would be interesting to interview members of these parties to see how they experience the negative statements made about them in the public sphere. How well does public aligning activity match what people say to interviewers? What is the relationship between the stigma contest over immigration that occurs in the public sphere and people's experience of material oppression? Does the ideational stigma that is produced through aligning activity ultimately influence public policy or social relationships? The fluid nature of U.S. cultural understandings of immigration is such that it will be necessary to continue documenting the aligning activity that defends and condemns immigrants, their advocates, and their antagonists.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.O.S. and M.B.F.; methodology, E.O.S.; software, E.O.S.; validation, E.O.S. and M.B.F.; formal analysis, E.O.S.; investigation, E.O.S.; resources, E.O.S. and M.B.F.; data curation, E.O.S.; writing—original draft preparation, E.O.S. and M.B.F.; writing—review and editing, E.O.S. and M.B.F.; visualization, not applicable; supervision, E.O.S. and M.B.F.; project administration, E.O.S. and M.B.F.; funding acquisition, not applicable. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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