

Following The Leader:  
Explicit Racial Appeals in Congress After Donald Trump

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**Introduction**

*"They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."* This now-infamous statement from Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign announcement marked a dramatic shift in American political rhetoric. Rather than an isolated comment, it represented a broader communication strategy that relied heavily on explicit, racialized language, particularly toward Latinx immigrants. Trump's rhetorical approach departed sharply from the coded, indirect racial appeals that had long defined mainstream American political discourse.

Throughout American history, race has been a potent political tool. From slavery through Jim Crow, politicians mobilized racial fears and resentments to shape voter alignments and justify their agendas. The passage of landmark civil rights legislation in the 1960s—notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—changed the public acceptability of overt racism in politics. These legal reforms, combined with broader cultural shifts, made explicitly racist language politically unacceptable. In response, politicians adopted more subtle, implicit forms of racial messaging.

Politicians employed coded language to evoke racial fears without direct references to race. Terms like "law and order," "illegal alien," and "inner-city crime" became proxies for racial concepts, allowing appeals to white voters' anxieties while maintaining post-Civil Rights era political norms. This approach was evident in presidential campaigns through Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy," Ronald Reagan's "states' rights" rhetoric, and George H. W. Bush's notorious Willie Horton ad in 1988.

For decades, this strategy let politicians maintain a delicate balance: they could signal racial attitudes to receptive audiences while preserving deniability with broader voters. Donald Trump's 2016 campaign broke decisively from this norm. Instead of subtle signals or coded language, Trump's rhetoric was brazen, inflammatory, and unapologetically explicit. His approach succeeded partly by tapping into long standing racial resentments that had intensified during Obama's presidency. Trump differed from his predecessors not in using racial appeals, but in their tone, directness, and centrality to his message. By embracing explicit racial language, Trump both energized his base and redefined the boundaries of acceptable discourse within the Republican Party. This transformation spread: Republican Congress members, who had previously favored coded language, increasingly adopted Trump's communication style, particularly when discussing immigration and the Latinx community.

The impact of Trump's rhetoric profoundly influenced Republican members of Congress. This essay argues that Trump's rise effectively normalized explicit racial appeals, particularly those targeting Latinx individuals, making such rhetoric more politically acceptable among Republican lawmakers. His racially charged language activated white identity and emboldened his followers, transforming how the Republican Party engaged in discussions on race and increased explicit racial appeals to white voters (Harmel 2024). This rhetorical shift outlasted Trump's first presidency, becoming a defining feature of Republican political discourse. To demonstrate this, I will analyze Republican congressional speeches before and after Trump's 2016 campaign, to illustrate how explicit racial rhetoric became common practice within the Republican Party.

## Literature Review

### *Explicit to Implicit Racial Appeals: The Rise of Trump*

Following the Civil Rights Movement, implicit racial appeals—those carefully crafted messages that subtly invoke racial stereotypes without explicitly mentioning race—were predominantly used in political messaging because they successfully avoided the significant backlash typically associated with overt racial language. In contrast, explicit racial appeals consistently faced strong voter resistance for being too blatant and socially unacceptable. However, a profound shift coincided with Trump's political ascendance. His remarkably open and increasingly aggressive use of racial appeals, particularly those specifically targeting racial and ethnic minority groups, was surprisingly embraced by a significant portion of the electorate. This unexpected public response suggests a fundamental and far-reaching change in public receptivity to racial rhetoric, marking a decisive break from previously established political discourse norms.

Trump's influence, we must carefully examine the key scholarly work that illuminates the dramatic shift in political communication norms and its broader implications for American politics. Tali Mendelberg's groundbreaking and highly influential work *The Race Card* (2001) establishes a crucial foundational framework for understanding the complex dynamics of racial rhetoric in American politics. Her historical and experimental surveys reveal in detail how subtle, coded language has historically influenced voters with remarkable effectiveness.

### *Appealing to White Identity*

Building substantially on this theoretical foundation, *The Changing Norms of Racial Political Rhetoric* (2018) by Nicholas Valentino and his distinguished colleagues significantly expands Mendelberg's implicit/explicit model by conducting an in-depth examination of how explicit racial rhetoric has gained unprecedented effectiveness, particularly as white identity has become increasingly politically salient in contemporary American politics. Through comprehensive analysis, Valentino convincingly demonstrates how explicit racial appeals grew increasingly potent as white identity, especially in response to perceived threats from minorities and immigration, became further prominent in political discourse.

This theoretical framework provides a compelling explanation for Trump's remarkable political success: his intentionally racially charged rhetoric resonated particularly strongly with supporters whose racial identities were strategically activated by his campaign messages. By systematically framing minority groups as substantial threats to both economic stability and traditional cultural values, Trump successfully tapped into deep-seated white voters' anxieties—particularly among working-class individuals who increasingly felt their established social position was being fundamentally threatened by demographic and economic changes.

Michèle Lamont's detailed examination in *Trump's Electoral Speeches and His Appeal to the American White Working Class* (2017) thoroughly analyzes how Trump's carefully crafted speeches systematically framed racial and ethnic minorities—with particular emphasis on immigrants—as significant economic threats to the white working class. By strategically combining racial and economic grievances into a compelling narrative, Trump successfully positioned himself as a passionate defender of white-working-class voters who increasingly felt

marginalized by accelerating global trends and demographic changes. This fusion of racial and economic anxiety became a defining and particularly effective feature of his political appeal, significantly elevating racialized economic concerns to unprecedented prominence in contemporary American political discourse.

Michael Espinoza's comprehensive analysis in *Donald Trump's Impact on the Republican Party* (2022) meticulously examines the broader and more profound implications of Trump's political rise. His detailed analysis reveals how Trump's enthusiastic embrace of right-wing populism, particularly centered on immigration and identity politics, effectively pushed the Republican Party significantly rightward on multiple issues. Trump's distinctive racial rhetoric, especially his consistent focus on white voters' interests and grievances, became increasingly central to overall party strategy. This fundamental shift has permanently altered the party's strategic direction, making explicit racial appeals an essential core feature of its contemporary electoral approach.

### ***Racial Dog Whistles and Fingleaves***

Jennifer M. Saul's groundbreaking work *Racial Fingleaves, the Shifting Boundaries of the Permissible, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (2017) offers particularly crucial insights into how Trump's distinctive rhetoric effectively blurred the traditionally clear line between acceptable political discourse and overt racism. Her innovative concept of the "racial fingleaf"—specifically referring to language deliberately crafted to be vague enough to deflect accusations of racism while still effectively conveying racial messages to intended audiences—provides a theoretical framework that explains how Trump could successfully appeal to racist sentiments without explicitly violating established societal taboos. Through his strategic use of deliberately

ambiguous language, Trump fundamentally reshaped political discourse, making explicit racial appeals increasingly acceptable within both the Republican Party and beyond traditional political boundaries.

### ***Changes in the Republican Party***

Brian F. Schaffner's innovative research in *The Acceptance and Expression of Prejudice During the Trump Era* (2020) illuminates the complex social implications of Trump's unprecedented rhetoric. Schaffner's "Trump effect" theory convincingly demonstrates how political leaders who openly express prejudiced views effectively embolden their supporters to do likewise in various social contexts. Through extensive analysis, Schaffner demonstrates how Trump's distinctive rhetoric systematically normalized overt racial and ethnic prejudice, particularly within the Republican Party, ultimately leading to a broader and more profound cultural shift in political discourse about race and ethnicity.

Similarly, Benjamin Newman's work *The Trump Effect: An Experimental Investigation of the Emboldening Effect of Racially Inflammatory Elite Communication* (2020) examines how explicitly racial and inflammatory speech by prominent politicians influences citizens' attitudes and behaviors in democratic societies. Focused on the 2016 Trump presidential campaign, it explores broader societal norms around racial equality, views publicly endorsed yet potentially conflicting with individuals' latent or deeply held racial biases. Newman argues that explicit racial rhetoric from elites, particularly when unchallenged by other political figures, has an "emboldening effect" on prejudiced individuals. In such environments, those harboring racial prejudice become more likely to express and act upon their views.



Through a survey experiment embedded in an online panel study, Newman demonstrates that in the absence of racialized rhetoric from political figures, prejudiced citizens tend to suppress their views, likely responding to social norms against racism. However, exposure to prejudiced speech by political elites—especially when accepted by other politicians—leads these citizens to more openly express racist attitudes and support discriminatory policies. This creates a feedback loop where political rhetoric both reflects and intensifies public racial prejudice.

Trump's rhetoric not only emboldened voters but also redefined party norms, normalizing explicit racial appeals among political elites. When Trump, as party leader, employed overt racial language without repercussion and even with political benefit, Republican members of Congress viewed such rhetoric as acceptable or advantageous. The emboldening effect proposed by Newman extends to politician's behaviors, as Republican lawmakers followed Trump's example and adopted more explicit racial appeals in their communications.

These scholars collectively reveal how Trump's strategic embrace of explicit racial appeals has fundamentally transformed both the Republican Party's political strategy and the broader American political landscape. Their comprehensive analyses of the complex interplay between race, identity, and economic concerns powerfully illuminate how Trump's distinctive rhetoric has both reflected and fundamentally reshaped the character of the Republican party.

Current literature provides a strong foundation for understanding the rise of explicit racial appeals in American politics, particularly under Donald Trump's influence, yet several important areas remain underexplored. While much scholarship focuses on Trump himself and voter attitudes, it often overlooks the effects on institutional actors like members of Congress. Despite researchers like Espinoza and Schaffner documenting shifts in Republican ideology and public expressions of prejudice, we lack analyses of how Republican lawmakers' rhetoric changed in

formal settings like congressional speeches. The intersection of racialized rhetoric and congressional incentives needs more examination. Though studies highlight Trump's appeal to the white working class and the racial aspects of economic grievance, we know little about how Republican lawmakers adjust their racial language in response to party leadership.

Most studies view Trump's rhetoric as disruptive but don't fully explore its lasting impact on Republican elites and political norms. Whether this explicit racial discourse has become embedded within the party, beyond Trump's personal style, remains unclear. I am to address this gap by analyzing speeches over three congressional periods to assess the extent of this rhetorical shift.

In this paper, I posit that Trump's political rhetoric fundamentally normalized explicit racial appeals, particularly toward Latinx communities, by redefining acceptable discourse within the Republican Party. His distinctive rhetoric, marked by blunt and often inflammatory language, transformed the political landscape, making direct racial appeals more permissible. This paper employs key theoretical frameworks to explain how Trump's rhetoric engaged with white identity, populism, and the normalization of racism.

## **Theory**

This thesis offers the theory of *Racial Rhetorical Leader Following*, which posits that presidents play a powerful role in shaping political norms and discourse about race, especially within their own party. As the most visible and influential political figure in the country, a president not only sets policy agendas but also establishes the boundaries of acceptable political discourse (Schaffner 2020). Members of Congress often take cues from the president, particularly when they are popular with the party base or seen as electorally successful (Cohen

2008). When presidents shift their rhetorical or policy positions, party members typically follow suit to maintain ideological alignment, political legitimacy, and constituent support (Newman 2020).

This dynamic became strikingly evident during and after Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump's approach to political communication marked a stark break from previous norms, especially regarding racial discourse. While earlier Republican figures typically used implicit or coded language when addressing racially charged issues, Trump employed explicit racial rhetoric, particularly when discussing immigration and Latinx communities. His language, marked by terms like "rapists" and "criminals" to describe Mexican immigrants, violated long-standing norms of presidential speech, yet resonated with large segments of the Republican base.

Trump's success in securing both the Republican nomination and the presidency signaled to many within the party that explicit racial appeals were not only politically viable but perhaps even strategically advantageous. Consequently, Republican members of Congress found strong incentives to echo his rhetoric. By adopting the president's language, they aligned themselves with the new party standard and connected with a base increasingly responsive to racialized, anti-immigrant messages (Newman 2020). Through this process, Trump redefined the rhetorical norms around immigration within the Republican Party, establishing a precedent that many congressional Republicans followed.

This theory of racial rhetorical leader following suggests that Trump's rhetoric did more than reflect existing attitudes—it fundamentally reshaped acceptable political speech. The transformation in presidential tone thus served as a signal and model for Republican lawmakers,

who adopted similar language in their Congressional speeches to align with their party's new dominant voice.

## **Hypothesis**

Based on the proposed theory of Racial Rhetorical Leader Following and the observed changes in political discourse during the Trump era, this study hypothesizes that Republican members of Congress increased their use of explicit racial language in Congressional speeches following Donald Trump's 2016 campaign.

This hypothesis proposes that Trump's rise directly influenced Republican political rhetoric regarding immigration. Specifically, it suggests that after the 2016 election, Republican Congress members used more overt racial language—especially regarding Latinx communities—as a way to signal their ideological alignment with President Trump. This thesis examines this hypothesis by analyzing a sample of Republican congressional speeches two years prior and two years post Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

## **Methods**

This study employs a detailed qualitative content analysis to investigate the evolution of racial rhetoric within Republican congressional discourse during the periods immediately preceding and following Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. The central research objective seeks to evaluate whether Republican congressional speeches addressing immigration demonstrated a quantifiable and significant increase in explicit racial appeals following the Trump 2016 campaign, particularly amongst rhetoric targeting Latinx migrants.

The analysis examined a random sample of 150 selected congressional speeches that were delivered by Republican representatives and senators spanning the period from two years prior to and extending two years following Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign. These congressional periods capture the political climate surrounding Trump's ascension to national political prominence, thereby enabling a meaningful comparative analysis.

The research draws upon primary source material from the Congressional Record, which serves as the archive of all official U.S. Congress floor speeches and formal statements. I analyzed speeches that were specifically selected from three consecutive congressional terms: the 113th, 114th, and 115th Congresses. To maintain relevance to the research questions, I incorporated only speeches containing the keyword "immigrant" in their content. Implementing a random sampling method, representative speeches from three congressional periods (2013–2014, 2015–2016, 2017–2018) were selected. This selection included only speeches delivered by Republican congressional members and focused on Latinx immigration specifically.

I developed a comprehensive codebook specifically designed to categorize the forms of racial appeals based on their rhetorical framing.<sup>1</sup> Through manual review, I coded each speech to analyze both the type and tone of racial language employed. I used the following categories: explicit racial appeals, implicit racial appeals, and neutral appeals. The category “explicit racial appeals” encompassed instances where speakers directly attributed societal problems to Latinx immigrants or explicitly characterized Latinx individuals as potential threats to society. An explicit racial appeal would specifically reference immigrants from particular countries of origin, such as Mexican or Central American migrants, while directly associating them with criminal behavior, perceived threats, or alleged cultural deterioration. The category “implicit racial

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<sup>1</sup> See *Appendix A*

appeals” included the more subtle attribution of various problems to immigrant populations in general, without explicitly identifying specific racial or ethnic groups in the discourse. These rhetorical constructions typically conveyed racial undertones while maintaining a veneer of neutrality through the use of general terminology, such as references to "illegals" or "border security" that avoided specific mention of national origins. The classification of a “neutral appeal” included general policy discussions regarding immigration that avoided both explicit and implicit racial framing or demonstrable bias in their presentation. Throughout the analysis, I also searched for phrases such as "crime/criminal," "safe/safety" "southern border," "illegal," and "security.”

## **Findings**

I analyzed 150 Latinx immigration-related speeches by Republican members of Congress across three legislative sessions (the 113th (2013–2014), 114th (2015–2016), and 115th (2017–2018) Congresses) to assess changes in racialized rhetoric before and after Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. I coded each speech as containing either explicit racial language, implicit racial language, or neutral rhetoric, focusing on how immigration and Latinx communities were framed. The findings reveal a progression toward more explicit racial appeals over time, supporting the theory of Racial Rhetorical Leader Following, which posits that Trump's rhetoric shaped and normalized new standards of political speech within the Republican Party.

### ***113th Congress***

In the 113th Congress, racial language around immigration was largely implicit, though signs of explicit racialization were emerging. Of the 50 speeches analyzed from this period, 24

contained implicitly coded racial language, 15 included explicit racial appeals, and 11 were neutral. Most speeches avoided naming national origins directly but used charged terms like *"illegal"* and *"security,"* often referring to the Southern border. These terms suggested Latinx identity, particularly Mexican and Central American, without explicit statement. While maintaining plausible deniability by avoiding racial or ethnic labels, speeches framed immigrants as rule-breakers and threats to American society through consistent references to border threats and lawlessness.

A subset of speeches crossed into derogatory remarks about immigrants. For example, Florida Senator Marco Rubio (2014) characterized immigrants from the Southern border as *"housekeepers"* and *"landscapers,"* while criticizing their morality and linking these immigrants to crime, stating "I am not in favor of a housekeeper or a landscaper coming across the border illegally. I am not in favor of that. But what keeps me up at night are the terrorists coming across the border, and a porous border at the north or south leads to that possibility. So the border is as much about our sovereignty and national security as it is about immigration". Though this speech did not directly reference national origin, it referenced the Southern Border only touching Mexico and employed racial stereotypes towards Latinx people, marking them as explicit in their approach. In a similar tone, Texas Congressman Louie Gohmert delivered a speech regarding Mexican immigration in 2014 where he spoke about the Mexican people derogatorily. Gohmert called Mexican morality into question, alleging "If we began treating Mexican nationals coming in illegally into the United States the way Mexico treats American citizens, they would be screaming, going crazy every day; but it is because we are a more fair nation than Mexico is." Notably, calls for bipartisan reform or compassionate immigration approaches came primarily from Democratic lawmakers, highlighting an early partisan divide in rhetorical framing.

### 113th Congressional Language Concerning Immigration (N=50 Speeches)

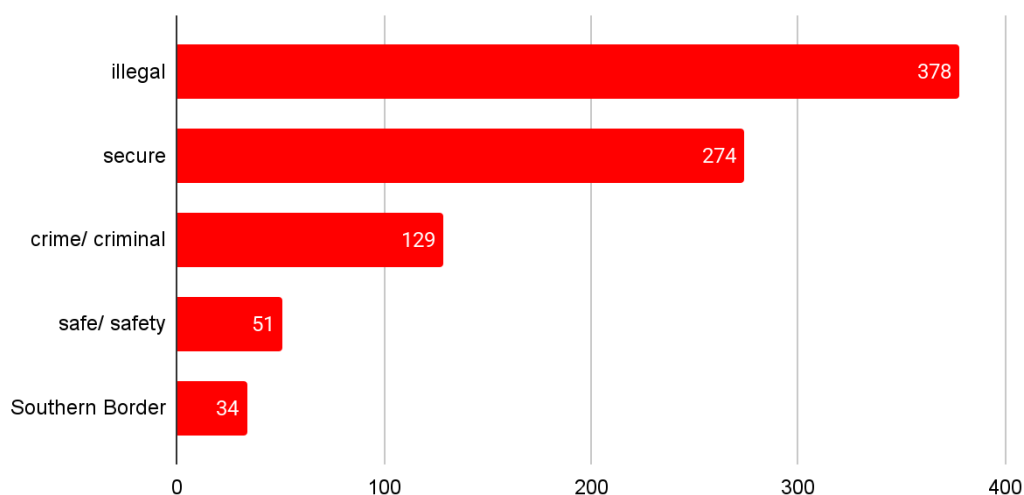


Figure 1

### *114th Congress*

The 114th Congress saw an intensification of anti-immigrant rhetoric, occurring around the time of Trump's growing political influence. Among the 50 speeches I analyzed, 27 contained implicit racial language, 15 featured explicit racial appeals, and 9 were neutral. While implicit framing remained dominant, political speeches increasingly used anecdotal narratives and crime statistics to portray immigrants as violent threats. One of the most frequently cited cases was that of Kate Steinle, a 32-year-old woman who was fatally shot in July 2015 while walking with her father along Pier 14 in San Francisco. The man arrested and later acquitted of murder, José Inés García Zárate, was an undocumented immigrant who had previous deportations and minor criminal offenses. Though the shooting was ruled accidental and legal proceedings found no malicious intent, Steinle's death quickly became a national flashpoint. Conservative media and Republican politicians, particularly Donald Trump, portrayed the incident as a symbol of the



dangers of "sanctuary cities" and supposed failures in U.S. immigration enforcement. Trump repeatedly referenced Steinle during his campaign to build support for strict immigration policies, framing her death as a result of weak border security and Democratic negligence. This narrative spread through Congress, where Republican lawmakers cited her case in speeches, hearings, and policy proposals, notably while advocating for Kate's Law, which aimed to increase penalties for immigrants who re-enter the country illegally after deportation.

Steinle's family openly opposed the use of her death for political purposes. Her parents stated that their daughter would not have wanted her memory used to vilify immigrants or justify broad anti-immigration policies. Yet her story became a central element in narratives that portrayed immigrants as violent threats. The frequent use of her case in congressional speeches shows how emotional, high-profile incidents were used to make racial fears more acceptable to mainstream audiences. These narratives enabled lawmakers to employ racial stereotypes under the pretext of public safety, marking a shift from subtle to more overt forms of racial messaging.

Several speeches referenced statistics claiming the Obama administration had released thousands of convicted undocumented immigrants who then committed additional crimes. In a 2016 speech Texas Congressman Lamar Smith alleged "the Obama administration released 20,000 illegal immigrants convicted of crimes into our communities. Together, they had committed 64,000 crimes, including kidnapping, homicide, drunken driving, and sexual assault. Instead of putting the safety of Americans first, the Obama administration often gives a free pass to violent criminals who are in the United States illegally." These narratives portrayed immigrants as inherently criminal and dangerous to American citizens. References to specific countries of origin, particularly Mexico and Central America, increased compared to the 113th Congress, leading more speeches to be classified as explicitly racial. Phrases like "*America*

*First*" and *"the rule of law"* suggested that undocumented immigrants threatened national integrity and sovereignty while masking overt racial language behind patriotic expressions.

### 114th Congressional Language Concerning Immigration (N=50 Speeches)

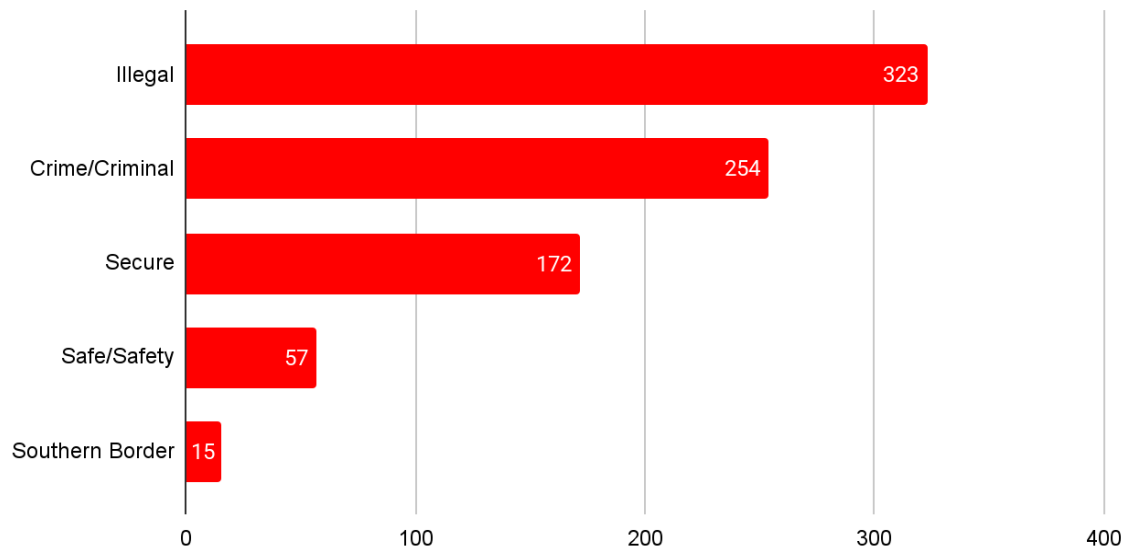


Figure 2

### 115th Congress

The 115th Congress, following Trump's election, marked a significant shift toward explicitly racialized language in Republican discourse. Of the 50 speeches I analyzed, 26 contained explicitly coded racial language, 17 included implicit language, and only 7 were neutral. Republican speakers frequently named Latinx immigrants, particularly from Mexico and Central America, and portrayed them in starkly negative terms. Beyond characterizations as economic competitors or rule-breakers, immigrants were described as violent criminals, drug traffickers, and human traffickers. Senator John Cornyn in a 2018 speech characterized undocumented immigration as a *cartel scheme* enabling *drug smuggling* and *sex slavery*,

explicitly connecting national origin to dangerous criminal conspiracies. Congressman Cornyn suggests that its a “part of their business model, that they can make money by shipping migrants up through Mexico into the United States or they can ship drugs from Mexico into the United States or traffic in children and women for sex slavery” .

This rhetoric departed sharply from earlier congressional discourse norms as the boundaries between race and national security dissolved. Another notable speech from this sample was delivered by Congressman Raul Labrador of Idaho. Congressman Labrador used the words “crime” and “criminal” in his speech 194 times. This speech was delivered to support the *Criminal Gang Alien Removal Act* and states “The Federal Government's most important responsibility is the safety and security of the American people. However, we are not fulfilling that responsibility when we allow gangs to illegally enter our country with the express purpose of victimizing innocent Americans... According to ICE, these gangs have grown to become a serious threat in American communities across the Nation--not only in cities, but increasingly in suburban and even rural areas. Entire neighborhoods and sometimes whole communities are held hostage by and subjected to their violence." Speeches emphasized crime and security, portraying Latinx immigration as not merely unlawful but threatening to American life. An interesting thing to note here is how *crime and criminal* have surpassed “illegal” in this sample.

### 115th Congressional Language Concerning Immigration (N=50 Speeches)

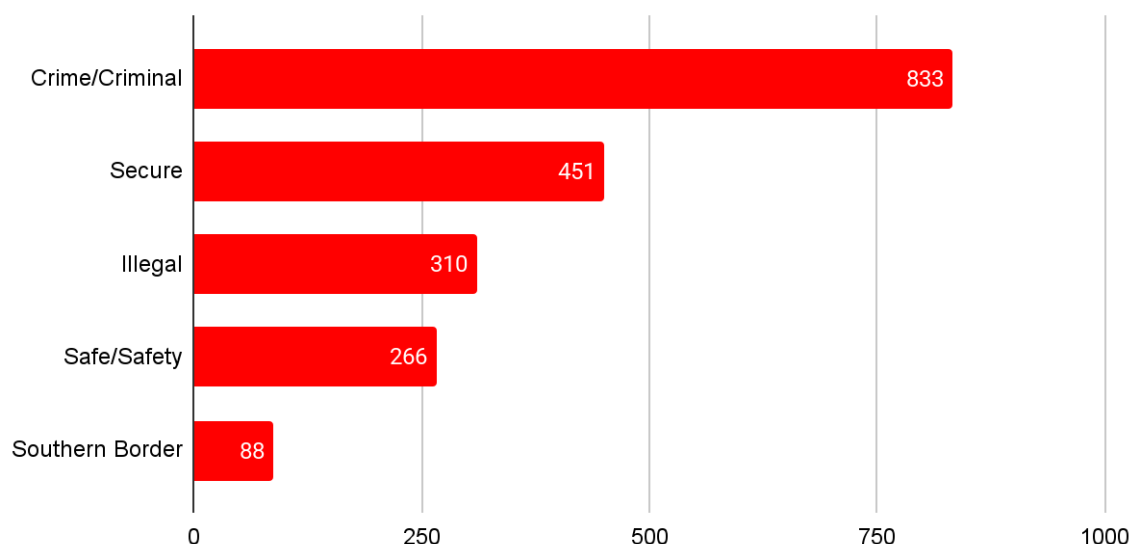


Figure 3

### Contrasting Rhetoric Regarding Christian Refugees and Latinx Immigrants

While this study has primarily focused on racialized language directed at Latinx immigrants, Republican congressional rhetoric employed a markedly different tone when addressing other immigrant groups, particularly Christian refugees from the Middle East. These contrasting rhetorical treatments reinforce that Republican racialized immigration discourse is not uniformly applied, but rather selectively deployed in ways that align with a broader narrative of white identity politics.

A striking example appears in a 2015 speech by California Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, who introduced the *Save the Christians from Genocide Act*. Rohrabacher expressed deep empathy for Christian and Yazidi refugees from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, and Libya, portraying them not as security threats, but as victims of a moral crisis deserving

protection and priority in U.S. immigration policy. He called these groups the "*true targets of genocide*" and criticized the Obama administration for allegedly failing to act. Rohrabacher contrasted their plight with that of "*hundreds of thousands of Muslims [who] are finding safety and economic handouts in Europe,*" suggesting that Muslim refugees were less deserving of refuge while Christian victims needed urgent support.

This speech marks a significant departure from how Latinx immigrants, particularly those from Mexico and Central America, were characterized in other Republican congressional speeches of the period. Instead of invoking crime, danger, and cultural degradation, Rohrabacher's language emphasized humanitarian urgency, religious persecution, and moral obligation. By portraying Christian Middle Eastern immigrants as victims of religious violence and advocating for expedited refugee processing and visa prioritization, he adopted an empathetic, almost heroic tone, presenting Christian refugees as culturally compatible with American values and inherently worthy of protection.

This rhetorical distinction extends beyond religion to perceived racial and civilizational alignment. Many Middle Eastern Christians, especially Syrians and Lebanese, are often racialized as white or culturally proximate to white identity, particularly when contrasted with the brown, indigenous, and mestizo identities associated with Latinx migrants. By positioning Christian refugees within a shared Judeo-Christian heritage under siege, Republican lawmakers like Rohrabacher could include these immigrants within the boundaries of "us", a moral in-group, while casting Latinx immigrants as the racialized "other."

These contrasting rhetorical strategies reveal the selective moral logic underlying Republican immigration rhetoric. While Latinx immigrants faced criminalization and

dehumanization through tropes of lawlessness and invasion, Christian immigrants received humanization through appeals to shared religious identity and victimhood. This selective empathy reflects the broader shift in racial discourse catalyzed by Trump, where whiteness and cultural proximity functioned as gateways to compassion, while nonwhite immigrants were portrayed as existential threats to American identity.

This contrasting case strengthens the thesis's core argument: Trump's normalization of explicit racial appeals built upon an existing ideological framework within the Republican Party that already differentiated immigrants along racial lines. By examining which immigrants received empathy and which were deemed dangerous outsiders, we see how racialized identity politics became embedded in Republican rhetoric.

## **Discussion**

These findings demonstrate a clear evolution from implicitly coded racial appeals in the 113th Congress to a dominance of explicitly racialized language by the 115th Congress. The rhetorical shift aligned closely with Trump's political ascendance and his direct, racially charged language. The steady increase in explicit references to Latinx identity, coupled with intensified portrayals of immigrants as violent, immoral, and criminal, suggests that Trump's rhetoric actively redefined Republican Party discourse around immigration. The evidence supports the theory that Trump, as the party's most visible leader, normalized overt racial rhetoric and provided Republican legislators with a model for discussing race and immigration more directly and more aggressively than before.

The findings provide compelling evidence for the theory of Racial Rhetorical Leader Following, which argues that presidents, as central figures in party identity and political

communication, shape acceptable political discourse, particularly within their own parties. The marked shift in Republican congressional rhetoric about immigration from the 113th to 115th Congresses shows how Trump's rise fundamentally altered political speech norms regarding race and immigration. Before Trump's emergence, Republican lawmakers relied primarily on implicit racial language, avoiding direct references to national origin or ethnic identity. However, as Trump began using explicit racial appeals, often targeting Mexican and Central American immigrants with inflammatory language, congressional Republicans followed suit.

This rhetorical transformation reflected not just evolving voter attitudes but a top-down recalibration of party messaging. Trump's 2016 electoral success demonstrated that explicit racial rhetoric, previously deemed politically dangerous and socially unacceptable, could energize the Republican base and win elections. The sharp increase in explicit racial language in the 115th Congress, from 15 speeches in the 113th Congress sample to 26 in the 115th Congress sample, suggests that Republican legislators saw Trump's messaging as a new template for political communication. By adopting his rhetorical style, they aligned themselves with a party leader who had redefined the boundaries of public discourse about race, national security, and cultural preservation.

Another significant trend is the increasing use of anecdotal crime narratives and sensationalized statistics in post-2016 speeches. These rhetorical devices portrayed Latinx immigrants as threats to American safety and culture, blurring distinctions between immigration policy and criminal justice. This shift paralleled Trump's campaign and presidential rhetoric, which characterized immigrants as "*rapists*" and "*criminals*" and used isolated incidents like the Kate Steinle case to justify broad anti-immigrant policies. Congressional Republicans' use of

these narratives, even when families requested their stories not be politicized, shows how emotional, racially charged appeals superseded measured policy discussions.

The shift toward explicit racial rhetoric carries significant implications for institutional norms and democratic culture. When government leaders normalize explicit racial appeals, they encourage other political figures to adopt similar language and signal to the public that overt racial hostility belongs in civic discourse. This creates a feedback loop: political speech shapes voter sentiment, which then validates and reinforces political speech, challenging democratic inclusivity, pluralism, and minority rights protection.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this analysis shows that Trump's influence extended beyond Republican policy priorities; it recalibrated the party's rhetorical boundaries around immigration. Through blunt, racially charged language, Trump created space for other Republican leaders to adopt similar messaging, particularly regarding Latinx communities. The evolution from subtle racial coding to overt racial speech marks a significant shift in American political discourse that continues to shape party identity and electoral strategy. Building on the theory of Racial Rhetorical Leader Following, this study shows how Trump's explicit racial appeals, particularly targeting Mexican and Central American immigrants, established new standards of political communication among Republican lawmakers.

Through qualitative analysis of 150 Republican speeches across three Congressional periods, this research reveals a clear shift in rhetorical strategy. While earlier speeches relied on implicit racial coding, using terms like "illegal" and "border security" without naming racial or ethnic groups, Trump's rise coincided with increased explicit racial appeals. By the 115th



Congress, references to specific Latinx nationalities and direct associations between immigrants and crime had become commonplace. These changes suggest that Trump's political style both reflected racial anxieties among voters and reshaped Republican congressional rhetoric. Trump's influence broke long-standing norms that had largely kept overt racism out of elite political discourse. His electoral success despite, or because of, norm violation provided Republican lawmakers a new model for addressing racial issues, emphasizing directness and emotional appeal over subtlety.

This transformation's broader implications are significant. As explicit racial rhetoric becomes normalized within a major party, it threatens democratic pluralism and deepens social divisions. Political leaders don't merely reflect public sentiment- they shape it. When elites model prejudice, they legitimize its public expression, creating cycles that intensify division and discrimination. Understanding this shift's mechanisms is crucial for comprehending and preserving American democracy's present and future.

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## Appendix A

### *Explicit Racial Appeals In Congress Post Trump Codebook*

#### I. Overview

This codebook is designed to assess the presence of explicit racial appeals in the rhetoric of Republican politicians before and after Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and rise to political prominence. The focus is on the evolution of prevalence in explicit racial appeals surrounding immigration, particularly on the Latinx community. It will identify both explicit and implicit forms of racism in political speeches and determine the influence of Trump's rhetoric on the normalization of these racial appeals within the Republican Party and Republican congressional speeches.

#### II. Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that the rhetoric of Republican members of Congress regarding Latinx immigrants has become more explicitly racist since Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump's language normalized overt racial appeals, which Republican lawmakers have been emboldened to increasingly adopt. Prior to Trump, Republican politicians preferred subtle, implicit racial appeals.

#### III. Data Source

- Congressional Records from 2014–2018 (113th to 115th Congress), including speeches from Republican members in Congress and the Senate.
- Search Term: “*immigrant*” to capture speeches about immigration, related topics.

#### IV. Key Terms and Definitions

1. *Crime/ criminal*: A term referencing criminal activity in discussions about immigration. Often used to stereotype immigrants, particularly Latinx individuals, as threats to American safety.
2. *Safety/security*: References concerns about national or community security, commonly linked to discussions about perceived threats from immigrants.
3. *Southern Border*: Refers to the U.S.-Mexico border, a central focus in immigration and border security debates. The term carries racial undertones particularly regarding Latinx immigration.
4. *Illegal*: A term used to describe individuals in the U.S. without legal authorization. Often used pejoratively to criminalize immigrants, especially those Latinx countries.
5. *Secure*: Refers to safety of American citizens and the U.S border from immigrants.
6. Implicit Appeal: Attribution of problems in general to immigrants
7. Explicit Appeal: Attribution of problems to specifically to Latinx migrants, naming Latinx migrants as constituting a specific threat
8. Neutral Appeal: general discussion of immigration

## **Political Science Senior Honors Thesis Cover Sheet**

**The following student has completed a senior honors thesis:**

Name: Selma Nessari

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Thesis title: Following The Leader: Explicit Racial Appeals in Congress  
After Donald Trump

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### **Faculty Advisor Section**

I have read and evaluated this thesis, and have accepted it as an approved thesis, fulfilling the thesis requirement for graduation with departmental honors in Political Science.

Faculty Advisor: Elizabeth Jordie Davies

Signature: 

Date: 6/11/2025