Is It Really Populism? Framing the Immigration Debate in the US Republican Party’s Primaries 2011/2012
Table of Contents

1 Introduction.................................................................................................................................................1

2 Populism and Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric.................................................................................................2

3 Methodology..............................................................................................................................................5

4 The 2011/2012 GOP Debates..................................................................................................................7
   4.1 Law and Order Frames.......................................................................................................................7
   4.2 Heartland Frames..............................................................................................................................12

5 Conclusion.................................................................................................................................................15

6 References..................................................................................................................................................18
1 Introduction

On 22 November 2011, presidential hopeful Mitt Romney said during one of the televised debates for the Republican Party’s (GOP) presidential candidates: “This is a party that loves legal immigration.” The very next words were: “But we have to stop illegal immigration.” These two sentences nicely capture the main substantive content of the GOP debates throughout 2011 and 2012 on the topic of immigration: pitting the legal one, which is to be encouraged, against the illegal one, which needs to be eliminated through stricter laws and border enforcement. This statement by Romney, together with the general salience of immigration in US-American politics as illustrated, for instance, by state immigration enforcement laws¹, suggests the presence of immigration rhetoric commonly characterized as ‘populist.’

This paper seeks to address this expectation by testing Gary Freeman’s assertion of an ‘anti-populist norm’ in settler societies, such as the US, which prevents politicians from taking extreme stances on immigration matters during elections (1995). Freeman’s argument seems counterintuitive as the currently heated political climate surrounding immigration appears to be an easy case to find populist rhetoric. Drawing on Paul Taggart’s notion of the ‘heartland’ as an integral part of populism (2000), this paper tracks populist rhetoric as employed by the four GOP candidates Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney, and Ron Paul throughout six GOP primary debates in 2011 and 2012. By analyzing the debates’ content through frame analysis, the paper shows that popular law and order frames dominate the debates rather than populist heartland frames that set the US ‘heartland’ against illegal immigrants as a social group worthy of exclusion. While this seemingly provides evidence for Freeman’s claim of an anti-populist norm, populism theory and the debates’ content rather suggest a weak theorization on Freeman’s part and cast doubts on the applicability of Freeman’s label to US election campaigns.

This paper proceeds in three steps. The first topical section will provide a survey of literature that comes from two directions: the concept of populism more generally and anti-immigrant rhetoric more specifically. The section identifies a way to link populism and anti-immigrant rhetoric through Taggart’s identification of the ‘heartland’ as one of six common themes of populisms. The second section outlines the paper’s methodology by delineating data

¹ The National Conference of State Legislatures tracks state laws across the United States. Since Arizona passed its immigration law in 2010, five additional states enacted similar omnibus laws in 2011 (Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah). Five other states—Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, Rhode Island, and West Virginia—introduced similar bill (2012).
sources and approaches. The fourth and main section presents the findings along two major frames: law and order frames that play on popular public sentiments and heartland frames that seek to contrast the heartland against illegal immigrants. This second frame represents the rather populist nature of the debates.

2 Populism and Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric

For a long time, research on populism in the US had been confined to the Populist Party and the Know-Nothings of previous centuries (Turner 1980, Clemens 1997, Hicks 2009). The last years, however, have seen a resurgence of scholarly interest in the topic of populism as people drew to the streets demanding citizens’ action against elite politicians and a return to America’s alleged founding ideal of limited government in what became known as the Tea Party movement (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010, Zernike 2010). Along with the capitalist-critical Occupy movement of 2011 (Trudell 2012, Kazin 2012), these recent movements have given new salience to populism research in the US context. Research particularly interested in anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US has been concerned with perceived threats to national identity and nativism more generally (Kawanabe 1996, Perea 1997, Chavez 2008).

The foil that this paper uses is Gary Freeman’s discussion of different immigration politics regimes among liberal democracies (1995). He finds more welcoming attitudes and less restrictive immigration policy regimes among the settler societies to which the United States undoubtedly belongs. Freeman asserts that since parties frame issues during elections, the politicians’ stances tend to be more moderate, and immigration issues tend to figure less prominently on the agenda. He identifies an ‘anti-populist norm’ in settler societies that “dictates that politicians should not seek to exploit racial, ethnic or immigration-related fears in order to win votes” (1995, 885). While this can certainly be expected during the general election in the US because both candidates have to sway moderate and independent voters rather than their most partisan supporters as is the case during primary season, this norm is at first glance at odds with the US primary elections system where candidates take clear stances and appeal to their most partisan supporters. Due to the continuing salience of immigration, it is unlikely that immigration will be off the agenda during the primary season when all conservative candidates try to portray themselves as ‘tough on immigration.’ This expectation goes directly against Freeman’s assertion that “[p]olitical parties in the settler societies rarely attack immigration as a means of appealing
for votes. Instead, there is a marked tendency to develop an interparty consensus (almost always expansionary, sometimes status quo) in order to take immigration out of politics” (1995, 888).

The widespread interest and application of the concept of populism and Freeman’s use thereof necessitates some prior remarks about the very concept itself. The work of Margaret Canovan has been key for the study of populism (1981, 2002, 2006) as has the work of Michael Kazin (1998) and Paul Taggert (2000) for the US-American context. In her major work *Populism* (1981), Canovan acknowledges a broad range of possible definitions of populism, prompting her to distinguish between two foci of the populism concept: agrarian and political populism. Each of them again has variants, thus defying overarching definitions and leading Canovan to talk of ‘populisms’ rather than ‘populism.’ Agrarian populisms are interested in the “rural character of the movements concerned” (8) and thus largely base their discussion on socioeconomic factors that distinguish a particular segment of society, such as farmers, and a particular moment in time that gives rise to rural radicalization, such as modernization. The latter, political populisms, are less tied to a specific societal segment and rather emphasize political characteristics, such as direct forms of democratic participation and the discrepancy between an elite and the ‘people.’

It is the focus on an alleged coherent body of core people that figures prominently in discussions of America populism. This is Kazin’s contention who in his major monograph *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* claims that the language of populism has been present throughout American history (1995, 1). The most important aspect is populism’s focus on the people which creates “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter” (1). Taking into consideration the United States’ self-styled narrative of a classless society, this antagonism between the elite and people seems less surprising, leading Kazin to describe populism as a tool: “Through populism, Americans have been able to protest social and economic inequalities without calling the entire system into question. . . . Populism is thus a grand form of rhetorical optimism; once mobilized, there is nothing ordinary Americans cannot accomplish” (2).

A third more general treatise on populism was provided by Taggert (2000). Echoing Canovan’s wariness to define populism, he identifies six key themes that run through populist movements and that together constitute an ideal type. Of these six, two prove insightful for the discussion of this paper. According to one, populism is a “powerful reaction to a sense of
extreme crisis” that occurs “when a larger process of transition gives rise to a sense of crisis, at least among one social group” (4). During these crises, the heartland is defended. Populists tend to identify themselves with “an idealized version of its chosen people, and to locate them in a similarly idealized landscape” (3). In order to do so the heartland needs to exclude societal elements perceived as different and alien, looking inward and backward. It is this very theme then that encapsulates the dichotomy of us v them, a rhetoric of exclusion that “works on a distinction between the things which are wholesome and those which are not” (3). Echoing Kazin’s assertion of populism’s ubiquity in American culture, Taggart states that “American populism is seen as more American than populist is testimony to the powers of absorption in populism” (45).

In a similar vein argue Michael J. Shapiro (1997) and Juan Perea (1997) holding that current anti-immigrant rhetoric and nativism form part of the US tradition. Immigrants are seen as threatening to the narrative of the US as a nation. While Shapiro’s article draws attention to the narrative of the United States and its relation to anti-immigrant sentiment, Perea’s edited volume touches on various aspects related to the contemporary nativist upsurge. Albeit neither Shapiro nor Parea use the term ‘populism’ in their research about ‘strangers in the land’ and their continuous subjection to “a variety of anxiety-driven forms of hostile scrutiny and policy initiative” (Shapiro 1997, 1), both accounts share the concern about an attack on the heartland iterated by Taggart. The images of the threatening immigrants have throughout US-American history been “recycled in the narratives that constitute the ‘American’ nation. . . . Immigrants both disrupt national stories and, some would claim, warrant attention from an authority (the state) that many want to appropriate for purposes of individual and collective identity affirmation” (Shapiro 1997, 2).

The notion of the heartland appears as a segue between populism and its focus on the people of the heartland, on the one hand, and anti-immigrant sentiment on the other. The heartland idea succeeds in incorporating the strategic aspect suggested by populism and populist rhetoric rather than a mere focus on the exclusion of others out of racist motivations. The heartland’s focus on the people implies a majority that is depicted as monolithic (Taggart 2000, 92), united by certain values which are in turn perceived to be threatened by special interests. Demonizing social groups provides the majority with an enemy to be used as a foil (94), thus making Taggert’s new populism a “very conscious attempt to fashion an identity for what is
otherwise an amorphous and heterogeneous mass, by singling out particular social groups.”

3 Methodology

To answer the question to what extent the immigration discourse of the GOP debates can be called populist, thus negating Freeman’s broad assertion of an anti-populist norm, or whether the discourse is merely capitalizing on popular anti-immigrant sentiment, this paper will use frame analysis. Frames can be understood as a sub-category of a specific discourse, as ‘interpretative frameworks’ that have content and influence human behavior. The immigration discourse in the United States more generally can thus be understood as an environment of various frames that give meaning to facts: portraying seemingly ‘objective’ facts in a specific light, emphasizing particular aspects while downplaying others that contradict or challenge the intended meaning and interpretation of these facts. Hank Johnston distinguishes between frame analysis and discourse analysis the following way: While the former focuses on collective action frames and awards less importance to the text itself (from which it draws the frames), the latter stresses cultural processes and their effects and pays closer attention to the text itself. In other words, frame analysis uses the text as a data source to decipher the frame while discourse analysis seems to be concerned with the text itself (Johnston 2002).

The data used to answer the research question is provided by six debates held by the Republican Party between 22 September 2011 and 22 February 2012. These six were selected among a total of 21 debates based on two criteria: 1. presence of the four candidates Santorum, Paul, Romney, and Gingrich, and 2. that immigration was a topic in the debate and commented on by all candidates. The transcripts of these debates were accessed via the Washington Post’s online service that allows viewers to sort the content of each debate based on candidates or on issues, such as immigration. To conduct the frame analysis recurring themes and arguments by the candidates were detected and how often they were made in order to make preliminary inferences about that frame’s resonance. If a frame was only proposed once and twice and failed to be picked up by other candidates, its resonance was coded as low.

Due to a restriction to the immigration discourse of the GOP debates, the operationalization of populism in this paper cannot claim to be comprehensive. As the previous

---

2 In a similar way did Menjiwar and Kil structure their study (2002) that looked at frames used by public officials in the campaign for California’s Proposition 187 which sought to exclude undocumented immigrant children from public schools.
section’s overview of the literature showed, the paper’s focus on the heartland and the ensuing exclusion of illegal immigrants as incompatible with the same, fails to take into account the anti-elitism most scholars see as a necessary component of populism. Thus, in order to fully answer to what extent the debates can be called populist, an expansion to non-immigration topics would be needed. Neither is this paper interested in the difference with regard to anti-immigrant rhetoric among the four candidates.

Using these debates as the data basis has both drawbacks and advantages. Firstly, it might be understood as a bias that only debates by the GOP were used and not the Democratic Party. While this paper’s findings are indeed limited to the Republican Party and hence cannot represent a full picture of the presence of populist frames on immigration in American politics, this is not meant to suggest that the Democratic Party does not use populist frames. The limit is rather based on the facts that 1. the Democratic Party did not hold presidential candidates’ debates during this election cycle and that 2. immigration was not a topic during the three televised debates between the 2008 presidential contenders Barack Obama and John McCain. A second potential bias inherent in the sample is the fact that the debates are held during the primary season. Seeking to appeal to only Republican voters necessarily creates a more conservative tilt to the discourse as most voters that vote during primary season tend to be more partisan than the entire population of voters during general elections. One can expect a shift toward more moderate positions of the GOP candidate that will become the official candidate in the summer.\(^3\)

In contrast, some advantages of this data source stand out and justify its use for a preliminary analysis of populist and popular frames. One advantage of using the debates is that they represent direct communication between the candidates and the voters, thus information that can be expected to be purposefully used by the candidates themselves without being potentially skewed by television, radio, or Internet providers. Secondly, a debate format allows for a certain time equality, i.e. equal number of utterances. All candidates are given the same amount of time and it can be expected that when a candidate raises an important topic, the other candidates are likely to bandwagon on the issue, thus allowing all candidates to voice their standpoints. A third

---
3 A third potential bias to note is that candidates in debates are not entirely free to pick their own subjects. For instance, sometimes the debate’s moderator provides a specific prompt. This was the case, for instance, during the debate in Washington, D.C. when the moderator asked for reactions to high-skilled immigration and individual states’ DREAM Act legislation. However, this potential bias can be be neglected because the candidates can still be expected to put forward their views regardless of the specific question.
advantage to test for the presence of an anti-populist norm is the very fact that GOP debates form the database. Candidates running on the Republican Party ticket can be expected to be more likely to voice tough positions on immigration, thus presenting a likely sample of populist frames.

4 The 2011/2012 GOP Debates

The analysis of the main themes and frames to be found in the six GOP debates reviewed here brought to light two major frames, so-called master frames.4 On the one hand, various frames emerged that can be grouped under the label of ‘law and order.’ These depict specific actions as ‘immoral’ because they have been declared illegal by the US political process. Simply by being outside of the law, illegal immigration then is branded as wrong whereas legal immigration is morally correct behavior. In a sense then these frames are statute based. On the other hand, frames emerged that qualify as populist frames because they draw on the notion of the heartland. Rather than being based on factual evidence, i.e. statutes, these frames aim at touching the audience and the public right at their US-American heart: By invoking more emotionally-based feelings of what it means to be law-abiding citizens, these frames clearly contrast the American heartland and its people against the un-American behavior of illegal immigrants. The following sections will address each of these master frames in more detail to show whether one discursively dominated over the other.

4.1 Law and Order Frames

In order to stop the wrong behavior, i.e. illegal immigration, law and order need to be promoted. Three ideas that failed to impact the debates beyond one or two statements are the discouragement of employing illegal immigrants via the E-Verify system, self-deportation, and the appraisal of stringent state laws. More resonant were frames advocating for stepped-up border enforcement and the removal of incentives, i.e. magnets, that pull illegal immigrants to the US. While these two frames figure prominently in the debates, the very essence of these law and order frames is represented by the most commonly invoked discussion of illegal v. legal immigration. While the former is wrong and should meet punishment, the latter is welcomed and should be encouraged.

One topic advanced by Mitt Romney is removing the incentive of work for illegal

---

4 A third broad frame was identified as ‘individual rights frame.’ This frame, however, was only promoted by Ron Paul and was never commented on by other candidates, which lead to it being disregarded within this paper.
immigrants, particularly through the program E-Verify, which allows employers to identify which potential employee has legal documentation: “We have to crackdown on employers that hire people that are here illegally.” Jumping on the bandwagon, Newt Gingrich in Orlando indirectly supported E-Verify albeit suggesting its outsourcing to private actors to avoid fraud. While often mentioned as a part of what is considered a comprehensive approach, the idea of employer sanctions failed to resonate widely or being discussed extensively. One reason might be the Republican Party’s skepticism of, if not outright hostility to, government regulation more generally and of the economy more specifically. This would explain why, especially in times of economic crisis, this frame does not carry weight. Another reason might be that other immigration-related issues are simply considered more salient and in need of urgent attention.

The second idea that failed to gain traction during the debates was Romney’s introduction of the idea of self-deportation, which was first mentioned during the Florida debate. Referring not to the usual deportation of illegal immigrants at the hand of US law enforcement officials, self-deportation means that “they go home by themselves because don’t find work.” By making their (illegal) lives in the US as hard as possible, the logic of self-deportation asserts that illegal immigrants will leave on their own, unable to make a living in the US. The reasons for this frame’s lack of resonance are more difficult to identify. A possible reason could be that this solution fails to present the candidate as an active enforcer rather than a passive bystander who simply waits for illegal immigrants to leave. Why exactly this idea proved ineffective needs to be closely studied.

The third theme that resonated little were anti-immigration laws passed on the state level. The Obama administration filed suit against the controversial Arizona law, claiming it preempted federal regulation of immigration. Widely in support of the law, Newt Gingrich in Charleston promised: “[O]n the very first day that I’m inaugurated, I will issue an executive order to the Justice Department to drop the lawsuits against South Carolina, Alabama, and Arizona. The federal government should enforce the law, not stop states from helping it enforce the law.” Equally supportive words were voiced by Santorum during the debate in Arizona in February 2012, when he praised the state for its law enforcement, and hailed Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Apaio who has become a national symbol for tough crack-downs on illegal immigrants.

Currently pending before the Supreme Court are four controversial provisions of Arizona’s omnibus law SB1070 that went into effect in 2010 and, among other things, allows law enforcement officers to ask drivers they stop for legal documentation of their immigration status.
immigration.\textsuperscript{6} While one would expect the Arizona law to occupy a prominent position during the debate held in this very state, this was not the case: Only Mitt Romney and Santorum mentioned the Arizona’s law and similar state laws during the debate.

One of the topics that carried a lot of weight during the debates is border enforcement as a way to stop illegal entry into the country. Paul mentioned it during the debate in Arizona in February 2012 arguing for a focus on the US borders rather than one in Pakistan, thus combining his critical stance of US engagement abroad with the domestic protection of the border as a better way to spend resources. Romney identifies border enforcement as one of the ‘easy’ tools to stop illegal immigration: During the debate in Charleston, South Carolina, he said, in contrast to other issues the nation is facing, such as Medicare and the rise of China, illegal immigration “is relatively straightforward . . . This one is not tough. You build a fence. You have enough border patrol agents to secure the fence.” Gingrich emphasized his belief in tougher border enforcement during two debates, and controlling the border should be first priority. In Charleston, Gingrich announced his plan for the border:

So first, you control the border. We have a bill that would have it controlled by January 1, 2014. And I’m prepared both to waive all federal regulations to get it built and controlled by 2014 and I’m prepared to move up to half the people who work for Homeland Security—about 20,000—they have 23,000 employees in Washington. I’d be prepared to move half of them to Texas, Arizona and New Mexico if that’s what it took to control the border.

Most GOP candidates capitalized on border enforcement, thus giving empirical evidence to what has been theorized as the ‘border crisis’ (Rodríguez 1997, Chang 1997). Understanding the US border as a social construction, Rodríguez argues that the notion of the border has become so laden with meaning and imagery precisely because it seems “incongruous” with the limitless flow of goods and money. While the social construction of the border is infused heavily by ideas of nationalism and limited national resources, which were also highlighted during the debates as the next sections reveal, it has become most clearly necessitated by national security concerns (1997, 227). The entry of illegal immigrants, or as Romney suggested “terrorists,” can only be prevented with a strong border.

One of the most prevalent substantive frames during the debates were incentives, i.e. pull

\textsuperscript{6} On his website, Arpaio is praised as “one tough lawman” (Maricopa County).
factors that entice people to cross the border into the US the limited national resources of which justify protection from ‘aliens’ via strong borders. The current en vogue term is ‘magnets,’ implying an almost automatic causal relation between programs in the US and people’s wishes to cross the border. Amnesty and citizenship, the welfare state, free education, and the economy were all depicted as magnets by the four candidates. Removing these magnets then becomes a vital strategy to stop the flow of illegal immigration. Paul, mentioning magnets during three debates, merges these incentives with notions of ‘big government’ by saying that they are “mandates from the federal government saying that you must educate, you must give them free education.” Using explicit us v them rhetoric that serves as an examples of how the law and order frames, on the one hand, and the heartland frames, on the other, cannot be completely disentangled, Paul said in Orlando: “What you need to do is attack their benefits”: “no free education, no free subsidies, no citizenship, no birth-right citizenship” (emphasis added).

Two favorites among the magnets were in-state tuition credit that some states instituted in the past years and the notion of amnesty which refers to a pathway to legal residency or citizenship for those already in the country. Romney presented the University of Texas as an example: “[I]f you’re an illegal alien, you get an in-state tuition discount. You know how much that is? That’s $22,000 a year. Four years of college, almost $100,000 discount if you are an illegal alien go to the University of Texas. If you are a United States citizen from any one of the other 49 states, you have to pay $100,000 more. That doesn’t make sense to me.” With regard to amnesty and implying that no mechanisms of ‘punishment’ are already in place such as deportations, Romney added in the DC debate that “if people who come here illegally are going to get to stay illegally for the rest of their life, that’s going to only encourage more people to come here illegally.” To buttress legal immigration, illegal immigration needs to be stopped which “means turning off the magnets of amnesty, in-state tuition for illegal aliens, employers that knowingly hire people that have come here illegally.”

By far the most references during the six debates under analysis was the ‘legal v illegal immigration’ frame. While legal immigration is welcomed, even loved by the Republican party as claimed by Romney, illegal immigration is to be punished and eradicated. In a zero-sum game, the candidates are convinced that only stopping illegal immigration paves the way for legal immigration to strive. An example of this conviction is the following statement by Romney in DC: “But in order to bring people in legally we’ve got to stop illegal immigration. That means
turning off the magnets of amnesty, in-state tuition for illegal aliens, employers that knowingly hire people that have come here illegally.”

Based on the notion of law and order, Romney asserts in Las Vegas that “the reason we’re so animated about stopping illegal immigration is there are 4.5 million people who want to come here who are in line legally, we want that to happen in an orderly and legal process.” He reiterated the ‘standing patiently in line’ trope in the Charleston debate saying that “the people who have come here illegally should not be given a preferential pathway relative to others but should be able to get in the same line at the back of the line.” On the one hand, the image of the waiting line implies an orderly process subject to legal regulation by the state. On the other hand, it evokes images of the masses of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island in what is regarded as the legal immigration history associated with the US past—a US past that featured immigrants from Europe mostly.

Gingrich echoes the theme of facilitating legal immigration while punishing illegal immigration. While the former should entail a modernization of the current visa system, including visas for immigrants with graduate degrees, the latter involves deportation: “I would make it much easier to deport people. So if you are a non-citizen who belonged, say, to MS-13, an El Salvadorian gang, we should be able to get rid of you in two weeks, not two years.” Here, Gingrich ties illegal immigrants explicitly to other criminal activity which is also done by Santorum in Charleston: “[I]f they’ve worked for 25 years, they’ve been breaking the law for 25 years. If they’ve been working, they have probably stolen someone’s Social Security number and they’ve committed Social Security fraud. They -- this is not just a single occurrence. It’s an ongoing issue.” Romney makes the same mental leap asserting that illegal immigration brings in people “who in some cases can be terrorists, in other cases they become burdens on our society.” Although reprehensible on the normative ground that not all illegal immigrants are criminals, this combination serves to drive home the fact that ‘they’ entered the country illegally and hence ‘we’ cannot be sure of what other criminal activity they possess. Moreover, the references imply a more general drain on the US state as these criminal acts either harm US citizens directly or cost law enforcement resources. The criminal potential of illegal immigrants was pronounced again by Santorum in the Florida debate: “[I]f they work here they are committing illegal acts, often they broke the law several times, so laws should be enforced and they shouldn’t be rewarded.”

A second noteworthy connection is the welcoming not only of legal immigration but
specifically of high-skilled labor. In turn, this potentially leads to the counterpoint where illegal immigration is branded as low-skilled, albeit ignoring visa over-stayers who remain in the US illegally after having entered legally. During the DC debate, Romney mentions those high-skilled immigrants: “But to make sure we’re able to bring in the best and brightest—and, by the way, I agree with the speaker in terms of—I’d staple a green card to the diploma of anybody who’s got a degree of math, science, a Masters degree, Ph.D. We want those brains in our country.” Rather than being a drain on the nation, these immigrants “allow us to compete globally,” thus claiming the same positive impetus to the US that previous generations of (legal) immigrants have provided.

4.2 Heartland Frames

Heartland frames operate on a more subtle level than law and order frames. They are more symbolic and linked to emotions. They appeal to the emotions of the audience rather than rules. The notion of the drain of illegal immigration that the first frames seek to incorporate on a neutral level, for instance, is here touched upon as a national treasure, a treasure of which the nation and its legal inhabitants are drained. Similarly to the previous sections, some heartland frames resonated little, such as English as the national language and integration, while others, particularly illegal immigration as un-American, were echoed widely.

One topic that failed to gain traction was integration, a topic that only Gingrich embraced during the debates. Twice did he suggest openness to the idea that the time matters that immigrants, regardless of their legal status, have spent in the US:

If you’re here—if you’ve come here recently, you have no ties to this country, you ought to go home. Period. If you’ve been here 25 years and you got three kids and two grandkids, you’ve been paying taxes and obeying the law, you belong to a local church, I don’t think we’re going to separate you from your family, uproot you forcefully and kick you out.

While this statement reveals the law and order frame mentioned above, expressed here by paying taxes and obeying the laws of the land, it reveals a deeper emotional concern that ties integration to religion and appeals to the moral foundations of US-American society. ‘We’ would

---

Footnote: It is also important to note here that the topic was broached purposefully by the moderator to draw attention to high-skilled labor which is usually left untouched by the public discourse.
not deport ‘you’ because ‘we’ have decency and accept people who try to integrate. Deportation, in this scenario, becomes the destruction of family, which is something neither the Republican Party nor the American people can accept: “I do not believe that the people of the United States are going to take people who have been here a quarter century, who have children and grandchildren, who are members of the community, who may have done something 25 years ago, separate them from their families, and expel them.”

While the other candidates did not pick up on it, Gingrich’s suggestion was branded by Santorum as equivalent to an amnesty, which is, as the sections above illustrated, widely regarded as an incentive for illegal immigration. Anticipating the response, Gingrich mentioned that he is “prepared to take the heat for saying, let’s be humane in enforcing the law without giving them citizenship but by finding a way to create legality so that they are not separated from their families.” The response came promptly in Charleston when Santorum fired back with a law and order concern of continuous criminal activity: “And the idea that someone, whether it’s either of these two gentlemen, the idea that someone who came here and lived here 25 years has only broken one law—if they’ve worked for 25 years, they’ve been breaking the law for 25 years.” The fact that Gingrich was the only one pushing the idea of being ‘humane’ with regard to the enforcement of immigration and deportation laws and that the only answer being a strong defense of the law and order frame of unlawful action provides evidence for how ineffective and unpopular the idea was.

Another frame that did not resonate over time as it was only used by Gingrich was English as the national language. Nor did it receive a lot of attention, partly because he aptly tied it to law and order by saying “I strongly favor 100 percent control of the border, and I strongly favor English as the official language of government.” In Charleston, Gingrich reiterated this stance claiming that it “creates a continuity.” While used twice by Gingrich, once in September 2011 and again in January 2012, no other candidate evoked this idea. Against the expectation then that a concern over the heartland would be expressed via the shared common language did not become evident throughout the debates. While this frame might be called populist then, it certainly proved to be unpopular within the context of official debate discourse.

A striking aspect that ties in with the integration theme and the US-American sense of family values and community occurred during the debate in Las Vegas when Santorum and Gingrich both uttered the only positive references to the US Latino community—given the
growth of this voter block this appears not striking but rather the peculiar absence of these voters is surprising. For Santorum, the Latino community is equally filled with religious and family values: “They understand the importance of faith and marriage. They understand that bond that builds that solid foundation, and that inculcation of faith and religious freedom.” Gingrich evokes the same image and put the US-born Latinos on an equal playing field with non-Latino Americans because they ‘want’ the same things: “[M]ost Latinos in the United States aren’t immigrants. Most Latinos in the United States now have been born in the United States. And the fact is they want virtually exactly what everyone else wants.” By emphasizing the contrast between the citizenry, of which Latinos are now an increasingly large share, and immigrants, Gingrich thus embraces natural-born Latinos as part of the US heartland, part of the in-group that can be differentiated from the out-group, immigrants. Implied in this comment is that they want other things while Latinos, by virtue of being born in the US, desire US-American things. What exactly this ‘want’ refers to is left open.

The mythical America frame refers to images that evoke feeling of inherent American values, the American dream, etc. This is probably the most explicit frame that seeks to create an American heartland. In Charleston, Gingrich’s statement relating to deportations can be seen as exemplary of this frame: “And I think trying to deport grandmothers and grandfathers will never pass the Congress and would never be accepted by the American people.” In Charleston, Santorum, again drawing on the personal (legal) immigration story of his own forebears, says: “And other folks who sacrificed, who came here to America, did it the right way according to the law. Because America was worth it.” Referring back to the Pilgrims, the first immigrants to the US, at least according to the dominant narrative, who fled religious persecution to start a new life in the US, Santorum explicitly mentions the idea of the US as a refuge and example nation: “I strongly believe in legal immigration and believe we are that shining city on the hill, that our future—if you look at all of the jobs that are being created in our economy today, a huge percentage of them come from the legal immigrants of this county—country who have innovated, who created great products, who created great companies and employed lots of people.” It is these immigrants and their belief in the greatness of the US that have made the country what it is today.

A commonly used frame is the idea that illegal immigration is un-American—a frame that was particularly pronounced by Santorum. Partly this dominance can be explained by his
own family story which he told during both the Charleston and the DC debate. The story goes:

Well, I come at it from—as being the son of an immigrant. And my grandfather came to this country and brought my dad when he was 7 years old. And that’s the story that I love and am familiar with, and believe in my heart of hearts that immigration is—people who want to come to this country and be Americans is really the continuing infusion of freedom and enthusiasm for our country. But when you come here illegally, the first act you take is to break our law, that’s a different story.

On the one hand, this story serves to portray Santorum as a likeable and approachable person simply by offering a personal story that many US-Americans can relate to this in a nation of immigrants. On the other hand, and more importantly in the context of this paper, the story draws a sharp distinction between legal immigration, here portrayed as those seeking a better life and being enthusiastic about the country, and illegal immigration that is implicitly based on ulterior motives—which ones are left unmentioned. He also linguistically untangles illegal immigration from immigration, implying it is merely a crime. Seemingly addressing illegal immigrants directly by using ‘you,’ Santorum contrasts this with the ‘our laws’ to mark the contrast between ‘us’ as those who came to this country legally, seemingly everyone who came before, and ‘them’ who are disrespectful of laws. In Florida, Santorum reiterated that point: “You come to this country and the first thing you do is to respect our laws. If you want to be an American, you respect the laws of America, and you do so continually while you’re here.”

But other candidates capitalize on the us v them dichotomy as well. During the debate in Arizona, Paul stressed the importance of “our borders,” the fact that “we reward them”, and that “they get benefits.” Romney in Charleston said: “this is a nation of laws.” Making a connection between high-skilled and legal immigration as well as the willingness to integrate into US-society, Gingrich sayed in DC: “You know, about five blocks down the street, you’ll see a statue of Einstein. Einstein came here as an immigrant. So let’s be clear how much the United States has drawn upon the world to be richer, better and more inclusive.”

5 Conclusion

Given the high salience of immigration in current US politics, this paper sought to put Freeman’s idea of an anti-populist norm to an empirical test. Populism in this study about
immigration discourse was conceptualized along Taggart’s notion of the heartland, i.e. the US and its citizens, at the expense of those outside of this group, those who immigrated illegally. In order to operationalize this the paper employed frame analysis to detect common themes and their meaning. Against the common perception, however, this analysis failed to provide strong evidence for populist heartland frames. Frames that would be clearly catering to an idealization of the heartland, such as English as the national language and the use of mythical imagery, were seldom used and failed to resonate with several candidates.

What might still speak for a strong presence of heartland frame is that they were often only implied. The strong presence of the illegal immigration is un-American frame features repeated references to the US as welcoming to legal immigration because it has made this country great. While this frame not only plays on the popular opposition to illegal immigration based on law, it also implies a fundamental difference in national character that distinguishes these new illegal immigrants from previous generations of US-Americans who have ‘patiently stood in line.’ This difference in character basically rules out their integration. Gingrich was left alone in his endorsement of decent enforcement if someone has lived in the country for 25 years and has established a life.

The law and order frames dominated the debates. Whereas some of these frames, particularly the E-Verify and the self-deportation theme, only found limited support over time, the legal v illegal immigration frame was most widely used. In most instances, this frame was used in the neutral, statute-based way that allows for its placement within the law and order frames rather than the more emotionally-based heartland frames. The country was depicted as welcoming to legal immigration, precisely because it followed an orderly process that allows for ‘standing patiently in line.’ In contrast, illegal immigration is not only morally wrong but it is against the laws of the country you enter. In return, illegal immigrants do not deserve benefits and magnets need to be eliminated to stop the influx. This dominance of legal v illegal immigration as a topic within both the neutral law and order frames and the more emotionally-charged heartland frames raises interesting questions for political science and politics on the ground: Under which conditions does which master frame dominate? Were populist frames purposefully avoided or were they purposefully tested? How should political candidates frame their opinions in order to appeal to voters and get their issue frame on the debate agenda?

In the end, the analysis above suggests that popular, law and order frames trumped
Franziska Böhme

populist frames at least according to the operationalization used in this paper. While the current immigration discourse in the US is often perceived and branded as populist by the mainstream media, this view is complicated upon closer inspection. Firstly, Freeman’s assertion of immigration being relegated to the margins of attention during election years as a result of some silent consensus among the parties does certainly not hold true in the US context. This is partly due to the extent to which Freeman assumes multi-party systems when claiming that the party exploiting anti-immigrant sentiments will be rebuked and branded as an outlier among the mainstream political parties. While this might certainly be true in European multi-party systems, the two-party system of the US does not provide this kind of cushion. Secondly, and most importantly, Freeman definition of his anti-populist norm as dictating “that politicians should not seek to exploit racial, ethnic or immigration-related fears in order to win votes” (1995, 885) needs to be described as undertheorized given the main tenants of populism as identified by Canovan, Kazin, Taggert et al.

The narrow scope of this paper suggests multiple ways of additional research on populist rhetoric in current US politics. In order to gain insight on the entire spectrum of immigration discourse, the number of debates under analysis should be extended and instead include all of the 21 debates in which immigration was considered. This research design would not only allow leverage on all propagated immigration themes, but would allow more data points on the frames found in this paper’s analysis. A second fruitful avenue for broader populism research would be to broaden the analysis to non-immigration topics. With media attention focused heavily on the economy and criticism of Washington, the idea of the ‘people’ being pitted against a removed government elite is likely to figure more prominently. Hence, the restriction of this paper on exclusion necessarily presents only one slide of the populism concept. A third possible track could be a longitudinal study where one can track populist rhetoric, restricted to immigration or not, over time to see whether it has become more populist over the last decade(s) as the US political system has become increasingly polarized.
6 References


National Conference of State Legislatures.


