Why Donald Trump could win the immigration fight

And how immigration activists can turn the tide.

By Carly Goodman and **Marisa Gerstein Pineau**

Family reunification has long been the heart of U.S. immigration policy, and a source of strength and resilience in our communities. Now the system is under threat. The White House insists that several categories of family immigration be eliminated as part of any deal to protect "dreamers," which would reduce legal immigration severely — even as polling shows that near-record majorities say immigration is a good thing and would like to see the level of immigration increase or remain the same. This demand has dimmed the possibility of any sort of bipartisan immigration deal.

How is the president building support for a proposal that would harm U.S. citizens, keep families apart and radically remake the immigration system?

He is framing the debate.

For months, Trump has been peppering speeches and tweets with complaints about "chain migration," a term that erases the humanity of people who migrate and disguises its true intent: to make it more difficult or impossible for family members of U.S. citizens to join them in the United States. This effort is particularly troubling because it is rooted in a desire to dramatically limit the immigration of black and brown people. One analysis shows that the White House's proposal, if implemented, could keep whites in the majority for several more years — a goal in line with Trump's other policies.

How an issue is framed can dramatically swing public opinion, especially on an issue like immigration, where the public has lots of feelings and assumptions — but little knowledge — about how the system works.

The public possesses diverse and often-contradictory ideas about immigration. That's why people can simultaneously celebrate the mythology of a "nation of immigrants" and speak proudly about their ancestors' long-ago arrival at Ellis Island while castigating newcomers as unwanted or "illegal" immigrants.

Framing cues which of these images of immigrants a debate stirs for the public.

For more than a century — dating to the 1880s and the Chinese Exclusion Act — immigration restrictionists and nativists have complained that the United States is under threat of being "invaded by hordes" of undesirable immigrants "flooding" and overwhelming the country. In the 1920s, the purported threat of inundation by an influx of "swarming, prolific aliens" helped build support for 1924's Johnson-Reed Act, an immigration restriction law that in its time sought to make America white again.

ADVERTISING

The Immigration Act of 1965, which replaced the overtly racist and unjust national quota system created by this legislation with one based on the idea of reunifying families, passed because reformers framed their effort as a part of a commitment to equality — powerful in the civil rights era.

Shifting to a system more heavily based on family unification attracted broad support. Liberal reformers favored it, highlighting the suffering of families kept apart under the previous system. Conservatives who sought to preserve the racial status quo supported family unification because they thought it would continue to bring white European immigrants to the country. For multiple audiences, this framing put a human face on the issue and tapped into assumptions about the importance of families to American life.

Yet rather than replicating the existing demographics of the country, as some 1965 reformers hoped, this system helped transform the country's ethnic makeup. While in 1965, 84 percent of the country was white, by 2015, that number had dropped to 62 percent. The legislation made the United States more diverse by creating opportunities for people from Asian and Latin American countries to immigrate legally, naturalize as citizens and petition for their family members to join them. This process of social networks enabling migration is what social scientists and historians have long described as "chain migration."

As historians Arissa Oh and Ellen Wu recently detailed, this term conveyed zero nativist vitriol until the Trump era.

But Trump hijacked the term, deploying it to frame the immigration debate by summoning visions of floods of foreigners overwhelming the United States' ability to integrate them. When he argues — baselessly — that chain migration means that "a single immigrant can bring in virtually unlimited numbers of distant relatives," this invokes long-simmering cultural ideas about immigrants as a threat — the ones that dominated in the earlier 20th century. Now that immigration is largely nonwhite, the frame also taps into white racial resentment and anxiety about the preservation of white racial hegemony in the United States.

Advocates for humane immigration reforms must pay attention to the growing prevalence of this frame, because the recent history of immigration policy debates vividly illustrates how once-neutral terms can be weaponized.

"Amnesty" — today a highly charged term, and a virtual expletive to many on the right — once had a fairly benign connotation.

During the 1980s, amnesty was seen as part of a bipartisan solution to unauthorized immigration — which had emerged as a consequence of the 1965 law capping Western Hemisphere immigration for the first time — one that the conservative Reagan administration embraced for longtime residents "who have put down roots."

Pairing a legalization program with harsh enforcement measures, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which created the opportunity for some 2.7 million people to receive lawful permanent resident status.

When that law did not permanently end unauthorized immigration, however, restrictionists began to argue that it was this amnesty provision itself that encouraged further migration. By 2000, Daniel Stein of the restrictionist group Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) was claiming that amnesty was "rewarding [unauthorized immigrants] by giving them what they broke the law for." This framing turned "amnesty" into a trigger for powerful negative assumptions about immigrants as a threat, both in terms of "flooding" the country, but also about immigrant criminality.

By the time policymakers again tried to undertake comprehensive immigration reform legislation in the 2000s and 2010s, the word amnesty was politically toxic. As Republican communications strategist Frank Luntz recognized, "if it sounds like amnesty, it will fail." Indeed, while the public overwhelmingly supports a path to citizenship for longtime residents of our communities, when these policies are described as amnesty, public opinion turns against them.

Capitalizing on this victory, restrictionists brand any proposal they dislike as amnesty.

Trump and his allies are aiming to do the same to family reunification — this time using chain migration as their bludgeon. FAIR, NumbersUSA and the Center for Immigration Studies, which have worked for years to limit immigration, have redoubled their efforts to reframe the issue of family visas pejoratively as chain migration. Right-wing media has amplified this message, with some 300 uses of the term in 2017 compared with zero in 2016. Mainstream media outlets may be inadvertently supporting their efforts by using chain migration descriptively without providing needed context.

Few nonexperts had even heard of chain migration before Trump started using the term, but it is strongly linked to notions of immigrants as an uncontrollable mob that threatens to overwhelm our borders.

To beat back these efforts, immigration advocates will need to reframe family migration for the public. Research conducted by the independent nonprofit Frameworks Institute (where one of the authors of this piece works) shows that different framing can enhance public understanding of how the immigration system works and build support for humane reforms. By leading with moral arguments about shared humanity, advocates can tap into the public's positive assumptions about immigrants and activate people's sense of moral obligation to all members of our communities.

Most people believe that the system should keep families together, not tear them apart, and if immigration advocates hammer home the argument that restrictionist proposals will tear families apart, they can win the legislative battle.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/02/16/why-donald-trump-is-winning-the-immigration-fight/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.79097b9536db