

# HSS4 – Transcript for Final Paper Presentation

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**Note:** This was a quick overview of points to mention and not a polished draft.

This is my presentation for the final paper, “Misleading perceptions on immigration during the Great Recession” I decided not to change my topic from the middle of the semester.

Let’s begin with a quote: In light of the attack from the Invisible Enemy, as well as the need to protect the jobs of our Great American citizens, I will be signing an executive order to temporarily suspend immigration into the United States

Guess who and when this quote was from? This was from ten days ago, by President Donald Trump, before passing an act that essentially brings immigration to a halt for the next two months. While much of my research and paper doesn’t focus too much on immigration legislature per se, this kind of attitude precisely fits what I was trying to discover.

So what was I hoping to find out? I believe I shared this earlier, but to reiterate: I am studying the economic effect of immigrants and attitudes towards them before, during and after the Great Recession because I want to find out how perception (notably, psychology) differed from actual economic effects in order to help my reader understand the actual vs. perceived economic effect of immigrants with respect to the Great Recession.

I want to start by bringing it back to the Great Depression. Back then, there was a large wave of nativism. There was a huge influx of immigration in the mid- 1800s on the West Coast, and one of the first major immigration bans was the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1880. There was also a large immigration of Mexican migrant workers in the early 1900s. There were many immigration laws passed in this time, the most strict being the Immigration Act of 1924, which passed quotas based on country of origin, and thus was clearly racially biased towards European immigrants. The Mexican Repatriation was the joint efforts of the U.S. and Mexican governments to move hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrant workers back to Mexico. Mexico wanted to do it to reintroduce skilled workers into their economy, and the U.S. purportedly had a very familiar argument: to save American jobs for natives. Then, there was some violence against Filipinos in California for “taking” their farmer jobs, such as in the Watsonville riots.

Turning to the Great Recession, it was also an unrestful time. Like the era before the Great Recession, the 1990s and early 2000s were a time of high immigration flux. Of course, things were more on edge after 9/11, and this combined with higher immigration caused a spike in deportations and funding to enforce these laws. During the Great Recession, there was a higher distrust of immigrant populations, especially Latinos, leading to stronger laws that were essentially racially discriminatory against Latinos, the most prominent being Alabama's House Bill 56, which enforced more frequent documentation checks and stronger restrictions against immigrants from receiving government aid or public education.

You can see in these charts here a little bit more. From the graph on the right, maybe it's not so clear because there is an underlying rising trend, but the number of noncriminal deportations peaked in 2008 and 2009, as the anti-immigrant hysteria peaked. Similarly, there was a very strong bias towards deporting Latino immigrants. You can't see it from the graph, but it was disproportionately targeting Latino immigrants over other immigrant populations based on the size of the immigrant groups, and often legal immigrants were deported, just like during the Mexican Repatriation.

To summarize the arguments behind these anti-immigrant laws briefly, during the Great Depression it could be rationalized from a eugenics standpoint (i.e., to preserve the homogeneity of the American demographic and culture), but clearly this faded out after WWII. But in general the cultural argument still persists. Secondly, and a common one for us to hear, is the threat immigrants pose to American jobs, since they are known to work for lower wages. Similarly, that immigrant families tend to be low-income and depend more on government handouts, thus costing the government more.

It's pretty clear that there's some racial discrimination. We can classify this under the term "threat rhetoric," which has historically been very effective. Both for the Mexican Repatriation and the acts during the Great Depression, this has caused little backlash when passing strict anti-immigrant laws. The basic idea is to associate immigrants with some threat, such as taking jobs. Then it becomes the task of protecting Americans rather than discriminating against "other people."

Similarly, some surveys taken throughout the Recession era have shown that more misconceptions come about with selfishness on a personal level. Unsurprisingly, people favor higher-skilled immigrants. However, high-skilled natives tended to favor high-skilled immigrants less and less during the Recession because they feared that they would lose their jobs. However, these surveys, which also took data on actual financial standings of the respondents, found that there was not a high correlation between negative attitudes of natives towards immigrants and actual threats (such as rate of immigration, and local and personal economic situation) but more on perceived threat to one's own financial situation. In other words, people tended to hate immigrants more if they felt threatened financially, even if it had nothing to do with immigrants. This is clearly a logic flaw.

This brings us full circle. What effect do immigrants actually have on the

economy? A study found that after roughly two generations, there isn't much difference between immigrant's and native's net effect on the economy. They still have to pay taxes, still receive Social Security the same way as regular citizens, and undocumented citizens neither contribute via taxes nor receive social security. All in all, it basically balances out, but the same study suggests that there is a small net positive benefit from immigrants in general due to some subtle factors.

Specifically, during the Great Recession, we have a few things going on: first, immigrants tended to increase diversification of the economy, which is a good thing. Secondly, they tended to get hit worst in the initial part of the Recession, with "less essential jobs" in a very similar experience to what we're seeing nowadays. Thus we can hardly say they "stole" American jobs, but perhaps provided some of a buffer to natives during the hardest part of the Recession. And lastly, they tended to help most with recovery, quickly gaining back reemployment in the years following the Recession, which refutes the idea that they are lazy and stay unemployed and dependent on government aid.

That's the whole story. Again, we have a history of the threat rhetoric, the conflation of personal stability with attitudes on immigration policy, and some studies on the actual effect of immigrants on the economy, which tend to show they benefit the economy in the time around a Recession.

I guess I'd finish on another quote, from UNICEF in a report written after the worst part of the Recession. As we are going into another recession, we have to be sure to consider the facts without bias.