American Immigration Rhetoric: A Dangerous Game

A Critical Analysis of Modern Immigration Speeches and Policy Statements

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BCSC 203: Assignment #3B

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Dec 4, 2018

(3129) Word Count

Abstract

The purpose of this primary research was to contrast the manner in which right-wing and left-wing political figures use rhetoric to refer to immigrants and refugees. The focus of this research was American political figures between the years of 2012 and 2018. Using critical discourse analysis and deconstruction, this paper examined speeches and policy statements from both political spectrums in order to compare their uses of dehumanizing terms in reference to immigrants and refugees. After comparing each side this paper found that in the sources analyzed, the right used dehumanizing rhetoric with more frequency and severity than the left. The units of analysis for this paper were the texts deconstructed and coded for words that fit this paper's working definition of dehumanizing rhetoric: words or terms that suggest a lack of human qualities in an individual or group of people. The goal of this research was to highlight the way immigrants and refugees are referred to in public discourse by politicians of different political affiliations, and the potential consequences of this negative rhetoric.

Keywords

Dehumanization, Immigrants, Democrats, Republicans, Donald Trump, Refugees, Rhetoric

Introduction

After years of internal struggle and complex political infighting, the Syrian Civil War began in 2011 (CNN Library, 2018). As a consequence of the war, over 5.6 million Syrians fled the country and another 6 million were internally displaced (CNN Library, 2018). This mass exodus has made Syrians the largest group of forcibly displaced peoples in the world (Mercy Corps, 2018). Along with the displacement of Syrians, the world has seen the displacement of people from countries like Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Myanmar, with the total number of refugees in the world totaling over 68 million according to Mercy Corps (2018), an aid organization (para. 2). In addition to refugees, there are also economic immigrants, people who relocate "to live in a country with better working or living conditions" (Cambridge Business Dictionary, 2018). The increase of refugees in the world in addition to economic migrants has inevitably led to a rise in immigration into Western and European countries. As a result, a contentious discourse has been ignited around immigration policy and the consequences, both positive and negative, of immigration on a nation. The opinions of voting citizens directly affected by the refugee crisis are influenced by this discourse, and more specifically the rhetoric used.

Immigrants and the issues surrounding them can be described in positive or negative ways or in terms more immigration centric, in humanizing or dehumanizing ways. Dehumanizing rhetoric as defined by this paper is; words or terms that suggest a lack of human qualities in an individual or group of people. Scholarship has been done studying the effects of dehumanizing rhetoric on perceptions of immigrants and immigration, and the ramifications of these perceptions on the immigrants themselves. But unlike that scholarship, the focus of this

paper is the groups who are using this rhetoric. The focus will be on speeches and policy

statements from American politicians, with the hypothesis that the sources from right-wing

politicians will use more dehumanizing rhetoric when expressing opinions about immigrants and

refugees in comparison to left-wing politicians. For the purposes of this paper, the word

immigrant will be used to refer in general to both immigrants and refugees. By first examining

the existing scholarship on dehumanization and immigration this paper will lay the foundation

for its own research. Following which there will be a discussion on the implications of the

studies findings, the potential limitations of the results, and finally a conclusion with suggestions

for further areas of research.

Literature Review

As Utych (2018) in his introduction points out, dehumanizing rhetoric is not a new

phenomenon in America (p. 440). Immigrants entering the United States in the early twentieth

century were subject to dehumanizing treatment (Utych, 2018, p. 440). By extension, one could

infer that dehumanization is not new to other nations as well. Because of the long history of

dehumanization against minority or out-groups, considerable scholarship has been done

examining its many facets. Some scholarship focuses on the creation and dissemination of

dehumanizing rhetoric through the media. Esses and Medianu (2013) study how media

depictions of immigrants and refugees potentially contribute to dehumanization and the

consequences of this type of immigrant portrayal (p. 518). While it might be logical to assume

that depictions of immigrants as invaders or "enemies at the gate," as Esses and Medianu put it,

are dehumanizing, the goal of their research was to find an actual causal relationship between

media representations and dehumanization (p. 518). They conducted a series of studies in order to establish this causal relationship. In one they had participants read an article with a cartoon in the bottom right corner (Esses and Medianu, 2013, p. 525). One group of participants viewed a cartoon that had an immigrant carrying a suitcase that had labels for a number of diseases including AIDS and SARs, while the image for the other group had no labels on it (Esses and Medianu, 2013, p. 525). Then they asked participants a number of questions including ones to determine what their memory of the cartoon was, and what their thoughts were on immigrants as carriers and spreaders of disease (Esses and Medianu, 2013, p. 525). The participants who saw the cartoon with negative labels "were significantly more likely to indicate that immigrants are a source and spreader of disease" (Esses and Medianu, 2013, p. 525). In addition, they were more likely to "dehumanize immigrants… and to express contempt and lack of admiration toward them" (Esses and Medianu, 2013, p. 525).

Similarly, Cisneros (2008) focuses on the metaphor of "immigrant as pollutant" in the media (p. 472). While Esses and Medianu (2013) focus on a much larger picture of media representation of immigrants Cisneros narrows in on the metaphor of pollutant, comparing media portrayal of immigrants as pollutants to the coverage of the Love Canal Crisis, a chemical spill in the 1970s. For Cisneros, the units of analysis for his study were not individuals but rather television news segments from CNN and Fox News (p. 574). He analyzed the segments searching for examples to support his thesis. In a similar way to how my study is focusing on the right and the left political spectrums, Cisneros chose two news outlets commonly associated with opposing political leanings. While some studies focus on the media and dehumanization, others focus on the attitudes of individuals toward immigrants as a result of dehumanizing rhetoric and

the consequences of these perceptions. Kteily and Bruneau (2017) like Cisneros focus their

research on the United States. Specifically, their study examines how the dehumanization of

Mexicans and Muslims is related to individuals support of Republican politicians and policies,

and how the targeted minorities are affected (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017, p. 87).

Meta-dehumanization is the term they use to describe the feeling of being "blatantly

dehumanized experienced by targeted groups" (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017, p. 88). Their two

studies establish a connection between the dehumanization of Mexicans and Muslims, and

support for Donald Trump and the Republican parties "exclusionary policies" (Kteily &

Bruneau, 2017, pp. 100-102). Utych (2018) conducted similar studies on how "dehumanizing

language leads to negative emotional responses and negative attitudes," specifically negative

attitudes toward immigration policy (p. 440). He focuses on the role of emotion, with his first

study asking questions of participants after they read a piece on immigration that either contained

or did not contain dehumanizing rhetoric (Utych, 2018, p. 443). Using a five-point scale he

measured the emotional responses of participants at the idea of illegal immigrants (Utych, 2018,

p. 443). He found that participants in both groups had the same emotional responses in terms of

anger and fear toward immigrants, but those who had read the text with dehumanizing terms

expressed feelings of disgust toward immigrants (Utych, 2018, p. 443).

  The final way in which scholars approach dehumanizing rhetoric in relation to

immigration is to study its origins. In contrast to the other forms of scholarship which take a

more critical stance, in that they study the consequences of dehumanization, this type of

scholarship takes a more objective approach in trying to understand its origins. The goal of

Costello and Hodson's (2009) perceptions of human-animal similarity research, was to discover

the roots of dehumanization. Their hypothesis was that subjects who believed that humans and

animals shared traits, humanized immigrants more than those who did not (Costello & Hodson,

2009, p. 3). The methodology in this paper, in comparison to others I read, was more qualitative

in nature. Comparison between the data they collected on people's beliefs on human-animal

similarities and their views on immigration, supported their hypothesis (Costello & Hodson,

2009). Lastly Stratham (2003) "investigated the values and meanings that people give to asylum

and immigration" (p. 163). He focused on British citizens and their perceptions of asylum

seekers on both the macro and micro levels (Stratham, 2003, p. 163). On a macro level he looked

at policy demands, and on a micro level he had group discussions with members of different

local towns to gain an understanding of their position on asylum seekers (Stratham, 2003). In

comparison to all of the literature looked at so far, the research of my paper falls more into the

first category in that it is gathering data on how and by whom dehumanizing rhetoric is spread.

Research Method

For this research, deconstruction was used to code sources for dehumanizing words or

phrases. In order to make comparisons between the political right and left in the United States,

sources were chosen for their approximate length and equivalency. The goal was to have three

sources to evaluate from each political spectrum. Placement of sources in the category of right or

left was determined by the political party to which the speaker or writer was publically aligned.

Democratic political speeches and policy statements were the left while statements and speeches

from Republicans were considered right. Sources had to meet a number of requirements in order

to be used in this research. The first requirement was that the main subject of the source was

immigration. If a source only briefly touched on the issue of immigration then it was not used.

Sources also had to be reasonably long, for example, sources of a single paragraph would not be

used. Finally, there was a time period from which texts could be chosen from. Speeches had to

have been delivered and policy statements posted or released between the years of 2012 and

2018. The year 2012 was chosen as the bottom end because as mentioned in the introduction

2011 was the year that the Syrian Civil War began which was subsequently followed by the

refugee crisis. By 2012 politicians would have begun to realize the severity of the crisis and

make statements accordingly. Another reasoning is that 2012 was also the year of a US

presidential election, meaning that this period was most likely saturated with speeches and policy

expressions from both sides of the aisle. Making it a valuable year from which to find sources.

Despite having this wide gap of years from which to choose sources, all of the sources used were

from between the years of 2014 and 2018.

The first source on the political left was a 2014 immigration speech from Barack Obama.

He gave the speech in the White House to the general audience of the American public while he

was still in office. The second source from the left was a 2014 letter from Chuck Schumer, a

Senator, and other members of the Senate, to Obama expressing support for his executive orders

on immigration. The final source from the left was the webpage on Hillary Clinton's website

detailing her immigration stance circa 2017. For the right, the first source was a 2016

immigration speech from Donald Trump that was delivered in front of a crowd of supporters in

Phoenix, Arizona. Length-wise and content wise this speech is equivalent to the speech from

Obama. The second source from the right was the immigration page on Paul Ryan's, the current

speaker of the House of Representatives, website. On the page, Ryan lays out the problems with

the immigration system and how the current Trump administration is working to fix it. Up to

date content on the page makes it a product of 2018. The final source analyzed from the right

was a 2018 speech delivered by Jeff Sessions, the Trump administration's former attorney

general, to an audience in Fort Wayne Indiana. As mentioned previously sources were

deconstructed for words or phrases considered dehumanizing according to the working definition

outlined in the introduction. Terms or words that referred more generally to the process of

immigration rather than the immigrants themselves were not coded. Below is the bank of words

found using emergent coding.

1. Illegal Immigrants

2. Criminal Aliens

3. Criminal Illegal Immigrants

4. Deportable Aliens

5. Dangerous Criminal Aliens

6. Aliens

7. Alien Children

8. Illegal Alien Minors

9. No good

The word illegal and the different variations with which it was used, fit the bill of dehumanizing

rhetoric because they illegitimatize humanity. Humans themselves cannot be illegal, and by

labeling them as such, a message is being sent to the reader or listener that the people in question

are less valued. Referring to something as alien clearly marks it as other, so by labeling

immigrants as aliens they are being identified as other. The chart below details the number of

times words from this bank were used in the sources.

Results of Emergent Coding of American Political Rhetoric on Immigration

Left Wing Political Speeches	Uses of Dehumanizing Immigration Rhetoric	Right Wing Political Speeches	Uses of Dehumanizing Immigration Rhetoric
Barack Obama Immigration Speech 2014	0	Donald Trump Immigration Speech 2016	30
Chuck Schumer Letter 2014	0	Paul Ryan Website Statement 2018	2
Hillary Clinton Immigration Policy on Website 2017	0	Jeff Sessions Immigration Speech 2018	9

Sources:
https://www.cnn.com/2014/11/20/politics/obama-immigration-speech-transcript/index.html
https://votesmart.org/public-statement/936828/letter-to-barack-obama-president-of-the-united-states-supporting-the-executive-authority-to-improve-immigration-system#.XAIQumhKjIU
https://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues/immigration-reform/
https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/us/politics/transcript-trump-immigration-speech.html
https://paulryan.house.gov/issues/issue/?IssueID=9970
https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-sessions-addresses-recent-criticisms-zero-tolerance-church-leaders

In the Donald Trump speech I found seventeen uses of illegal immigrant, one use of the

phrase "he was no good" which suggests a defective commercial quality about the immigrant in

question, a clear dehumanization (2016) He also had eight uses of criminal alien, two uses of

criminal illegal immigrants, one use of dangerous criminal aliens, and one use of deportable

aliens. Paul Ryan used illegal immigrants twice. And Jeff Sessions used illegal aliens five times, aliens twice, alien children once, and illegal alien minors once.

Surprisingly, I found no uses of dehumanizing rhetoric in any of the texts from the left. Even in the lengthy Obama speech. Another results that I was expecting to find but didn't, was more uses of words that alluded to immigrants being vermin or natural disasters ex. "Immigrant infestation" or "Immigrant flood." As the results show, the most dehumanizing rhetoric was found in the speech from Donald Trump at 30 instances. Because of the distinctive personality traits of Donald Trump, it was important to include other sources from the right so that his particular abrasive speaking style was not the sole representation of the right. The source with the least uses of dehumanizing rhetoric on the right was the policy statement on Paul Ryan's website. One reason for this might be the more curated nature of websites in comparison to the medium of live speech. This curated nature might also explain the absence of dehumanizing rhetoric in the texts from Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer. The results of the research very clearly support my hypothesis but the data collection was not without its limitations.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the results of this research. One limitation is the differences in the types of sources on each side. Despite trying to the best of my ability to compile equivalent sources, the right side has more speeches while the left has more miscellaneous sources. Ultimately this was due to the availability of data sources, finding full transcripts of speeches that fit my criteria was a challenge. This has an effect on the data being analyzed, in that the content of websites and letters is fundamentally different from the content of

speeches as they are different mediums of message delivery. While the aim of this research was not to make grand quantitative statements about the use of dehumanizing rhetoric by the right and left, the data would have been strengthened with more sources.

Discussion

While the hypothesis of this paper was that the right or Republican side would use more dehumanizing rhetoric I was surprised at the considerable contrast in the number of uses between the two sides. Although some of this could be attributed to the limitations of the research most of it was simply the raw reality of the data. One has to wonder just like many of the sources in the literature review did, what the consequences of this rhetoric are. In his section on language and political attitudes, Utych (2018) outlines some of the effects of dehumanizing language. Dehumanization changes how people perceive dehumanized groups. People can distance themselves from the groups or as Utych puts it "morally disengage from reprehensible conduct by changing how they look at the victim of the conduct" (p. 441). It also makes people believe that those being dehumanized are somehow less aware of the manner in which they are being treated, which makes them easier targets for ill-treatment (Utych, 2018, p. 441). So in the sources used for this research, the speakers and writers who used dehumanizing language are allowing their audiences to disengage from the humanity of immigrants. People who pay close attention to, and consume the rhetoric of these people, therefore, being to form entrenched ideas about the nature of immigrants.

In contrast, people who are exposing themselves or are exposed to the rhetoric of the left would have different views on immigrants. While this was not included in the research, there were many instances of what I would label as humanizing rhetoric in the sources from the left.

For example, in President Obama's immigration address he used words and phrases like "families", "hopeful immigrant", and "immigrant fathers" when talking about immigrants (2014). Words and phrases like these serve to humanize immigrants because they create parallels to circumstances in our own lives. Readers can feel more empathy for an "immigrant father" as opposed to an "illegal alien". These differing perceptions have real-world consequences for immigrants both in terms of how they are treated and how they react to this treatment. The results of one of the studies done by Kteily and Bruneau (2017) found that people who dehumanized Mexican immigrants were more likely to be supportive of harsher measures against them, such as immigrant detentions and deportations of the undocumented (p. 91). On the other side of the coin, the Latinos who recognized that they were being dehumanized felt emotional hostility toward the groups they felt targeted by and supported "punitive measures, such as hoping that the Republican Party falls apart and wishing Trump harm" (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017, p. 96). This dissonance between people who ascribe to dehumanizing rhetoric and those who do not does not bode well for creating a united, United States.

Conclusion

Immigrants and immigration are not issues that will be disappearing in the near future and neither will the discussions around them. Dehumanizing rhetoric has crept into the discourse surrounding immigration, and in the specific sources used in this paper, all of this rhetoric is emanating from Republican or right-leaning politicians. While the left-leaning sources of this paper were able to talk about immigrants without resorting to such language. The consequences of this rhetoric are negative feelings toward immigrants from citizens and feelings of resentment

from the dehumanized groups (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017) Without clear acknowledgment of the

issue there can be no moves toward change. Research exploring the roots of dehumanizing

rhetoric in the ideologies of the right and the left, as well as research exploring the same issues in

Canada, would add to the scholarship around this issue.

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