

IMMIGRATION AND POPULIST POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Elizabeth Chacko

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States of American was seen by his followers as a triumph of common people whom previous administrations had alienated by consistently pandering to powerful political and financial elites and their supporters. Positioning himself as a champion of ordinary Americans and someone who dissented from the Republican orthodoxy, Trump promised among other things in his campaign speeches to “Make America Great Again” and to put “America First”. These slogans resonated with voters in the so-called Rust Belt of the mid-west, and in economically depressed areas that had been hemorrhaging manufacturing jobs for decades. Trump’s populist platform also appealed to religiously conservative voters who believed that American values, which they strongly related with evangelical Christianity, were under threat.

The unhappy voters also thought that previous governments had turned a blind eye to the steady erosion of American jobs and colluded with global capitalism at the expense of the citizens of the country. In speeches he gave at rallies, Trump not only promised to displace corrupt elites with vested interests, but also called upon true patriots for a return to American ideals. Among the groups that he painted broadly as antithetical to his vision of the America of the future was immigrants. Trump has famously said that “Immigration is completely out of control” and that Americans need “to take our country back”.

The United States of America considers itself a nation of immigrants and this sentiment may be seen on US currency which has “E pluribus unum”, meaning, “Out of many, one” printed on it. But the coalescing of many into one nation has been historically fraught with difficulties. In the late 1880s, in a country that was almost entirely Protestant, those considered “New Immigrants” were Catholics and Jews from Italy and Russia respectively. These groups were viewed by nativists at that time with mistrust and as lacking the social, cultural, educational and occupational skills to successfully assimilate into American society. The National Origins formula of 1921 made the preference for immigrants from countries of Western, Northern and Central Europe explicit by restricting immigration and assigning quotas to different European countries, while denying potential immigrants from Asia access to the United States as a country for settlement. It was not until 1965 and the passage of the Hart-Celler Act that national quotas were removed, ushering a new era with immigrants coming in large numbers from Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Although unlike Canada, the USA has not officially endorsed multiculturalism, it has become an increasingly diverse country in terms of race/ethnicity, religion, and cultures since the mid 1960s. The U.S. Census predicts that by 2044 no single ethnic/racial group will demographically dominate (account for more than 50% of the population) in the United States. As early as 2020, more than half the country’s children are likely to belong to a minority race or ethnic group. The group that has grown the most are the Hispanics, persons hailing largely from Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. The U.S. Hispanic population grew by 43 percent between 2000 and 2010 and topped 50 million in 2010. This growth accounted for over half of the 27 million increases in the population of the United States between census years 2000 and 2010. Hispanics could make up 50 percent of the country’s population by 2050.

Among the immigrant groups that Trump demonized in his election campaign speeches were Mexicans and Muslims. Of Mexicans, Trump as Republican nominee said, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. They are not sending you...They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists”. The charge that seems to resonate the most with American voters is that Mexicans comprise the largest proportion among the over 11 million undocumented persons living in the United States. Even though unauthorized Mexican immigrants in the USA declined by 1 million from 6.9 million to 5.9 million in 2012 according to the Pew Research Center, that this single nationality makes up more than half of the undocumented is significant. There is also a popular perception that the undocumented immigrants from Mexico are engaged in criminal activities, although the majority does not have any criminal records.

While deportations of illegal aliens (undocumented migrants) have taken place in previous administrations, the recent raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials in a number of cities known to have large and clustered Hispanic immigrant populations have been public and publicized. ICE has also embarked on random checks, especially in areas close to border towns and in select cities, asking for identification and proof of legal right to live in the United States. These activities have led to great fear in the Hispanic immigrant community, especially among the undocumented, as those who are law abiding are often also caught in the ICE raids along with those with known criminal records and deported as well.

Populism can also be seen as emerging from white identity politics and reactionary hostility towards foreigners who look different and do not appear to be embracing the American and Western ethos. The idea that the West and the United States are at war

with Islam, and therefore all Muslims rather than Islamists and Islamist terrorist groups came to the fore after 9/11 attacks. This notion was bolstered by the existence of a strong pro-Israel political lobby and the concomitant rise of alt-right/ Christian fundamentalist groups. As a result, all Muslims were denounced. Moreover, the media that tended to focus on violent acts perpetrated by Muslims both abroad and in the country underscored existing cultural biases. Islam was pitched as a belligerent religion that was in opposition to the Christian values that most whites subscribed to in the United States. The populist notion that Muslims are a violent people was underscored in Trump's speeches, ".....our country cannot be the victim of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in jihad and have no sense of reason or respect for human life". Despite Osama bin Laden being traced to his hiding place in Pakistan and being assassinated there by U.S. Navy SEALs during the Obama administration, the view held by some white Christian voters was that President Obama had been soft on Muslims and was perhaps a Muslim himself.

As in the case of Immigration and Customs Enforcement targeting undocumented Hispanics in focused raids in February of this year, efforts to keep Muslims out of the country have also been made by the Trump administration. In January, 2017 an executive order from President Trump banned entry to the United States of citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries for 90 days and suspended the entry of refugees for 120 days. Refugees from Syria were banned indefinitely. Even permanent residents in the United States who hailed from these countries were informed that they did not have the automatic right to re-enter the country should they leave. Although the legality of such an order was challenged and federal judges suspended it, the idea that Muslims are the primary perpetrators of terrorist activities in the country prevails.

Nonetheless, it cannot be overlooked that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States among its black population or that most American Muslims are well integrated into society. Muslim and Arab immigrants and their offspring who have helped raise the economic and intellectual profile of the United States may be offered as examples of how the country can benefit from immigration: Apple Computers founder Steve Jobs was the son of a Syrian migrant and in 2017, Maryam Mirzakhani, an immigrant from Iran, became the first woman to be awarded the prestigious Fields Medal, considered the Nobel Prize in mathematics.

The Americans who found comfort in Trump's campaign speeches and voted for him may have belonged to the disenfranchised and the forgotten within the white population, but populism in the United States seems to be slipping into ultra-nationalism based on intolerance and xenophobia. Propaganda and disinformation campaigns continue to be the hallmarks of the Trump administration while populism's critique of financial and political powers in society and unregulated capitalism remains unaddressed. Concerted attacks on minorities, continued erosion of civil rights and the replacement of politically entrenched elites with financially entrenched ones is likely to cause a populist backlash from people belonging to different groups who will band together for the common good. To continue to be a great country, the United States needs to be a place where discriminatory biases play no part in government policies, immigrants and refugees are welcomed in a legal and organized manner and where the government does not meddle in the private lives of its people.