

Keywords: Anti-immigrant rhetoric (Anna Bendrat, MCSU Lublin, Poland)

Anti-immigrant Rhetoric

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Immigration has been the subject of much debate in recent years, in a global climate replete with contentious rhetoric intended to stoke fear, division, and prejudice. Among the salient concepts within this realm is “anti-immigrant rhetoric.” This term encapsulates language and narratives employed to portray immigrants in a negative light, often emphasizing perceived threats to security, culture, or economic stability. Anti-immigrant rhetoric conventionally is understood as a discourse directed against immigrants, commonly framed in contexts of nationalism, social cohesion, and economic competition (Reisigl and Wodak 2000). This rhetoric is often defined by its use of derogatory language, stereotyping, and the promotion of fears surrounding cultural dilution, job displacement, or security threats attributed to immigrant populations. This essay will delve into the characteristics of anti-immigrant rhetoric, its implications, and provide recent examples to illustrate its prevalence in contemporary discourse.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric refers to the use of language, narratives, and symbolism to vilify, marginalize, or demonize immigrants. It encompasses a range of strategies aimed at fostering fear, distrust, and resentment towards immigrant communities. This rhetoric often portrays immigrants as invaders, criminals, or drains on resources, perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices. Moreover, it frequently conflates immigration with issues of national security, cultural preservation, and economic competition, framing immigrants as existential threats to the host society.

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In historical contexts, the rhetoric surrounding the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 might be considered one of the earliest and most prominent examples of anti-immigrant rhetoric codified into U.S. law. This legislation explicitly targeted Chinese immigrants, banning them from entering the country and restricting Chinese individuals already in the U.S. from becoming citizens. It reflected widespread anti-Chinese sentiment at the time, fueled by fears that Chinese immigrants were taking jobs from white Americans and posed a threat to American culture (Lew-Williams 2021).

The Act institutionalized anti-immigrant rhetoric that had been building for years, particularly during the economic downturns of the 1870s, when scapegoating of Chinese laborers became more pronounced. Politicians, labor unions, and media outlets of the era often used racially charged language, depicting Chinese immigrants as “alien,” “unassimilable,” and “undesirable,” stoking xenophobic fears that influenced public opinion and policy. This set a precedent for other exclusionary immigration policies that followed, marking the Act as a foundational moment in the history of anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States.

As observed by Kristina Bakkær Simonsen (2019, 146), “[r]ecent scholarship on the potential consequences of anti-immigrant political rhetoric has shown that it increases the level of anti-immigrant/nationalist attitudes in the majority population (Helbling et al. 2015, 2016; Bohman 2011; Hopkins 2010, 2011; however, see Hjerm and Schnabel 2010) and strengthens majority members’ in-group/out-group framing of social interaction (Sønderskov and Thomsen 2015).” It may thus be argued that the pervasive use of anti-immigrant rhetoric has far-reaching consequences, both tangible and intangible. Firstly, it fosters a climate of hostility and discrimination towards immigrants, exacerbating social divisions and marginalization. Furthermore, anti-immigrant rhetoric not only undermines the well-being of immigrant communities, but also erodes social cohesion and trust within society at large (Richey 2023). As a direct consequence, this rhetoric can significantly shape policy decisions, leading to the implementation of restrictive immigration policies that prioritize exclusion over inclusion. Such policies often result in the violation of human rights, the separation of families, and the perpetuation of systemic inequalities.

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Examples of anti-immigrant rhetoric can be found in several influential arenas, particularly in political campaigns, media coverage, and online discourse. During electoral campaigns, politicians frequently employ anti-immigrant rhetoric to appeal to specific voter demographics. For instance, in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election in the United States, Donald Trump pledged to “rescue” communities like the Denver suburb of Aurora, Colorado, from what he describes as “blood thirsty criminals” and the “most violent people on earth”—terms he uses to characterize immigrants, whom he accuses of ruining the country’s “fabric” and culture (Birkeland 2024). Aurora has become a focal point for Trump’s escalated rhetoric, which depicts migrants and minority groups as inherently dangerous and genetically inclined to criminality. His portrayal of immigrants as “animals,” “stone cold killers,” and the “enemy from within” highlights a message that goes beyond advocating for border control measures. A striking new element in Donald Trump’s 2024 campaign rhetoric was his assertion that immigrants had already infiltrated the nation, a claim he used to justify his proposed second-term agenda of constructing detention centers and carrying out mass deportations (Ward 2024). Such rhetoric was intended to galvanize his base by stoking fears around immigration and casting himself as a defender of national security.

Similarly, media outlets play a critical role in shaping public perceptions of immigration through their portrayal of immigrant communities. In some instances, it is sensationalist reporting itself, infused with anti-immigrant rhetoric, that spreads and fuels violence against immigrants. UK tabloid newspapers, such as *The Daily Telegraph*, have faced criticism for publishing misleading and inflammatory headlines that cast immigrants as instigators of violence. For example, the headline “Far-right Clash with Muslims in Rioting” (05/08/2024) portrayed a false equivalency, suggesting that Muslim communities were equally responsible for the unrest after a stabbing attack in Southport in July 2024. Such reporting not only distorted the facts, but actively contributed to a hostile retribution, amplifying anti-immigrant sentiment and reinforcing dangerous stereotypes (Davenport 2024). During these riots, far-right extremists targeted mosques, assaulted police officers, and chanted racist slogans. Despite this, some media reports suggested that Muslims were partly to blame for the unrest. In reality, this wave of violence directly targeted Muslim communities, resulting in a sharp

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increase in anti-Muslim threats and hate crimes – reportedly rising fivefold and threefold, respectively, according to the national monitoring group Tell MAMA (<https://tellmamauk.org/>). The organization, which tracks anti-Muslim hate crimes, documented that at least 10 mosques – including those in Southport, Liverpool, and Hartlepool – were subjected to attacks or threats, leaving Muslim communities feeling vulnerable, terrorized and unsafe.

Beyond traditional media, social media platforms have also become fertile ground for anti-immigrant rhetoric, where users spread misinformation and hateful narratives about immigrant communities. Platforms like X, Facebook, and YouTube have seen a surge in xenophobic and nativist content, amplifying prejudices and fostering echo chambers where extremist views circulate unchallenged. A new strand of research into anti-immigrant rhetoric examines the role of misinformation disseminated by bots, a phenomenon known as “computational propaganda.” In their study titled “Harass, Mislead, & Polarize: An Analysis of Twitter Political Bots’ Tactics in Targeting the Immigration Debate Before the 2018 U.S. Midterm Election,” Nonnecke et al. investigated how political Twitter bots influenced the immigration discourse leading up to the election. The analysis revealed that the ten most influential bots in their dataset all espoused anti-immigration views. These bots not only generated original tweets but also retweeted content from other bot accounts, creating a false sense of authenticity and a perceived consensus against immigration. Their messaging relied heavily on negative emotional appeals, utilizing harassing language and disinformation aimed at evoking fear toward immigrants. Furthermore, these accounts employed polarizing language to deepen political divisions and provoke partisanship among users. The study underscores the significant impact that these automated accounts can have on shaping public perceptions and the political landscape, highlighting the need for strategies to counteract their influence in the ongoing immigration debate.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric represents a concerning trend in contemporary discourse, with implications for social cohesion, policy-making, and human rights. By understanding the definition of anti-immigrant rhetoric and recognizing its manifestations in various contexts,

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informed citizens can work towards challenging prejudice, fostering empathy, and promoting inclusive narratives that celebrate the contributions of immigrants to society. Efforts to counter anti-immigrant rhetoric require a multifaceted approach involving education, media literacy, advocacy, and policy reform, where diversity is embraced rather than feared.

To study the term “anti-immigrant rhetoric,” consider exploring an interdisciplinary bibliography that encompasses both foundational texts and contemporary analyses. Examine the works that analyze the evolution of anti-immigrant sentiment, such as Jane Guskin and David L. Wilson’s *The Politics of Immigration: Questions and Answers* or Lisa A. Flores’s *Deportable and Disposable: Public Rhetoric and the Making of the “Illegal” Immigrant*. These texts provide essential historiographical contexts and foundational theories concerning the societal implications of immigration-related rhetoric. It is also advisable to look for seminal works in sociology and political science, such as *Strangers in Their Own Land* by Arlie Hochschild, which investigate how narratives are constructed around nationality, belonging, and exclusion. Additionally, explore legal scholarship that discusses the implications of anti-immigration laws and the rhetoric surrounding them, such as *Research Handbook on the Law and Politics of Migration* by Catherine Dauvergne, which contextualizes legal discourse within the broader societal narratives.

Contemporary research on anti-immigrant rhetoric may also be found in peer-reviewed journals focusing on rhetoric and communication studies, such as the *Journal of Communication or Rhetoric & Public Affairs*. You may also look for specific scholars, such as Celeste Michelle Condit, who have critiqued anti-immigrant discourse in modern media. Consider investigating works that analyze specific case studies, especially those that discuss the role of social media in shaping public opinion around immigration, for instance “Social Media and Anti-Immigrant Prejudice: A Multi-Method Analysis of the Role of Social Media Use, Threat Perceptions, and Cognitive Ability” (Ahmed et al. 2024). Incorporate analyses of mainstream media narratives, examining how news outlets frame immigration issues. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have published several series focused on the portrayal of immigrants, which can be beneficial for understanding the framing techniques

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involved. Last but not least, explore the impact of political speeches and campaigns, particularly during election cycles, analyzing how rhetoric shifts to invoke anti-immigrant sentiments, such as works by researchers in political communication (Štětka, Mihelj, and Tóth 2021).

This diverse bibliography will yield a well-rounded understanding of anti-immigrant rhetoric, providing both theoretical frameworks and practical instances of its manifestation in various contexts.

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