MORE THAN A STATUS: IMMIGRANT "ILLEGALITY" AND DISCOURSE DURING THE TRUMP ERA

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Introduction

Understanding immigration policy as both a method of discourse and practice reveals the ways in which immigrant "illegality" is produced. Research shows that notions of immigrant illegality are socially and legally constructed, impacting the way immigrants navigate and experience U.S. society and its laws. The sociolegal production of illegality has consequential implications on the lives of undocumented immigrants and their families living and migrating to the United States. Anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric circulate discursively via mass media reaching wider audiences in the form of news, social media conversations, and publications. The consequence of such rhetoric is that it furthers nativism, xenophobia, and racism that leads to the dehumanization of immigrants everywhere. The Trump administration furthered sociolegal notions of illegality through discourse and policy that has left a long-lasting impact on immigrant communities.

This project will investigate the way discourse surrounding Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Zero Tolerance Policy impacted the way immigrants in Utah experienced "illegality." The first half of the project entails gathering data on the way the Trump administration discussed immigration and immigrants who were impacted by DACA and Zero Tolerance Policy.
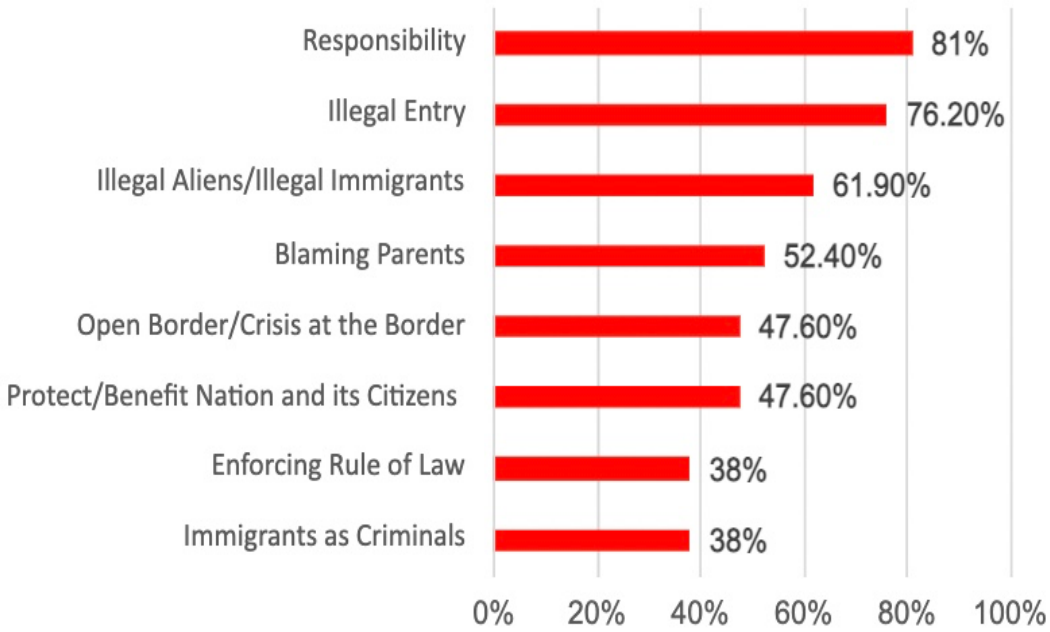
Methods

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze discourse surrounding DACA between September 1, 2017 and September 30, 2017 and Zero Tolerance Policy between April 2018 and June 2018. Discourse pieces were collected from the White House and Office of the Attorney General archives. Additional news articles were gathered through the Marriott Library online database. I relied on a series of keyword searches including, 'DACA", "Zero Tolerance Policy", "illegal immigration," "criminals," "Border" and more. I analyzed a total of 21 discourses pieces ranging from speeches, statements, and news articles.

Results

Data analysis revealed a total of 8 reoccurring themes that account for the way the Trump administration discussed and perceived immigrants and immigration policy.
The notion of responsibility showed up 81% of the time when discussing who was responsible for fixing the immigration system. All entry into the United States was categorized as "illegal" 76.20% of the time, overlooking authorized entries such as seeking asylum. Additionally, DACA recipients and prospective migrants were labeled as "illegal aliens" and "illegal immigrants" 61% of the time. Findings can be found on Figure 1.

Figure 1 – *Immigration Discourse Themes*

Theme	Percentage
Responsibility	81%
Illegal Entry	76.20%
Illegal Aliens/Illegal Immigrants	61.90%
Blaming Parents	52.40%
Open Border/Crisis at the Border	47.60%
Protect/Benefit Nation and its Citizens	47.60%
Enforcing Rule of Law	38%
Immigrants as Criminals	38%

Conclusion

Results indicate that the Trump administration circulated negative and stereotypical language about undocumented immigrants and prospective migrants. Notions of illegality were further distributed by framing immigrants as lawbreakers and a threat to the well-being of the nation state. The repercussions of such discourse not only adversely impacts immigrant communities, but shapes the way the public perceives immigrants and the way that immigration policy and enforcement is crafted.