EXECUTIVE FRAMING AND PUBLIC OPINION: AN EXPLORATION OF MIGRANT CRISES IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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The purpose of this paper is to examine American reactions to child migrant crises and the role that the executive branch of government has in framing public opinion. In 2014 and 2018, the United States faced two separate and distinct child migrant crises: The Central American Migrant Crisis and the Family Separation Policy, respectively. Under polarizing presidents, the American public found themselves faced with similar humanitarian and voting issues in the same decade. Through research of the history and government response to each crisis, the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation Policy will be explored to understand how public opinion is formed through presidential framing. Through an analysis of immigration trends, reasons for crisis, presidential framing, and public opinion polls, this paper will help to understand the role executive framing has in influencing public opinion and why child migrant crises incite such strong, emotional, and varied responses from the American public.

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The past four years have been the greatest privilege of my life–to grow with unbridled support and to learn with carefree curiosity.

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Introduction

Child immigration and corresponding policies in the United States have been among the most contentious of political issues on ballots, on public opinion polls, at dinner tables, and in classrooms. At times, the conversation regarding child and family immigration becomes more personal than political, making it a topic that incites varied and vehement responses. Over the course of the last two U.S. presidencies, the number of unaccompanied minors, family units, and asylum seekers that have attempted to enter the United States illegally from Central America has surged dramatically. This surge in numbers has brought the subject of immigration to the news cycle again and again. As opinions around immigration become more divisive and the topic of immigration dominates U.S. media and presidential addresses, policies around immigration remain unchanged over the past decade or so. The rhetoric that presidents use to address the public contributes significantly to the polarization of public opinions around immigration.

To understand how public opinion is shaped by executive framing of child immigration, I will be researching two discrete crises from the two most recent U.S. presidencies. The 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis under President Barak Obama and the 2018 Family Separation Policy under President Donald Trump allow for a deep understanding of how presidential framing of migrant crises affects public opinion among the American constituents. Both administrations faced unforeseen migrant crises that tested their abilities to handle immigration issues legally and tested each president's competency in using rhetoric and framing to communicate effectively to the American public.

The two crises cited are similar in policy but extraordinarily different in how they are framed by each president. In this paper, the public's response to each crisis will be measured and compared to the framing used by President Obama and President Trump, respectively.

Public opinion is influenced by a myriad of sources, including but not limited to: race, gender, ethnicity, location, media, age, and party affiliation. In times of crisis, the public looks to the executive branch of government for guidance, information, and solutions. In both the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation Policy, the way that information was communicated by the executive branch is a huge factor that affected public opinion. Although public opinion responses to immigration policy vary constantly, actual policy change and homeland security tactics do not vary greatly from President Obama's administration to President Trump's. In fact, very little new immigration policy exists. Major policy around child immigration, such as the Flores Settlement of 1997, has been the basis for and defense against much new immigration policy in the 21st century. By establishing the stability of immigration policy as it compares to fluctuating public opinion, this paper will demonstrate the power in presidential framing.

President Obama and President Trump represent polarized sides of the American political spectrum, and they use very different styles of framing to convey information about two separate but similar migrant crisis events. This paper will help us to understand how executive framing affects public opinion and why child migrant crises incite such strong responses from the American public. The issue of immigration is political, but the issue of child migrants and how they are treated by the U.S. becomes

much more emotional than political. In times of child migrant crises, public opinion

shows that the American people listen to their instinct and own compassion more than

their executive's intentional framing.

Chapter 1: Background on Child Immigration Policy

A Recent History of Child Immigration Policy in the United States

An essential component to fully understanding the reasons for both the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation Crisis is the history of child immigration policy in the United States. Child immigration policy in the United States is a relatively new topic of debate and concern. The earliest policy dedicated fully to the topic of child immigration only dates back to 1997, meaning the United States existed for centuries without any legal regulations as to how to treat or properly detain unaccompanied child migrants. The Flores Settlement Agreement of 1997 led the U.S. government to set immigration detention standards for unaccompanied alien children (UACs), with strict regulations on facility conditions, limits for time holding UACs in custody, as well as standards adhering to the terms of their release (Sussis, 2019). Prior to the establishment of the Flores Settlement, there were no laws specifically in place pertaining to the detainment or protection of migrant children.

The Flores Settlement Agreement of 1997

Before either President Obama or President Trump held office, child immigration was a national issue in need of legal recognition. In 1985, the first recorded class action lawsuit against the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was brought before the United States Supreme Court. This lawsuit concerned the treatment and detainment of an unaccompanied migrant child named Jenny Flores and expressed concerns that Flores was strip-searched, shared living quarters with adult males, and was not allowed to be released to non-guardian relatives (Sussis, 2019). These

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conditions put Flores in danger that drew the attention of activist groups and the voting

public. This lawsuit brought the issue of how the INS treats unaccompanied alien

children to the forefront of public awareness and political debate. The INS needed to

have a system in which they could safely and humanely detain illegal immigrant

minors, so this agency began to follow the regulations set forth by the 1997 Flores

Settlement (The Flores, 2016).

The Flores Settlement establishes rules, timelines, and standards for both the

detention and release of immigrant children. This settlement acts as a legal safeguard

for children, ensuring UACs a non-delayed release from immigration detention,

ensuring UACs' placement in the least-restrictive setting appropriate to their age, and

ensuring all children basic health and treatment standards under the INS. In addition,

while adults who cross the border illegally can be held indefinitely in jails, Flores

provides children the option of leaving the INS shelters they are placed in (Barry,

2018). The Flores Settlement has proved essential to protecting unaccompanied alien

children, especially in the protection of children during the 2014 Central American

Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation Policy.

Changes to the Flores Settlement Agreement

The 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis included an exponential rise in the

number of migrant children attempting to cross the U.S./Mexico border. The Obama

administration, in response to the surge in numbers, pursued a policy of incarcerating

thousands of families. In 2015, the U.S. District Court ruled that the federal

government's family detention policy went against the terms of the Flores Settlement

Agreement, and that only in times of crisis could children be separated from families

upon arrest—and at maximum, this detainment could only last up to twenty days. This order also required the government to work quickly toward family unification and to release children without unnecessary delay. In the case that a child could not be released promptly to an adult family member, the unaccompanied child would be detained in a "'secure' facility, defined as a 'detention facility where individuals are held in custody and not free to leave'" (The Flores, 2016).

In 2016, the Flores Settlement was changed so that it covered not only unaccompanied minors, but accompanied minors as well. After this adjustment, it was assumed by adult illegal immigrants that their "children — and often if not usually the adults, too — [would] be released into the country shortly after they are apprehended as they await their removal proceedings" should they ask to be put under asylum proceedings (Sussis, 2019). U.S. Border Patrol reports indicate that, from 2015 to 2018, the yearly total of family unit apprehensions at the border had increased from about 40,000 family units to about 107,000 units (United States, 2018). These statistics largely reflect the effect of the 2016 adjustment to the Flores settlement, with the U.S. experiencing a surge of family unit apprehensions after this adjustment. The enforcement of the Flores Settlement from 1997 to 2019 reiterates the importance of child immigration and the continued debate on how to legally handle the complexities that come with child immigration.

The background of the Flores Settlement Agreement is an essential component to understanding both the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation Policy. This piece of legislation is a defining guideline to legal treatment of both unaccompanied and accompanied migrant children upon entering the United

States. With each distinct crisis, the Flores Settlement plays an important role in shaping the trajectory of history and the formation of public opinion regarding child immigration.

Chapter 2: Defining and Exploring Migrant Crisis

Defining a Migrant Crisis

There is a lack of consensus around the definition of "migrant crisis," as well as

different understandings of what constitutes a crisis based on the social setting and

circumstances.

> '**Crisis**' is one of those notoriously difficult concepts which abound in the
> social sciences. Because of its wide usage, the term lacks precision and
> specificity; so that even those who work in crisis intervention and
> research are reluctant to commit themselves to a single definition.
> (Eastham, 1970)

The way that the 2014 Central American Migrant crisis is defined is through the sheer

number of apprehended units of migrants attempting to enter the U.S. through the U.S./

Mexico border. In contrast, the 2018 Family Separation Policy had much lower

numbers of apprehended migrants overall. The 2018 crisis was defined by the zero-

tolerance for all adults who entered the U.S. and the resulting separation of thousands of

children from their parents. Both migrant crises, while different in constitution, resulted

in the United States' systematic failure to respond in an orderly, humane way to

unaccompanied and accompanied child migrants at the border.

The 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation

Policy are two distinct crises where the United States' system of immigration control

and border protection were not well-equipped or prepared to handle the sheer number of

migrants attempting to enter the United States.

> **Migrant crisis** is the intense difficulty, trouble, or danger situation in the receiving state (destination country) due to the movements of large groups of immigrants (displaced people, refugees, or asylum seekers) escaping from the conditions (natural or artificially created) which negatively affected their situation (security, economic, political, or societal) at the country of origin (departure). The "crisis" situation is not the refugee numbers (number of migrants seeking protection) but the system's failure to respond in an orderly way in the government's legal obligations. (Eastham, 1970)

Understanding what constitutes a migrant crisis helps to define what distinguishes the crises under Obama's and Trump's presidencies as unique. Both presidents faced these migrant crises that helped to define their presidencies and tested their ability to handle an unprecedented situation. The combination of an influx of apprehended units of children at the U.S./Mexico border and a lack of government capacity to appropriately detain and deal with these children resulted in two defining migrant crises in the past decade of United States history.

Media Portrayal of Crisis

As essential as the definition of crisis is the visual representation of the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis as well as the 2018 Migrant Crisis. While immigration has always been a contentious issue in the U.S., the subject of unaccompanied minors or children separated from families brings an onslaught of curiosity and attention from the American public. There is a very human element that comes into each of the migrant crises that are included in this research. While immigrants are often painted as criminal and illegal, there is a softer reaction to young, underage migrant children. Images of children sleeping in detention centers consumed the U.S. media circuit in both the summer of 2014 and summer of 2018.

Figure 1: Eric Gay, NPR "From A Stream to A Flood: Migrant Kids Overwhelm U.S. Border Agents", Texas 2014

Young detainees sleep in a U.S. Customs and Border Protection holding cell in Brownsville, Texas. More than 50,000 unaccompanied migrant kids have been detained in the last eight months, an almost 100 percent increase from the previous fiscal year.

The 2014 crisis was documented through photos, videos, and sound bites that alerted the world of the humanitarian crisis. With photos of unaccompanied children at the head of each article, news hour, and op-ed piece, the American public was immediately alerted to the prevalence of the migrant crisis. In 2018, the same photo journalism was used to capture Trump's Family Separation Policy, which led to the family separation crisis that shocked the world. The photo below was TIME Magazine's July 2018 cover and won the World Press Photo of the Year (Hanna, 2019).

Figure 2: John Moore, Getty Images "A 2-year-old Honduran girl cries as her mother is searched near the U.S.-Mexico border on June 12", June 2018

The emotional reaction to these photos and the weight behind the word "crisis" is powerful on its own. While the 2014 and 2018 crises were four years apart, images and rhetoric used by mainstream media to portray each crisis made it so the American public could easily see the connection between the two events. Similar emotions were brought up during the summer of 2014 and the summer of 2018, and it was the combination of systematic failure in the U.S. government and public outcry that notified each respective president of the severity of the crisis on their hands.

Chapter 3: The 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis

Background on the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis

The 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis resulted in an unprecedented number of Central American migrants making the trek to the U.S. border. Over the course of 2014, there was a seventy-seven percent increase of unaccompanied children apprehended at the U.S./Mexico border, totaling about 69,000 children (Lind, 2014). Numbers of this quantity were unheard of, and at the same time as thousands of unaccompanied children flooded U.S. borders, accompanied children and their families pushed numbers higher. By the end of 2014, family units with children apprehended were three times higher than the previous year's numbers.

Border apprehensions of unaccompanied children

☐ Mexico ☐ El Salvador ☐ Guatemala ☐ Honduras
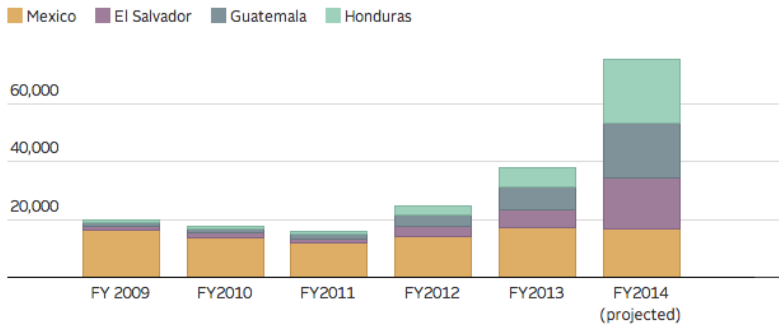
Source: US Customs and Border Protection, through June 30th *V*

Figure 3: U.S. Customs and Border Protection: Border apprehensions of unaccompanied children and their nationality

This figure represents the nationalities of unaccompanied minors apprehended at the U.S./Mexico border from fiscal year 2009 until fiscal year 2014. The colored sections of each column show the nationality as it pertains to numbers apprehended.

These numbers greatly overwhelmed the U.S. immigration and border protection systems. The system Congress had helped implement was prepared with facilities and housing to host 6,000-8,000 children, not to host over 60,000–the number during the summer of 2014 (Lind, 2014). Normally, the way that families are treated upon crossing the US border depends on circumstances. Families are either slotted to be removed from the country without a trial, or, if families state a "credible fear" of returning to their own country, they are assigned a hearing date to appear in immigration court to determine if they will qualify for asylum. Normally, unaccompanied children are not held by Border Control or intermediate detention center for more than seventy-two hours. From this point, the Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for finding a relative or family friend willing to take care of the child or the DHS places the child in a foster care system. During the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis, serious efforts were made to keep families together. While both numbers of unaccompanied children and family units apprehended rose, the Obama administration worked hard to keep families together.

Reasons for Increased Migration from Central American Countries

Each Central American country's respective national crisis drove hordes of migrants seeking protection and asylum to the United States. In 2014, families and children fled to the U.S. from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico. In the early 2010s, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador had some of the highest murder rates in the entire world (Lind, 2014). Violence, often derived from criminal gang activity and corruption inside of the country, led thousands of migrants to seek asylum in the United States. A report conducted by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees

"based on interviews of 404 children aged 12-17 who left their home countries, found that 70 percent did so because of either domestic abuse, or violence" (Cowan, 2014).
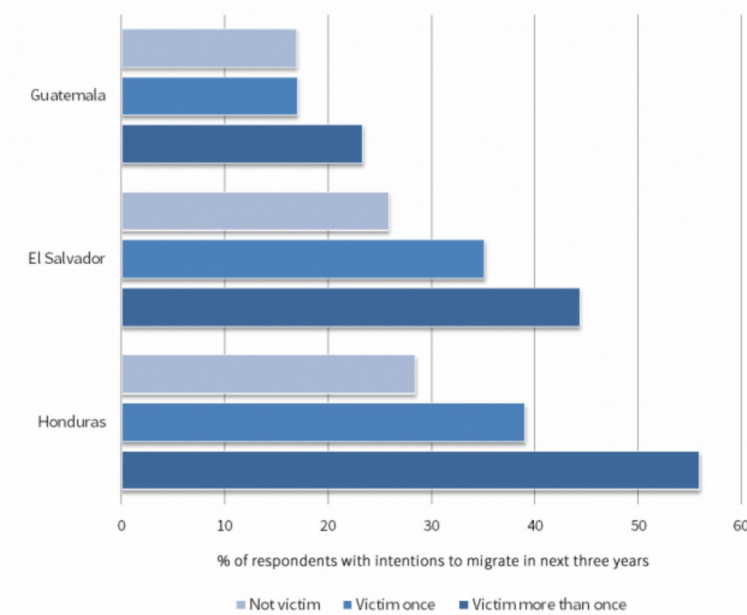
Source: LAPOP, *AmericasBarometer 2014*.

Figure 4: Crime Victimization and Migrant Intentions, American Immigration Council 2012.

This graph shows the percent of respondents with intentions to migrate as it corresponds with how many times each respondent was a victim of serious crime.

In addition, there was misinformation about the kind of treatment migrants would receive at the border. Due to the processes set forward by the Flores Settlement, many migrant families and parents trusted their children would be detained safely and eventually allowed into the country or reunited with a family member already established in the U.S. The combination of reasons for each country led to the exponential increase in apprehended units at the U.S. Border in 2014, and overwhelmed the U.S. Customs and Border System, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement,

U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and deeply affected the opinion of the U.S. public.

President Obama's Role & Response

Obama's legacy of immigration policy is a complex one that is often misunderstood by the general electorate. By the end of his two terms, President Obama earned himself the title "Deporter in Chief". He had, during his eight-year presidency, removed over 2.5 million people, more than any other president in United States history (Marshall, 2019). This staggering number was largely made up of criminal immigrants or those previously convicted of a crime, a serious effort on the part of the Obama administration to avoid deporting non-problematic immigrants. Obama marked his immigration policy by targeting criminal immigrants and working to protect immigrants who arrived as children or who were unproblematic in their illegal status, as most immigrants were in the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis. In addition to concentrating deportation efforts on criminals and working to keep family units together, Obama designated Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help provide adequate shelter and housing for families and unaccompanied minors in detainment facilities. Thousands of new beds were opened for detainees and over four million dollars was allocated to provide lawyers to unaccompanied children facing immigration court (Lind, 2014).

Criticisms of Obama during the 2014 Central American Migrant crisis cite his DACA program as a reason many unaccompanied minors attempted to cross the border. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is an immigration policy that Obama introduced in 2012. DACA allows for immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children to

have a two-year period with deferred action from deportation and an opportunity to receive a work permit (United States). Specific eligibility and rules make this DACA status highly coveted, and public support for this policy was divided based on partisanship–yet DACA was still able to pass under Obama. However, there is no statistical to prove that this policy incentivized or encouraged the surge in immigration.

Obama was often criticized by constituents for his role as "Deporter-in-chief". Although Obama pushed for comprehensive immigration reform, he received a lot of criticism for the sheer numbers of immigrants he deported and for the separation of families. The left-leaning constituents, often in support of Obama's comprehensive immigration laws, gathered to protest his deportation tactics and the way his administration concentrated efforts to deport illegal immigrants.

Figure 5: Epstein & King, Politico "Obama under siege over deportations", March 2014

Protesters gather in front of the White House in Washington, D.C. to protest the Obama administration's efforts in deportation.

To further solidify his political stance in deportation and policies on immigration in the eyes of the public, Obama listed his priorities of immigrants to be

deported. In 2014 Obama listed the priority in which U.S. Immigrations and Customs

Enforcement (ICE) was working under, with the priority deportees being "national

security threats, noncitizens apprehended immediately at the border, gang members, and

noncitizens convicted of felonies or aggravated felonies as defined in immigration law"

(Chishti, 2017). Obama focused concentrated effort on protecting children and keeping

families together while at the same time working to deport illegal immigrants quickly

and effectively to combat the influx of immigrants during the summer of 2014.

Chapter 4: The Family Separation Crisis of 2018

Background on the Family Separation Policy

In the first year of his presidency, Trump and his administration began stealthily testing family separation to act as a deterrent to the rising number of asylum seekers crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. This policy was not announced, but rumors of its existence and evidence of separated families began to trickle into the media and gain public attention. There is no clear reason as to why family separation was implemented as a policy. The numbers of unaccompanied children or family units apprehended at the U.S./Mexico border were nowhere near close to the numbers of the crisis in 2014. This policy was implemented in attempts to lower the numbers of migrants and find a way to deter families from attempting to cross the border, but it was not a response to any surge in numbers or humanitarian crisis. In late 2017, the ACLU caught wind of family separation and filed a lawsuit. It was not until 2018 that the "zero-tolerance policy" was officially implemented by the Department of Justice (DOJ).

> On May 7, 2018, the Department of Justice implemented its 'zero tolerance' policy, dictating that all migrants who cross the border without permission, including those seeking asylum, be referred to the DOJ for prosecution. Undocumented asylum-seekers were imprisoned, and any accompanying children under the age of 18 were handed over to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which shipped them miles away from their parents and scattered them among 100 Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) shelters and other care arrangements across the country. Hundreds of these children, including infants and toddlers, were under the age of 5.
>
> Prior to the Trump administration, families were generally paroled into the country to await their immigration cases or detained together. (Family, 2019)

Under this policy, the DOJ prosecuted all adult immigrants crossing the border

illegally. This policy had no exceptions, meaning adult immigrants seeking asylum or

adults with children were still prosecuted. Migrant adults with children presented the

U.S. government with the difficult situation of not being allowed to detain their children

in the same holding facilities as their parents. Because of this law, provided under the

Flores Settlement, illegal immigrant children were separated from their parents upon

entry and treated as "unaccompanied minors" (United States, Congress). The results of

the "zero tolerance policy" include about 3,000 children separated from their parents,

including thousands more separated before the public announcement of the "zero-

tolerance policy." Trump experienced public backlash at a staggering rate with his

"zero-tolerance policy," and about six weeks after its implementation the policy was

rolled back.

Figure 6: Getty Images, Alfredo Estrella 2018

This photo depicts a Honduran child in the trailer of a truck. She is part of a larger caravan making their way to the United States border.

President Trump's Role & Response

In as early as June of 2017, President Trump and his administration began separating families through a pilot program based in El Paso, Texas. This program had separated at least twenty-two parents from their children by November of 2017. By June of 2018 the Department of Health and Human Services reported the number of children separated from their families to be over 2,000. Although the Zero-Tolerance Policy was not officially announced until May of 2018, the separation began before its announcement and continued after the program's official ending. President Trump was in support of this separation and as recently as April of 2019, commented that without family separation the border compares to Disneyland with its overcrowded nature and plethora of children (Kimberly, 2019). Even as Trump faced mass disapproval of this policy, he continued to verbally support this policy. Political figures in his own Republican party spoke against the policy, citing the separation of families as

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inhumane, cruel, and un-American. However, Trump believed this policy would act as an effective deterrent to the pervasive issue of illegal immigration. He continued to defend his policy via public addresses and social media and, upon its abrupt ending six weeks after its initial announcement, maintained that this policy was one of the only defenses that Americans could employ to lower the number of families crossing the border.

Chapter 5: Executive Framing of Crises

Defining Executive Framing

The way in which an issue is framed by presidents largely determines how that issue will be understood and acted upon by the constituents. When it comes to issues as prominent and as large-scale as immigration issues and unaccompanied child migrants, the framing of the issue is essential to the public's awareness and reaction. The term "executive framing" speaks to the way that a President or the executive branch of the U.S. government uses specific words, tone, or references to frame a subject. In the case of the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation Policy, executive framing was a way that President Obama and President Trump provided their supporters with information and swayed their opinions. Often when speaking of politics, framing is used to present a problem in need of a solution. The way that President Obama and President Trump framed their respective crises clearly defined the issues and the proposed solutions their administrations supported and advocated for. Regarding the two discrete crises under Presidents Obama and Trump, executive framing contributed to the varied responses on public opinion polls.

Executive Framing of 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis

The way that President Obama used key words and a specific kind of rhetoric when addressing the public to explain the events of the migrant crisis and proposed solutions was intentional to keep Americans satisfied with how his administration was handling the crisis. The main rhetorical tactics employed by Obama during his public addresses were framing unaccompanied minors as *children* deserving of care and

quality of life, and stressing his administration's efforts to help Central American

countries suffering from humanitarian crises.

In July of 2014, Obama spoke multiple times in public addresses, specifically

discussing issues with migration and steps taken toward a solution. The way that Obama

and his administration handled the crisis was with words that emphasized the humanity

and innocence of many of these migrants, as well as to attempt to stop migration at the

source rather than focusing protection efforts solely at the border. On July 9th, at the

peak of the migrant crisis, Obama addressed the public from the White House to discuss

the influx of unaccompanied minors attempting to cross the border. In this speech,

Obama spoke of "children crossing the border", not using terms like *unaccompanied*

minors, immigrants, or *aliens*. Specifically, Obama used the words "*kids*" and

"*children*" to speak about these unaccompanied minors. In this speech, Obama

promised that he and his administration were "working to make sure that [our borders]

have sufficient facilities to detain, house, and process them appropriately, while

attending to unaccompanied children with the care and compassion that they deserve

while they're in our custody." (President, 2014). Highlighting that these migrants are

children, and the direct use of the word "*deserve*" to talk about their need for care and

compassion, was employed by Obama to play on American emotion and sense of

humanity. Obama cautiously paints migrant children in a light of innocence to invoke

compassion from Americans who felt angry and scared about how this migrant crisis

would affect them.

Obama's speeches were directed at the American electorate as well as all

Central Americans who were listening. On July 10th, Obama reported that he had

"asked parents across Central America not to put their children in harm's way [by attempting to cross the border]" through the U.S. government's campaigns to attempt to lower numbers of detained children. The Obama administration paid for a million-dollar multimedia advertising campaign run in Central America that the U.S. Customs and Border Protection helped to develop. This campaign worked to alert migrants of the dangers of travelling north and counter rumors that unaccompanied minors would be granted permanent asylum in the United States. In addition, the U.S. sent a $250-million-dollar aid package to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to assist with the humanitarian crisis in each respective country (Lind, 2014). Obama spoke of these efforts to reassure Americans that he and his administration were not sitting idly by, but rather working to stop migrants at the source and prevent the surge of unaccompanied minors at the U.S./Mexico border. He specifically does not place blame on immigrants or Central American governments, but instead intentionally speaks of solutions and the humanity behind the crisis.

On July 19th, during the peak of the migrant crisis, during his weekly presidential address, Obama calls out to all Americans. He includes the subject of immigration reform while still focusing on the American public, making sure to highlight civilian safety and security as a priority:

> We should pass commonsense immigration reform that strengthens our
> borders and our businesses, and includes a chance for long-time residents
> to earn their citizenship. I want to work with Democrats and Republicans
> on all of these priorities. But I will do whatever I can, wherever I can, to
> help families like yours. Because there's nothing more important to me
> than you…making sure this country remains a place where everyone
> who works hard can make it if you try (President, 2014)

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This kind of closing to his speech allows Americans to feel heard and helps to erase partisanship as he addresses his desire to work with both parties. Obama is cautious about how much attention he gives to the crisis in his speech, making sure to end on a positive note for Americans while advocating for immigration reform (Gordon, 2017).

The overall effect of Obama's framing leaves listeners with a few conclusions. Firstly, that all efforts of the government to help manage the crisis must follow due process put in place by laws that were implemented before Obama's presidency. This helps constituents place any blame they have on the laws that were already in place, and removes blame from the acting government. Secondly, the framing shows that Obama and his administration realize these unaccompanied migrants are children and that he intends to treat them with compassion, which helps the public feel compassion toward migrants as well. Lastly, Obama makes it clear that American civilians are his priority and that he is working with foreign governments to protect Americans and asylum seekers alike.

Executive Framing of the 2018 Family Separation Policy

President Trump used specific words in his executive framing that painted the migration events in the summer of 2018 as a by-product of previous administrations and that places blame on the prevalence of dangerous or unruly immigrants. The overall effect of Trump's rhetoric is a defensive stance that many Americans adopted as well, leading to an "Us versus Them" mentality that affected how public opinion on immigration was formed and how opinions on immigration changed in the summer of 2018.

Far from being empty or inconsequential, however, rhetoric is material and meaningful. Rhetoric is action. It actively defines situations and people, which influences not only how persons respond to those situations and people, but also limits what persons are even able to conceive of as possible responses. It actively alters persons' ideas, values, and beliefs, contributing to and constraining what and how they think. It actively generates emotion and affect, altering how people feel and behave. It actively mobilizes people to action or inaction in all contexts all the time. What people say does more than simply express who they are and what they are feeling and thinking, though it does those things. It fundamentally calls on others to be certain types of people, and to feel, think, and act in certain ways. (Ott, 2019).

While President Trump's framing is not the deciding factor in constituent opinions or voting trends, there is a real aspect to the impact of his framing and rhetoric to address the public. President Trump's framing of the family separation policy called on his followers to listen to him over listening to their instinctual response. He worked to misplace blame and use emotion to convince his followers that his zero-tolerance policy was a good decision, using rhetoric to fight against the American public's feelings of discomfort over the separation of families.

To escape much of the heat and judgement that was ignited by the implementation and practices of the zero-tolerance policy, President Trump adopted a few defensive tactics. A main form of defense was alluding to the prior president, Obama, and his administration as the true contributors to family separation. In a tweet published in November of 2018, months after the Zero-Tolerance Policy ended, Trump wrote:

Obama separated ... children from parents, as did Bush etc., because that is the policy and law. I tried to keep them together but the problem is, when you do that, vast numbers of additional people storm the Border. So, with Obama separation is fine, but with Trump it's not. (Qui, 2014)

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This comparison of Obama's immigration efforts to his own efforts falls flat. Both

Obama and Trump operated under the same laws put in place by the Flores Settlement

of 1997. Obama did not implement a family separation policy, but was forced to find

ways to handle the sheer number of families entering the U.S./Mexico border in 2014.

Although Trump's policy wasn't explicitly titled "Family Separation", the effects of the

Zero-Tolerance Policy led to the criminal prosecution of anyone who crossed the border

illegally, whether violent or non-violent, child or adult. This led to parents being

detained and, consequently, children finding themselves separated from their parents

and alone in U.S, detainment facilities. Again, according to Trump,

> Because of Democrat-supported loopholes in our federal laws, most
> illegal immigrant families and minors from Central America who arrive
> unlawfully at the border cannot be detained together or removed
> together, only released. These are crippling loopholes that cause family
> separation, which we don't want. (Qui, 2014)

Trump incorrectly cites "loopholes" and continues the framing of blame. The loopholes

he speaks of could be a result of the child protections put in place by the Flores

Settlement of 1997, but there is no law that allows for or mandates detaining parents

and separating children from their families. By saying family separation is a result of

Democrat-supported policies, Trump again redirects this issue to Obama and his

administration.

In the summer of 2014, the U.S. border had to systematically and safely process

over 60,000 child migrants. In spring and early summer of 2018, the numbers of

apprehended units were nowhere near close to these 2014 numbers. But because

numbers were not on Trump's side, Trump used a rhetorical tactic to paint immigrants

in a negative light. Unlike Obama's efforts to unify the American public through

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reminding them of the humanity of child migrants, Trump described migrants in a

different light:

> We must enforce the rules against visa fraud, illegal overstay, illegal
> entry, and other immigration violations and crimes; and crimes they are -
> believe me, crimes they are. These are the practices exploited by
> terrorists, drug dealers, child smugglers, human traffickers, gang
> members - and countless unknown and unregistered criminals - to gain
> illicit access to our country and threaten our citizens. (C-Span, 2014)

Trump paints immigrants in a negative light, focusing on criminal activity committed

by immigrants and comparing immigrants that cross the U.S./Mexico border to human

traffickers, gang members, and drug dealers. The negative connotation of migrants

distracts from the reality that families and unaccompanied children were the main

sufferers from the zero-tolerance policy, not criminal migrants, as intended. In an

address, former U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions used the phrase "criminal aliens"

or "aliens with children" instead of saying families or migrants. Although expressing

regret at the separation of families, Sessions quotes Trump as declaring "[illegal

immigration] lawlessness cannot continue", and makes it clear to listeners that Trump's

Zero-Tolerance Policy was put in place to protect Americans against migrants

(Sessions, 2018).

The overall effect of Trump's framing leaves listeners with a few conclusions.

Firstly, Trump puts blame on the previous administration by directly claiming it was

Obama's administration and their policies that perpetrated the crisis. This works to

remove criticism and explain the family separation crisis that does not put blame on

Trump or his administration. Both presidents use this common tactic to divert blame,

and it works temporarily. In our current political climate, facts prove more easily

accessible than ever before, and Trump's misplacement of blame was quickly

discovered as untruthful. Second, Trump works to paint all migrants, including child migrants, in a negative light. Instead of alluding to immigrants as asylum seekers or children, he uses framing to describe them as criminals or negative additions to the United States. He does this to lessen the criticism he received from separating family units. Lastly, Trump and his administration frame their decisions as necessary to the protection of the American public, in attempt to garner public support of his zero-tolerance policy.

Chapter 6: Public Opinion of Crises

The 2014 Central American Migrant Crises and the 2018 Family Separation Policy deeply affected the American public. In both cases, the issue of unaccompanied children at the mercy of the U.S. government instilled both fear and compassion into Americans. Through media exposure, Americans learned of the facts behind each crisis and saw the suffering of migrant children. This compassion was balanced with a valid fear of the lasting effects of a migrant crisis and varied mistrust in the executive branch to lead the country through unprecedented times. Through presidential framing, President Obama and President Trump directed their supporters on what was happening and how they, as leaders, were helping and dealing with each respective crisis. In this way, presidential framing of the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation Policy directly affected public opinion.

Defining Public Opinion

The complexities with defining "public opinion" are in no way limited to how a president frames a crisis. Public opinion is constituted from a collective mixture of race, ethnicity, party alliance, gender, age, and location, to name a few contributing factors.

> Public opinion is one of the most frequently evoked terms in American politics. At the most basic level, public opinion represents people's collective preferences on matters related to government and politics. However, public opinion is a complex phenomenon, and scholars have developed a variety of interpretations of what public opinion means. One perspective holds that individual opinions matter; therefore, the opinions of the majority should be weighed more heavily than opinions of the minority when leaders make decisions. A contrasting view maintains that public opinion is controlled by organized groups, government leaders, and media elites. The opinions of those in positions of power or who have access to those in power carry the most weight. (*What Is, 2015*)

There is discourse on whose opinion holds more weight in our political sector: the individual or those in power. While the opinion of those in power, like President Obama or President Trump, matters greatly, the system of checks and balances leads to an essential component of government: democracy. In our American democracy, opinion matters. Public opinion is used to track the public's satisfaction with presidents, used to track opinions on immigration, used to guide the government in the direction of the constituents' favor.

The 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and 2018 Family Separation Policy were crises that attracted the attention of the world. This turned many Americans to the polls, participating in opinion polls and responding to newspaper op-ed pieces in unprecedented numbers. The issue of migrant children suffering at the hands of the U.S. government, whether inadvertently or not, brought out strong opinions in the American public.

Public Opinion in 2014

Through collection of public opinion data, there is a clear pattern of reaction to the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the effects of President Obama's framing of that crisis in his public speeches. Approval of Obama's immigration reform was divided among party affiliation. Although there was a partisan divide about immigration reform and specific policy, the **"**majorities of Democrats, Republicans and independents agree that illegal immigrants should be given a way to remain in the country legally" (Thee-brenan, 2014). This reflects the more accepting tone that Obama employed in his speeches in which he advocated for the legal integration of immigrants who were contributing members to society. However, partisan splits revealed "70% of

Republicans saying Central American children should not be treated as refugees

compared with 62% of Democrats who believe they should" (Cowan, 2014). It can be

assumed that the partisan divide derives from the direct and compassionate framing

Obama employed. Obama directed Americans to find the truth in the crisis, explaining

the issues in Central America and the reasons for immigration, while highlighting the

suffering endured by migrant children. Americans who listened to and followed

Obama's framing could see the humanity behind the crisis and paid attention to the

reasons for the migrants flooding the borders. This compassion affected public opinion,

and Republicans or people who do not listen to Obama did not receive the same

message of compassion towards migrants and voted differently on polls.

In June of 2014, in the height of the migrant crisis, 62% of Americans favored a

way of providing immigrants who are already in the United States a path to citizenship

(Cox, 2014). This reflects a country-wide shift that is more accepting of immigrants and

their place in American society. Framing by Obama that establishes immigrants as

"deserving of care and compassion" helped to impact this shift in view. The surge in

apprehended numbers of child migrants and family units "at the border increased the

public desire for securing U.S. borders, up to 77% of Americans responding that this is

an important safety measure" (Thee-brenan, 2014). This idea of border security as

safety comes from the combined awareness of the conditions of detainment facilities

and framing from President Obama. Through media exposure, Americans saw the harsh

conditions of overcrowded detainment facilities and through framing, they were made

to agree that security on the border would be the most helpful solution to the migrant

crisis. In addition, Obama's efforts to run campaigns in Central America and work with

the Mexican government made the public agree that border security stops the issue before it trickles into the United States.

Public Opinion in 2018

The Trump administration's rollout of the Zero-Tolerance Policy in May of 2018 led six weeks later to public outrage and political disapproval that cut the program short. By mid-June, 66% of American voters opposed the Family Separation Policy. Half of all voters argued that the Trump administration had been too aggressive in deporting illegal immigrants and the reaction from voters, a lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union, and outcry from prominent political figures contributed to the majority of the electorate's disapproval of Trump's policy.

Although executive framing weighs heavily on voter opinions, when children in are in danger, more than just the president's rhetoric matters. Outcry from prominent figures like Former First Lady Barbara Bush also influenced the electorate. Bush wrote in an op-ed piece that it is the country's "obligation to reunite these detained children with their parents — and to stop separating parents and children in the first place" (Chan, 2018). Approval ratings of Trump shot down, and having his own party speak against his administration and his policies did not sit well with Americans. This widespread disapproval and condemnation from Trump's own party quickly put the family separation policy to an end. Although the government stopped the practice of separating families, children were still separated from parents well after the summer. Due to language barriers and no plan for reunification, many children remained separated and in U.S. custody for months after their initial separation.

In fact, by the end of 2018, Americans responded they were "slightly more likely to approve (51%) than disapprove (43%) of letting these refugees into the U.S." (Jones, 2019). This reflects a rare shift away from the historical norm, revealing that Trump's negative framing of immigrants and combined family separation tactics had the opposite effect on the American public. Instead of being more closed off, the idea of children stranded in a foreign country away from their parents, seeking asylum and awaiting a faraway court hearing caused Americans to shift in their normal trends of border security. It is clear from these statistics that when the immigration issue involves children in despair, Americans must decide to listen to their morals more than their president's framing.

Trump's family separation policy and negative framing of migrants so greatly contrasted with media exposure of unaccompanied children that it worked against his goals. In 2018, "more than 60 percent of respondents oppose denying asylum to victims of domestic abuse or gang violence", meaning more Americans supported granting migrant asylum than ever before (Jones, 2019). The public opinion polls reveal that Americans trust their eyes often more than their ears, as media images and awareness of the family separation impacted voting more than Trump's framing.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The prevalence of child migrant crises in the last decade has shaped the way the American electorate views and votes on immigration issues. The 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis and the 2018 Family Separation Policy highlighted the issue of child immigration and divided party lines. The role of the president in both crises is a complicated role. "Presidents work in a political system composed of elements of tension, and at times, in contradiction to one another" (Tulis, 1987). They must strictly govern the people as well as relate to the people, a difficult role in times of crisis. Immigration issues have always been a topic of concern and varied opinions, but something about child migrants incites a new level of passion, fear, and interest in the American public. While the role of the president is essential to shaping the public's awareness of crisis, the American public proved to rely more on their emotional response than one derived from presidential framing.

The humanitarian crises in Central America in 2014 were dire enough to cause tens of thousands of children to flee their homes, separate from families, and enter a world where the customs, language, and people are unfamiliar to them. After the trauma of migrating north to an unknown world, children face the complexities and suffer from the inadequate systems put in place by the U.S. government. In 2018, children were introduced to a new kind of trauma: separation from their parents upon entering the United States and an unknown timeline of reunification. These continued humanitarian crises, beginning in Central America in 2014 and continuing to present day, remain prevalent issues weighing on the American ballot and conscience.

Public opinion provides insight into how Americans react to and deal with crisis. When looking at public opinion polls around child immigration, what is normally political becomes incredibly personal. In unprecedented times, when voters are confused and scared, they look to people in power to help them direct their opinions and knowledge. But because of the personal aspect of child migrant crises, the emotional response that is invoked by the reality of the crisis often matters more than presidential framing. When presidential decision making is particularly egregious, such as Trump's zero-tolerance policy, constituents must listen to their instinct and rely less on presidential framing. While presidential framing in speeches and public addresses is usually hugely influential to public opinion, the reality of migrant crises that involve child migrants makes it so presidential framing is less influential, and personal reaction becomes political. The advice and quality of information supplied by the executive leader greatly allows Americans to feel supported and stand firm in their opinion, even when conflicting information is coming from all sides. impacts how the American public votes and approves of presidential behavior and policy.

President Obama and President Trump intentionally framed each crisis in a way to sway voter opinions and appeal to their party base. President Obama's calm and compassionate framing worked to convince Americans that while the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis was unprecedented, there was a plan in place and to remember that these migrants were children and families fleeing a crisis. President Trump's framing of defending America and painting migrants in a negative light worked to convince Americans that family separation was the only way to deter migrants from illegally entering the United States and that Americans and immigrants are two separate

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populations. Based on public opinion polls and reactions to each crisis, a child migrant crisis is best met with compassion and a plan. When the issue on the ballot is children in need, most Americans choose to forgo their nationalism and vote to accept and help children in crisis. Presidential framing, while important to public opinion, is less important than our human reactions to the sound of children crying or the images of children with their arms outstretched, reaching for their parents.

There is no question that the executive powers hold immense power in their framing and ability to impact the American electorate. Supporters of each respective president often use presidential recommendations and listen to executive framing in order make their decisions and vote in accordance to their party. But in times of migrant crisis, when children are endangered, it is clear American voters follow their instinct to protect children more than they follow their president's intentional executive framing.

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