

An Analysis of Trump's Securitization Strategy (2015–2016)

Uma Análise da Estratégia de Securitização de Trump (2015-2016)

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INTRODUCTION

Donald Trump's electoral campaign (2015–2016) marked a turning point in American politics, defined by repeated incitements to violence and deepening partisan polarization. This shift highlighted the growing fragility of democratic regimes, fueling what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify as a crisis of liberal democracy. The crisis reflected Trump's electoral proposal to construct a wall along the United States–Mexico border, which served as a tactic to distort the perceptions of a specific audience about the effects of global capitalism (Castells 2018).

Several scholars, including Andreas (2009), Brown (2010), and Vallet (2020), emphasize that the wall operates as a political symbol for an ideological group that opposes the diversification of national identity due to the presence of immigrants in the country. While their analyses focus primarily on the symbolic dimensions of wall-building, this article aims to extend the discussion by showing that the wall materializes the construction of immigration as an existential threat and helps to legitimize exceptional measures framed as necessary for national protection. This symbolic-material linkage also reveals how securitization narrows the range of possible responses, making extraordinary measures the only viable solution, even though alternative frameworks could address the issue more effectively (Saint-Pierre and Vitelli 2018). The article is guided by the following question: **How did Trump's tweets in defense of the border wall shape a securitization strategy?**

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Although statistical evidence shows that undocumented immigrants are not more dangerous than U.S.-born citizens, much of the American public continues to perceive them as a threat. This mismatch between data and public belief makes securitization theory the most appropriate framework for this study. It enables an analysis of how Trump, through repeated speech acts on Twitter, transformed immigration into an alleged security crisis and mobilized an audience already predisposed to fear and resentment. Rooted in the Copenhagen School and refined by the Paris School — particularly Balzacq’s emphasis on the active role of the audience, and the context factor — this framework allows us to understand how Trump’s tweets constructed immigrants as an existential danger and justified exceptional measures, such as the border wall, despite the absence of empirical evidence.

The securitization of walls: a perspective from the Paris School

Securitization is a useful framework for examining how certain issues become security concerns through discursive politics. This case applies the Paris School’s approach, following Balzacq’s (2005) conceptualization of securitization as a strategic practice that depends on the social context in which discourse adapts. This perspective emphasizes the role of the audience and the power dynamics that shape its reception. Thus, the securitizing actor seeks an opportune moment to start the securitization process and persuade the public to accept the proposed threat.

The Paris School, as noted by Balzacq (2011), engages in an analysis concerned with the empirical understanding of security dynamics and security politics. For the author, the symbolic power of security may be achieved at the intersection of the legitimacy of agents involved and the words employed. Therefore, language does not trigger a series of consequences through its utterance alone, but also through the intersection of practices, contexts, and power, which shape its impact.

The role of the audience in the securitization process is also considered active and interactive in relation to the securitizing actor (Côté 2016). For this reason, Balzacq (2011) suggests using the audience as an analytical level parallel to the securitizing actor, presuming that both securitizing actor(s) and audience(s) are mutually constitutive. The audience is part of the intersubjective process; it is not a pre-constituted, passive element. Vuori (2008) contributes to the identification of the audience, describing it as dependent on the specific socio-historical situation and the context in which the discourse is conveyed to the audience. From this perspective, the choice to analyze Donald Trump’s tweets advocating for the construction of the wall along the United States–Mexico border is justified by the

relevance of online debate as a means for political leaders to reach and influence a broad audience (Dubois and Gaffney 2014).

Paris School adds to the debate a different concept of the audience by retrieving from Foucauldian thought the concept of governmentality, which is key to understanding securitization as a “technique of government,” revealing the relationship between securitization and its exceptional character. Securitization, in turn, is a strategy of governing through (in)security (Balzacq et al. 2010). Also, reframe the audience as an active role in the securitization process, in which audiences interact dynamically with securitizing actors and co-constitute the process. Following Balzacq’s (2011) insights, the Paris School treats the audience as an analytical level in its own right, rather than as a passive and pre-constituted element. This approach also engages more directly with the unresolved challenge of determining how speech acts are accepted or rejected and of identifying who the audience actually is, instead of relying on generic assumptions.

A heuristic framework for understanding securitization processes is proposed by Balzacq (2005), establishing two levels of analysis: (1) agents (securitizer and audience), focusing on the dynamics of power, social identities, and capacities of those involved; and (2) acts or actions, which assess the type of intervention and the context, both essential for creating the enabling conditions for audience mobilization.

As “security” makes up a truth regime created by those who deal with security daily, there are no isolated securitizing actions — rather, there is a set of everyday practices that forms a continuum of (in)security (Huysmans 2006). Foucauldian thought has been extensively explored within the Paris School to examine how practices of power within intensified surveillance contexts, communication monitoring, and the establishment of norms and behavioral standards regulate social spaces as well as collective perceptions of an object (Foucault 1966).

Securitization thus receives a new perspective, as part of the construction of political normality, managed through the institutionalization and normalization of exceptional security measures, and acting as a disciplinary and biopolitical regulation of populations (Balzacq 2008). In the context of the information society, Han (2018) emphasizes that affective communication overrides rational communication and shapes debates within democratic political regimes. Tweets holding fake news or decontextualized fragments of information may prove more effective than well-founded arguments in electoral debates (Han 2022), as shown in Figure 4, U.S. society comes to view immigrants as dangerous largely through the ideas circulating and legitimized by Donald Trump’s campaign-driven fake news, as demonstrated in the analysis of his tweets. However, the statistical evidence presented in

Figures 5, 6, and 7 demonstrates that this alleged characteristic of undocumented immigrants is false and reflects an unfounded stigma.

Another contribution from the Paris School, shown by Bigo and Tsoukala (2008), involves linking the concept of risk society to the politics of unease. This framework helps analyze the widespread empirical practice of labeling various issues under the “security” agenda, which often functions as a slogan or tool for specific groups to justify and impose a political program framed as an object of fear or risk — as shown in Trump’s twitplomacy. Understanding security as the elimination of threats perpetuates a vicious cycle within the international system, as the pursuit of security simultaneously generates greater insecurity (Bigo 2008).

Thus, for the Paris School, securitization emerges from everyday practices that weave a broad scenario of uncertainty for international politics (Bigo 2011). It is therefore necessary to undertake an analytical process of the security–insecurity dichotomy, in which both should be analyzed as a dual (in)securitization process based on practices (Balzacq et al. 2010). The following analytical model shows what underlies Trump’s tweets advocating for the construction of the wall along the United States–Mexico border.

Table 1 — Analytical Model of the Securitization Process

Referent Object	Securitizing Agent	Audience	Context
What will be constructed as a threat	The one responsible for convincing others that there is a threat	A group of individuals with the influence to allow the actions of the securitizing agent	Political, economic, and cultural contexts in which the securitization process takes place

The inclusion of the sociocultural context element and the redefinition of the role of the audience mobilize a new path for analyzing the securitization process. Therefore, although securitizing agents may discursively prove that the referenced object requires exceptional measures to be resolved as a security problem, the sociocultural context will, in turn, demystify the extent to which these practices are exceptional or routine.

THE CONTEXTS OF BORDER SECURITIZATION IN THE U.S.–MEXICO CASE

The social context in which securitization operates extends beyond a neoliberalism understood merely as economic policy promoting market

deregulation and the dismantling of the welfare state. While this dynamic is often reduced to the privatization of public goods and the shifting of responsibility onto individuals — as seen under Thatcherism and Reaganism — neoliberalism must also be understood as a form of governmental rationality. This rationality not only reshapes public policy but also produces particular kinds of subjects, modes of conduct, and new hierarchies of social meaning and value (Brown 2021).

Within this framework, capitalism advances a “win at all costs” mentality and what Bauman (2017) calls a “sink-or-swim” society, where individual performance is valorized and structural forms of violence are obscured. Politics becomes personalized, while democratic principles of universality, equality, and openness are gradually marginalized. The nation adopts an increasingly illiberal posture toward so-called “internal adversaries,” echoing the antagonisms of the McCarthy era (Lepore 2020). As policing and authoritarian power expand under the guise of protecting personal freedom, walls, gates, surveillance systems, and “no trespassing” signs emerge as symbolic markers separating the protected from the exposed, and private property from collective life.

In this neoliberal rationality, open attacks on immigrants, Muslims, Black people, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and women function as political expressions of a worldview that elevates personal freedom above norms of equality, tolerance, and inclusion. The right to reject these norms is framed as an exercise of individual liberty. In doing so, neoliberalism authorizes direct assaults on social provision, justice, politics, and democracy itself. The very idea of a democratic, pluralistic, secular public sphere is recast as a form of tyrannical policing, allegedly rooted in a “totalitarian” myth of the social (Brown 2015). Consequently, contemporary politics experiences not merely a return but a profound reconfiguration of the culture wars once thought to have subsided at the end of the twentieth century.

These dynamics are particularly visible in the socio-historical contexts of rural and suburban Euro-Atlantic regions, where neoliberal economic policies have eroded the stability of white middle- and working-class communities. The outsourcing of manufacturing jobs and the decline of union power have led these groups to link their own economic decline with the weakening of nation-state sovereignty and the erosion of white male supremacy (Brown 2015; 2018).

This scenario is strongly present in the United States through the dissatisfaction of swing states with the NAFTA agreement, which also signaled the Democratic Party’s departure from its working-class and New Deal roots under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In addition to triggering

devastating job losses in factories in places like Milwaukee, Janesville, and Racine, Wisconsin, NAFTA contributed to making the state the nation's leader in farm bankruptcies, accelerating the “get big or get out” trend in agriculture. Wisconsin lost more than half of its family farms in the early 2000s. A notable example of this effect was Master Lock, the Milwaukee-based lock company that outsourced 1,000 jobs to Mexico shortly after President Bill Clinton signed NAFTA (Conniff 2022).

Based on these, Donald Trump's campaign catalyzed the socio-economic and cultural insecurities of a specific group in the United States, reinforcing the belief that immigrants are a threat. This process was fueled by the Tea Party, which, since Barack Obama's presidency, has exploited racial and economic grievances. Rapidly emerging in 2009, the movement consolidated itself as a significant political force by articulating the dissatisfaction of white Americans who perceived their socio-economic status as being threatened by increasing political diversity and the aftermath of the Great Recession (Skocpol and Williamson 2016).

Inevitably, the socioeconomic context in which Trump ran his political campaign aligns with what Chesnais (2001) calls the globalization of capital, where companies expand globally in search of cheaper labor and more favorable regulatory environments. In this context, the United States faced challenges for labor groups most vulnerable to deindustrialization, as companies moved production to lower-wage regions while looking for more efficient and cost-effective global supply chains. According to Temin (2017), this scenario is linked to the severe transformation of the Rust Belt from the “Manufacturing Belt” to the “Rust Belt.”

What was once the industrial heartland of America has become the country's largest and most obsolete area of early industrialization. The region declined as factories relocated westward and automation expanded throughout the twentieth century. The geographical reference to the Midwest reinforces this narrative, as the region includes states with a strong rural influence — such as Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. This context highlights the cultural polarization that Trump often evokes as the “real America” (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2024). The Midwest also encompasses part of the Rust Belt, a historically industrial region that, following the collapse of the manufacturing sector, became associated with deep economic distress. This area played a crucial role in Trump's 2016 electoral victory, as he secured overwhelming support across the region; only two states in the entire Rust Belt–Midwest corridor voted predominantly for the Democratic candidate.

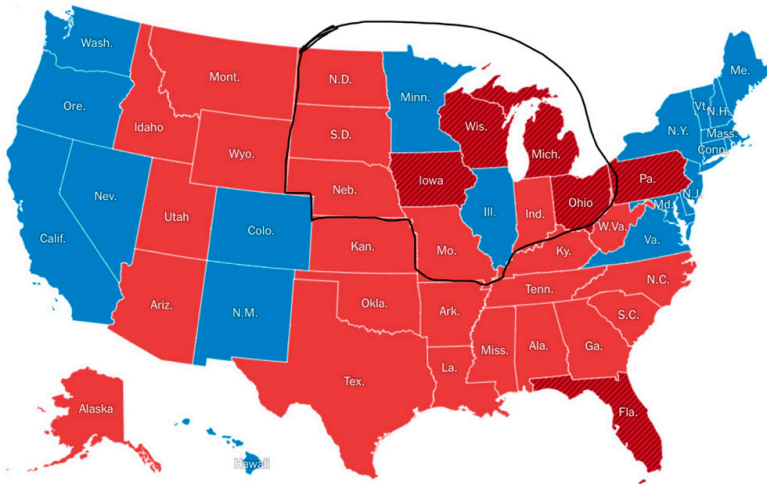


Figure 1 — Illustration of the Midwest region with electoral highlights.

According to Taylor and Ömer (2019), this conjuncture results from the return of the U.S. economy to a highly unequal economic structure amid profound institutional and technological changes and China's global expansion. This context is politically instrumentalized, with the figure of the immigrant hyperbolized and merged with the image of the job thief, where false promises of restored economic power intertwine with false promises of restored racial and gender supremacy. Porous neighborhood and national borders eroded socioeconomic status, and new forms of insecurity tied together within a racialized causal logic (Brown 2019).

As expressed in the Brexit slogan, "Take back control," or in France with "*C'est chez nous*" (Castells 2018). Although white middle and working-class men are not the only ones harmed by neoliberal policies or neglected by neoliberal politicians, they are the primary targets for inciting practices against "political correctness" and "social justice" (Brown 2018).

THE SECURITIZING AGENT: WHO IS DONALD TRUMP?

Trump's rhetoric departs from traditional political discourse centered on the economy and public services, instead using violent language to focus on identity and cultural issues (Savin and Treisman 2024). He worsens social divisions by polarizing his supporters against minorities and opponents, dehumanizing groups such as immigrants, religious groups, the media, and political adversaries. This approach resonates with his base,

fueling threats and violence against the targets of his criticisms (Nacos, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon 2020).

A notable example was his repeated attack on Barack Obama, associating him with conspiracy theories and reinforcing racial stereotypes, particularly through the Tea Party and Fox News (Knowles et al. 2013). Also, his supporters tend to endorse political violence, including the invasion of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Since his political rise, Trump has created a permissive environment for extremist discourse, reducing its stigma and making it part of the public debate (Accioly Filho, Nobre, and Leite 2024). Although protected by the First Amendment, this rhetoric has fueled acts of violence, as shown in Graph 2, and hate crimes since his presidential campaign increased (Barkun 2017).

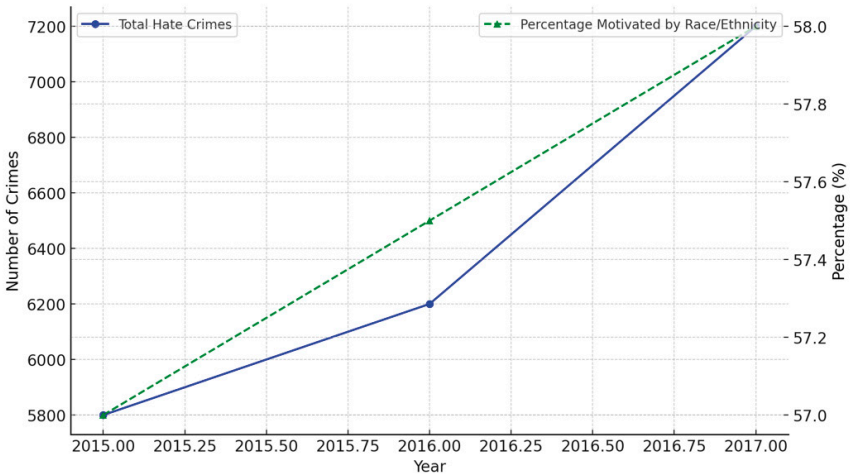


Figure 2 — Evolution of Hate Crimes in the United States, 2015-2017.

Thus, Donald Trump plays a direct role in digital populism, often characterized by a rhetoric of politicians positioning themselves as defenders of the common citizen against alleged institutionalized corruption. At the beginning of his political career, Trump used this inclusive language, often referring to the “people” (Zicman and Lago 2022). This dynamic was overly exploited with his challenge to the electoral result of his non-re-election in 2020, which worsened partisan polarization and encouraged his supporters to endorse violence directed at the state apparatus, culminating in the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021 (Arceneaux and Truex 2023).

THE AUDIENCE: THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT RESONATING IN TRUMP'S RHETORIC

The era of disinformation intensifies the effect of the informational bubble, influencing specific audiences in the securitization process. In the case of Donald Trump, his impact is not limited to all his supporters but to a geographically localized group. According to Montgomery (2017), Trump's rhetoric attracted voters who saw his frankness as a differentiator. An analysis of the 2016 election shows that his base was predominantly composed of non-Hispanic white individuals, especially men without a college degree, rural voters, and residents of the "Rust Belt" (Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin).

Trump was able to connect with this group by positioning himself as the representative of the so-called "forgotten workers of America," especially in response to policies from the Obama administration. His speech was marked by the slogan "Make America Great Again", as a criticism of diversity — a combination of xenophobia, advocating for greater control of immigration; conspiracy theories about the elites (such as the "fake news" narratives and the "evil media"); and economic protectionism with the "America First" policy (Perry 2019).

This phenomenon reveals how inequality is mediated by populist political leaders who interpret economic realities as a resource for their political strategy. A clear example of this process was the rise of the Tea Party, which transformed emotional polarization from a diffuse sentiment into a political force capable of electing candidates (Kleinfield 2021; 2023).

Another event illustrating this socioeconomic context is the trade shock with China, which resulted in job losses and lasting declines in income, particularly in rural and industrial communities in the Rust Belt. This impact is linked to the rise of China as an export power, whose share in the U.S. market peaked in 2010. Between 1991 and 2015, its manufacturing exports surged from 3.1% to 17.6%, before falling back to 14.2% in 2018 (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2021). In 2010, China accounted for 23.4% of the U.S. manufactured imports. Although its growth in this sector slowed in 2018, China continued to boost U.S. imports by outsourcing production to low-income countries in Southeast Asia, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Heath and Mobarak 2015).

In the figure below, we can better visualize China's performance, with data from the year 2015, the period of analysis of Donald Trump's election campaign. Thus, China leads in industrial production, with over \$2.01 trillion in production, with its national production accounting for

20% of global industrial production. This does not include data from Taiwan, which remains controversial for potential inclusion (West and Lansang 2018).

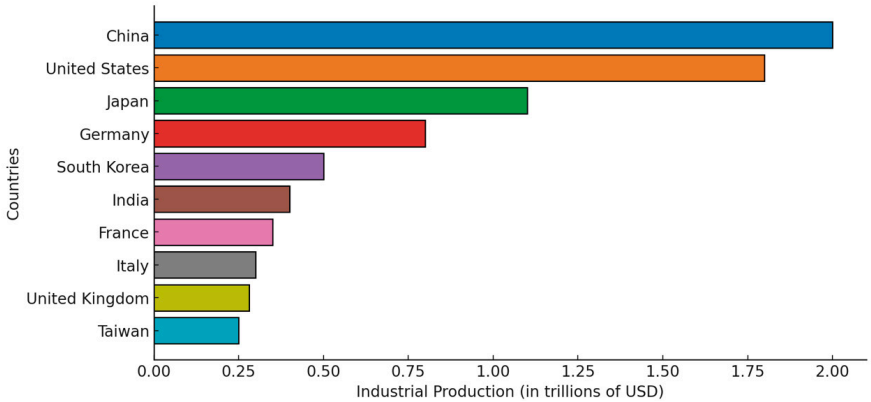


Figure 3 — Top Countries by Industrial Production (2015).

In this context, the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program, which offers benefits to some workers displaced by trade shocks, began to decline due to its limited reach compared to the number of workers who lost their jobs due to competition from imports. Another limitation of TAA is that assistance depends on the cause of the job loss, specifically trade (Hyman 2018). It is assumed that job loss causes similarly severe scars, regardless of whether the underlying cause is importing competition, technological changes (Autor and Dorn 2013; Daron and Restrepo 2020), or government regulation (Walker 2013).

Policy failures in this domain highlight how nationalist populists in the U.S. and Europe gained political leverage (Colantone and Stanig 2018a; 2018b; Rodrick 2021). This has especially occurred because the common solution of populist politicians is to increase import barriers and block immigration. Trump pursued this strategy to address the trade shock with China, justifying aggressive trade measures against the country (Redding 2022). However, the subsequent trade war between the U.S. and China succeeded in raising product prices in the U.S. (Fajgelbaum et al. 2020), but did not expand employment in sectors protected by imports (Flaen and Pierce 2019).

Some authors associate the rise of leaders like Trump with deglobalization, a process of retreating from global economic and cultural integra-

tion (García-Herrero 2019). This trend, seen since the early 21st century, results from factors such as the protection of domestic jobs, economic self-sufficiency, and national security, intensified by crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. This movement drives protectionism, economic nationalism, and the reorganization of capital transnationalization, reflecting disputes such as Brexit and the China-U.S. rivalry (Stanojevic and Zakic 2023).

Cramer's (2016) ethnography reveals that Trump's rhetoric attracted rural voters from Wisconsin, driven by resentment and white, rural identity. They believe their communities are neglected by policymakers and disrespected by urbanites. Kivisto (2017) adds, highlighting the anti-intellectualism of this group, which views academics as liberal indoctrinators, and associates Black people and Latino immigrants with social problems and excessive public spending.

THE REFERENCE OBJECT: THE DEMONIZED FOREIGNER IN THE REPULSION AGAINST GLOBALISM

Globalism, despite its economic promises, generated challenges that were quickly exploited by the far-right, which blames minorities, especially immigrants from the Global South, and uses stigmas to promote violent political agendas. This process intensified with the rise of **twiplomacy** and the spread of fake news on social media, especially during the 2016 election. During this period, 62% of American adults consumed news via social networks, with Facebook being one of the main vectors of disinformation, favoring Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

Studies show that belief in false information influenced electoral behavior and remains a challenge, as visual and sensationalist content mobilizes affective communities and amplifies polarization (Callahan 2020). Disinformation is even more polarizing in countries with low trust in the media and government, worsening misconceptions about immigration in the U.S. (Alesina, Miano, and Strancheva 2023) — as shown in the graph below — in which topics such as crime and the economy tend to have a negative correlation when associated with immigrants in U.S. society.

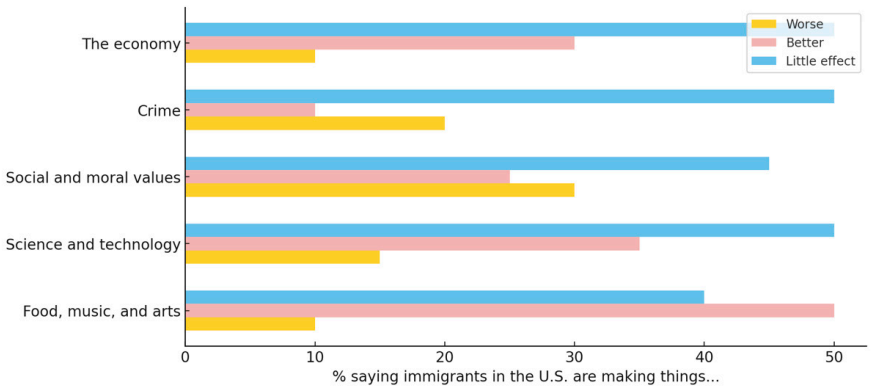


Figure 4 — American Opinions on the Impact of Immigrants on Society.

This disinformational scenario reflects how the image of the immigrant population in the United States is associated with disparaging agendas. Moreover, those people place more importance on the construction of a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, a highly costly policy, than on other policy options related to immigration (McConnell 2022). This proposal was one of Donald Trump’s main political platforms (Rivers and Ross 2020) and the “pivot” of his anti-immigrant rhetoric and immigration agenda as president (Carr, Sibila, and Rauhaus 2020).

Moreover, Trump was influential in shaping the political agenda via Twitter, spreading disinformation and false information about immigration and other topics, combined with extensive media coverage of his communications (Lewandowsky et al. 2020).

Another area of discussion is about crime in the United States, as there is growing evidence that immigrants, regardless of legal status, are less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans. However, a substantial number of Americans still believe that immigration increases crime (Light and Anadon 2019; Landgrave and Nowrasteh 2020). This scenario is highlighted in the graph below, especially by the number of crimes being committed more by native-born Americans during Donald Trump’s administration.

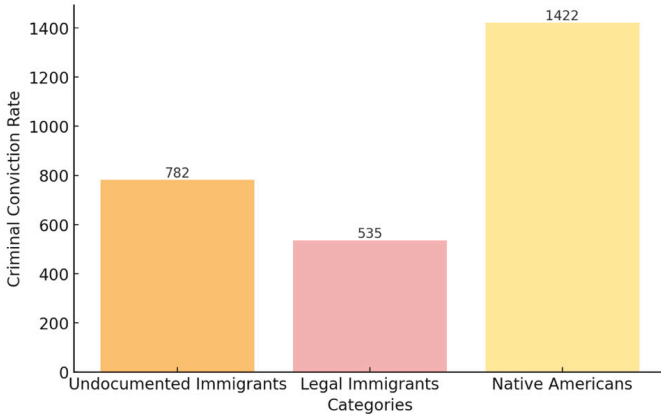


Figure 5 — Criminal Conviction Rate in Texas in 2018.

In this other graph, based on data from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ),¹ illustrating arrest numbers based on citizenship and documentation status from 2012 to 2018, we can see that undocumented immigrants have the lowest criminal violation rates. Therefore, the perception regarding undocumented immigrants is more about stigma than statistical confirmation. In this sense, we see that Trump's rhetoric is sensationalist on the danger these groups may or may not pose to U.S. society.

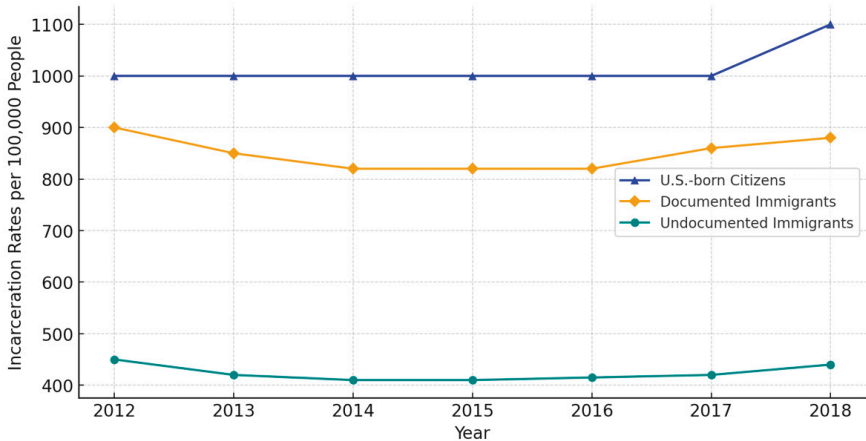


Figure 6 — Arrest Rate by Citizenship/Documentation Status (2012-2018).

However, these results weren't limited to Texas; other statistical studies show that, nationally, the crime rate among undocumented immigrants is low. Since 1980, immigrants have had lower incarceration rates than U.S.-born individuals, accumulating an extended period of 150 years. In this other graph, we can see part of this scenario at the national level in the United States, for the year 2018, once again reflecting that the real verifiability of this threat is questionable (Abramitzky et al. 2024).

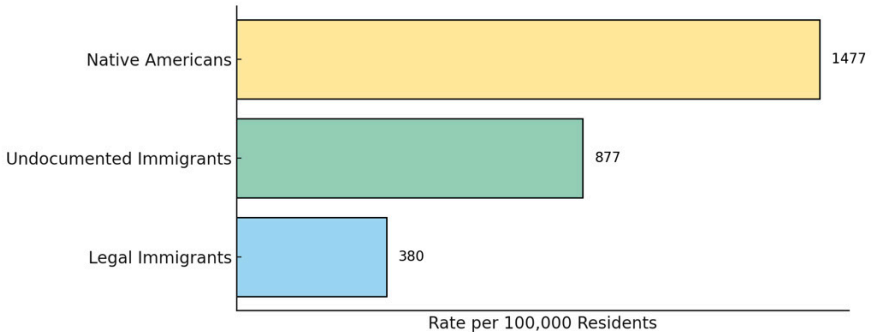


Figure 7 — Incarceration Rate by Citizenship/Documentation Status (2018), Ages 18-54.

These data lose their meaning in the digital age, as populist leaders exploit the targeting power of social networks to capture specific audiences and narrow their view of politics, framing it as a battlefield between enemies rather than a contest among adversaries. This also holds their supporters hostage, forcing them to engage with the political world in an environment that resonates with and crystallizes dialogues solely within their own bubble (Gerbaudo 2019). And thus, it inhibits the possibility of understanding who causes the insecurity in these contexts.

Those data show how the sociocultural context in which the securitization process runs lies in the disinformation age, which has a costly impact on affective communication, accentuated and reinforced by societal division and polarization (O'Neil 2017; Nunes and Traumann 2023). The use of the social media platform Twitter illustrates how Trump secured greater electoral engagement by strengthening a direct relationship with his supporters. His political strategy is grounded in twiplomacy: the use of the platform as both a campaign tool and a means of communication aimed at advancing his political agenda (Gonçalves and De Assis 2019).

Concurrently, the commodification of fear as a political tool since September 11 has further solidified the “othering” of stigmatized foreigners. The perceived imminence of threat often appears more as a byproduct of commercial propaganda than as a reflection of the actual severity of the fear it projects. This dilemma reflected many attempts to invest in sophisticated security technologies, which do not offer true protection against danger but instead cultivate an allure around refined mechanisms of illusory security (Bauman 2014), and it became a recurring strategy in US politics. This process involves framing immigration as a threat to national security, thus legitimizing restrictive policies and emergency measures.

This scenario directly applies to the issue of the US-Mexico border. Since Bill Clinton’s administration, the US government has adopted the strategy of prevention through deterrence, which strengthened border control through heavy investment in surveillance and enforcement infrastructure, pushing migrants towards more perilous crossing routes, such as the use of advanced technologies to monitor the border with Mexico. This measure included drones, integrated fixed towers (IFTs), motion sensors, night vision cameras, facial recognition, and biometric data analysis (Aizeki et al. 2021). Those policies have contributed to increased migrant deaths, as migrants are forced to seek out more dangerous routes, their lives are placed at greater risk without bringing any reduction in migration flows across the border (Martínez et al. 2014; Slack et al. 2016; Chambers et al. 2021; Neivns 2023). This reflects a deterrence-based strategy – in other words, the intention is to discourage irregular migration, rather than to completely prevent these groups from entering the country. This model was further amplified under George W. Bush (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015) and became a central pillar of Donald Trump’s agenda.

Between 1998 and 2006, for example, \$239 million was invested in the ISIS (Integrated Surveillance Intelligence System), which connected ground sensors to control centers. However, the Department of Homeland Security found that over 90% of the alerts were false, and only 2% resulted in border detentions along the southwest border (Boyce 2016). This strong technosolutionist impulse — deploying technological artefacts to solve problems even when data show they do not produce outcomes proportional to the investment — reflects the logic associated with techno-authoritarians. Predominantly linked to far-right groups, these actors are responsible for designing, funding, and implementing repressive and violent forms of urban governance. They operate in contexts of democratic fragility, where authoritarian modes of thinking prevail, normalizing the transfer of responsibilities to automated systems in ways that limit

discretion and suppress critical reflection about technologies and their uses (Peron, Almstadter, and Caetano 2025).

METHODS

The material collected and filtered for this research was sourced from the tools available on the platform *The Trump Archive*, which contains a database of all Donald Trump's tweets. Therefore, we did not aim to apply quantitative methods for this step of the research. Twitter was selected as the social network to be analysed due to its relevance in that context during the electoral period. The data were collected and structured between January 6 and 10, 2024. The first filter applied was temporal, considering tweets published between January 1, 2015, and November 7, 2016. This time frame was defined based on the period of Trump's electoral campaign, excluding analyses of his administration.

The focus was to examine his behavior during the electoral campaign, where the project to build a physical wall on the Mexico-U.S. border would not primarily aim to combat drug trafficking or prevent the operation of terrorist cells in the region. On the contrary, the literature suggests that the wall proposal functions as a political-electoral mechanism, designed to increase political capital. Thus, in this first filtering step, we were able to isolate content more contextualized to the electoral period, resulting in a selection of 11,495 tweets.

The screenshot shows the 'Trump Twitter Archive V2' interface. At the top, there is a search bar and links for 'Insights' and 'FAQ'. Below the search bar, there are filters for 'startDate: 2015-01-01' and 'endDate: 2016-11-07', with a 'Clear All' button. Underneath, there are input fields for 'Start Date' (2015-01-01) and 'End Date' (2016-11-07). A row of filter buttons includes 'Search tips', 'Truth Social filters', 'Retweet filters', 'Deleted filters', 'Date filters', 'Device filters', and 'Export'. Below the filters, it says '11,495 tweets found' and 'Most Likes'. A list of seven tweets is displayed, each with a date, time, engagement metrics (retweets and likes), and a 'Show' button. The tweets are as follows:

Date	Time	Retweets	Likes	Content
Jun 9th 2016	4:40:32 PM EST	130k	246k	How long did it take your staff of 823 people to think that up--and where are your 33,000 emails that you deleted? https://t.co/gECLNIQizQ
Jul 20th 2016	11:36:06 AM EST	94k	208k	The media is spending more time doing a forensic analysis of Melania's speech than the FBI spent on Hillary's emails.
May 5th 2016	2:57:30 PM EST	92k	143k	Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics! https://t.co/ufoteQd8YA https://t.co/K01Mc6CuDl
Jul 19th 2016	7:52:59 PM EST	33k	108k	Such a great honor to be the Republican Nominee for President of the United States. I will work hard and never let you down! AMERICA FIRST!
Sep 30th 2016	2:37:48 PM EST	39k	103k	For those few people knocking me for tweeting at three o'clock in the morning, at least you know I will be there, awake, to answer the call!
Oct 4th 2016	10:36:02 PM EST	29k	100k	Mike Pence won big. We should all be proud of Mike!
Oct 8th 2016	12:19:43 AM EST	42k	98k	Here is my statement. https://t.co/WAZiGoQqMQ

Figure 8 — Filtering of Tweets by Temporal Cut (2015-2016).

Subsequently, aiming for greater emphasis on Trump’s agenda of building a wall at the border, we sought to filter his tweets by keywords. The first term used was “Wall”. In this second filtering, we achieved a significant reduction to only 86 tweets. As illustrated below.

The screenshot shows the 'Trump Twitter Archive V2' search interface. The search term 'Wall' is entered in the search bar. The search parameters are: start date 2015-01-01, end date 2016-11-07, and searchbox: Wall. The results show 86 tweets found, sorted by 'Most Likes'. The top seven tweets are listed below:

Rank	Date & Time	Engagement (Retweets/Likes)	Text
1.	Sep 1st 2016 - 6:31:17 AM EST	36k Retweets / 85k Likes	Mexico will pay for the wall!
2.	Jul 12th 2016 - 1:01:51 PM EST	26k Retweets / 39k Likes	Bernie Sanders endorsing Crooked Hillary Clinton is like Occupy Wall Street endorsing Goldman Sachs.
3.	Jul 28th 2016 - 11:52:46 PM EST	13k Retweets / 35k Likes	Hillary will never reform Wall Street. She is owned by Wall Street!
4.	Aug 21st 2016 - 8:33:38 PM EST	11k Retweets / 33k Likes	Crooked Hillary is flooding the airwaves with false and misleading ads - all paid for by her bosses on Wall Street. Media is protecting her!
5.	Aug 27th 2016 - 10:17:14 AM EST	9k Retweets / 28k Likes	Heroin overdoses are taking over our children and others in the MIDWEST. Coming in from our southern border. We need strong border & WALL!
6.	Aug 30th 2016 - 6:27:21 AM EST	9k Retweets / 27k Likes	From day one I said that I was going to build a great wall on the SOUTHERN BORDER, and much more. Stop illegal immigration. Watch Wednesday!
7.	Nov 19th 2015 - 8:11:49 AM EST	13k Retweets / 24k Likes	Eight Syrians were just caught on the southern border trying to get into the U.S. ISIS maybe? I told you so. WE NEED A BIG & BEAUTIFUL WALL!

Figure 9 — Filtering of Tweets by the Term “Wall”.

At this stage, we aimed to create a graph with those that received the highest engagement, summing the number of likes and retweets, which can be seen in Figure 11 below. Based on this filtering, we will conduct the first analysis of Trump’s tweets on his project to build a wall to mitigate illegal crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border.

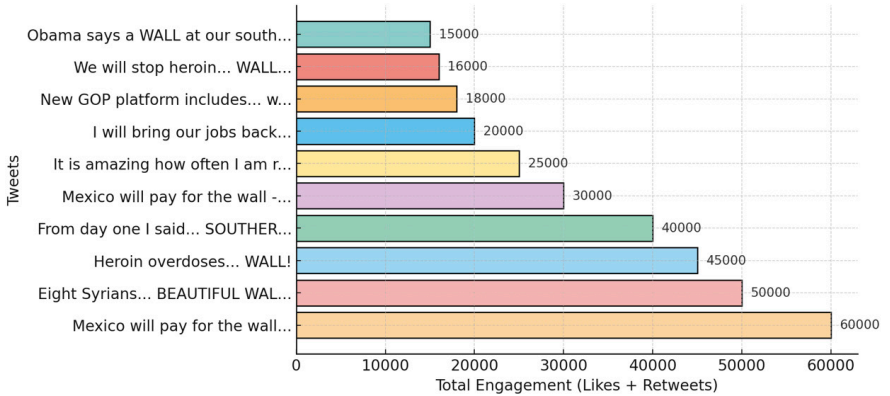


Figure 10 — Trump’s Tweets with the Highest Engagement from the “Wall” Term Filtering.

Subsequently, a final filter was applied using the term “border” to find an added term correlated with the discourse on illegal crossings at the Mexico–United States border.

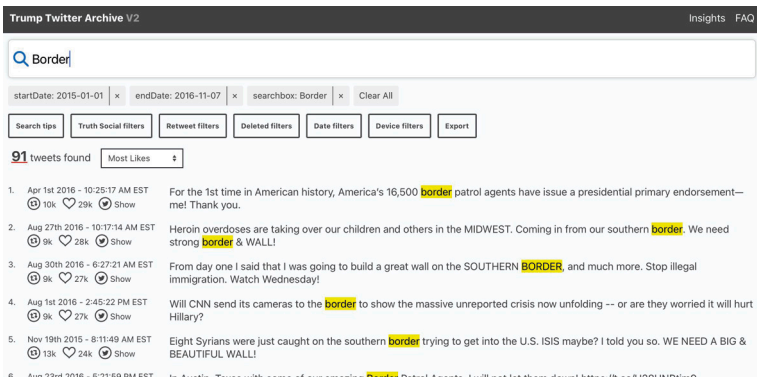


Figure 11 — Filtering tweets by the term “border”.

Based on these data, we sought to reduce the number of tweets for analysis, as was done with the earlier filters, by selecting only the top 10 tweets with the highest engagement, as shown in Figure 13 below.

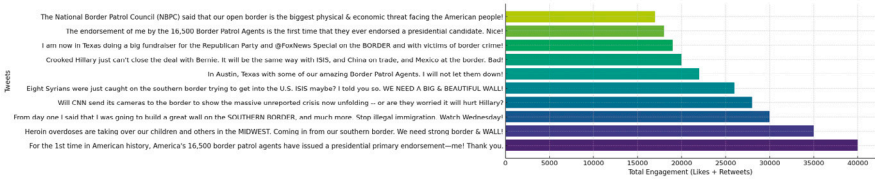


Figure 12 — Trump’s Most Engaging Tweets Filtered by the Term “Border”.

Next, we conducted a third filtering process using the term “migrants,” but only one post was found.

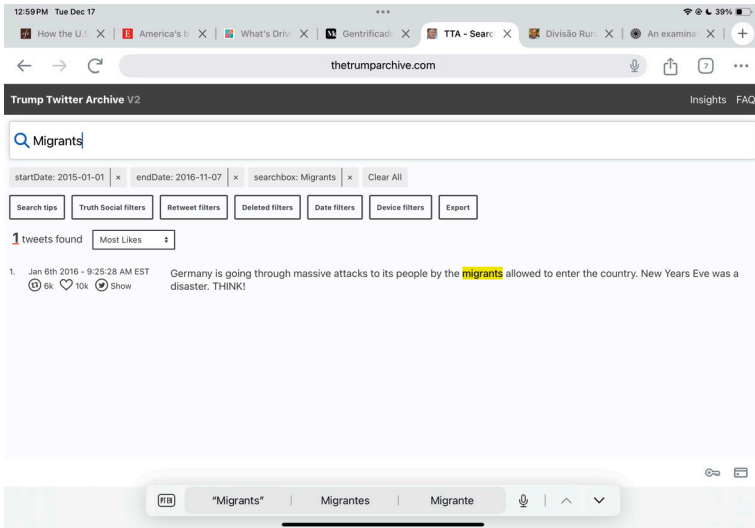


Figure 13 — Filtering tweets by the term “Migrants”.

Considering this, and seeking to explore another term that could be used to refer to individuals trying to cross the border with Mexico, we applied the term “immigrants” and found 22 tweets.

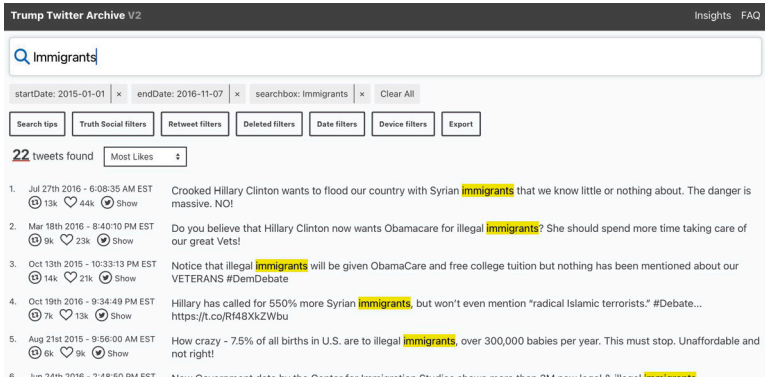


Figure 14 — Filtering tweets by the term “Immigrants”.

Based on this filtering, we created a chart to illustrate the tweets with the highest engagement, following the same approach as in the first filtering. We selected only the top 10 tweets with the highest engagement, as done in the earlier chart.

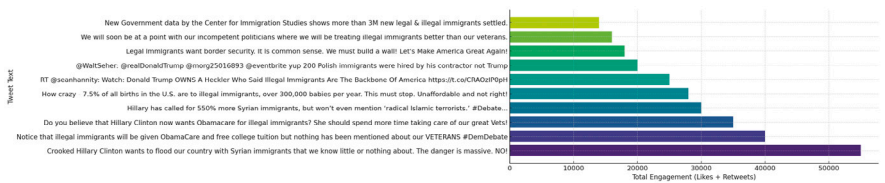


Figure 15 — Trump’s Most Engaged Tweets Filtered by the Term “Immigrants”.

A fourth filtering process was conducted, focusing on the term “NAFTA,” considering the relevance attributed to the agreement in the literature and its connection to the rural electorate, which strongly supported the movement that endorsed Trump’s electoral campaign, the Tea Party. This filtering identified a total of 15 tweets, as illustrated in Figure 16 below.

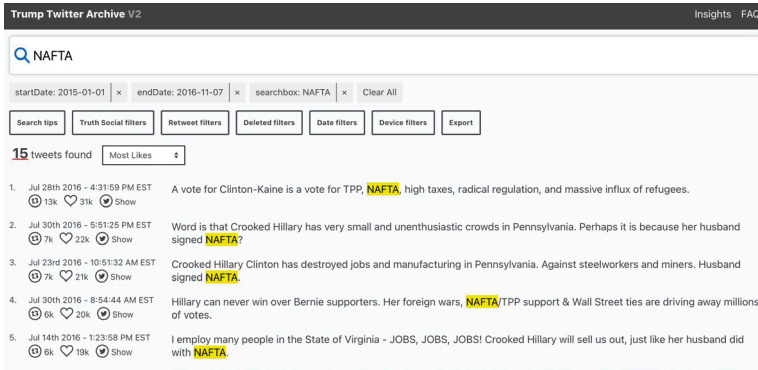


Figure 16 — Filtering tweets by the term “NAFTA”.

In this filtering, the tweet with the highest engagement presents a superficial association, without further elaboration, suggesting that NAFTA and the broader economic disruptions in the United States are attributable to the massive influx of refugees.

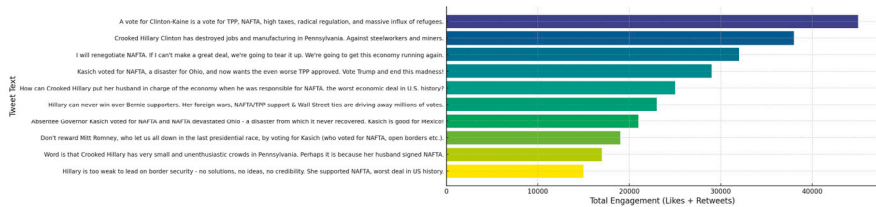


Figure 17 — Trump’s Most Engaged Tweets Filtered by the Term “NAFTA”.

Thus, at this stage, we collected a series of posts made by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump, using a filtering process based on key terms that helped the selection and analysis of tweets related to the issue of illegal immigrant crossings at the Mexican border. In the next section, we will conduct a detailed analysis of the collected data to decide whether a securitization process took place.

ANALYZING THE TWEETS

In this section, we aim to analyze Donald Trump’s tweets following the methodological framework outlined in Table 1. From Figure 10, which

displays the tweets with the highest engagement filtered by the term “Wall,” the most impactful (most liked and retweeted) tweet was the one that firmly set up his narrative about the border wall project, asserting that the wall would be paid for by Mexicans.



Figure 18 — First tweet with the highest engagement filtered by the term “wall”.

Subsequently, there are three tweets that show a similar level of engagement. One of these tweets asserts that the issue of heroin overdoses among young individuals in the Midwest region of the United States stems from the Mexican border. By making this claim, it seeks to justify the necessity of the proposed border wall project. This tweet aptly illustrates how misinformation and mediated communication on social media intensify securitization practices, as Trump makes allegations without providing any corroboration for such questionable claims. The same pattern was observed in studies analyzing his contestation of the 2020 electoral process, which ultimately culminated in the canonical event of the January 6 Capitol attack (Accioly Filho, Nobre, and Leite 2024).



Figure 19 — Second most engaged tweet filtered by the term “wall”.

This tweet reinforces a pejorative stereotype by associating undocumented immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border with criminal activities, particularly drug trafficking. In doing so, Trump constructs an image of threat, aligning with the stigmatized perception held by a segment of the U.S. population that immigration is directly linked to rising crime rates. In other words, he seeks to exploit the sentiments that his audience (the electorate) holds toward so-called illegal immigrants, which brings back the Paris School's argument that the audience is constitutive of the securitization process rather than a mere recipient that either accepts or rejects the speech act. This social conception of immigrants in the United States is well illustrated in Figure 4.

From an ideological perspective, the tweet connects to Trump's central campaign slogan, Make America Great Again (MAGA), which capitalizes on cultural tensions between rural and urban communities in the United States, as mentioned in the context that securitization proceeds operate (Light and Anadon 2019; Orrenius and Zavodny 2019; Landgrave and Nowrasteh 2020; Adelman et al. 2021).

Another relevant aspect is the intersection between the opioid crisis and the construction of the border wall. In 2017, the states most affected by the opioid epidemic, in terms of GDP percentage, were concentrated in New England, Maryland, North Carolina, New Mexico, and the Rust Belt (including West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Michigan). Although Trump's tweet links the construction of the wall to mitigating the opioid epidemic, this justification appears disconnected, as opioid consumption in these regions is more closely related to internal economic and social factors than to immigration (Maclean et al. 2020). In this context, we can observe, for instance, the level of support Trump received in the 2016 election based on the geographic distribution of his supporters (Reidhead and Billings 2019).

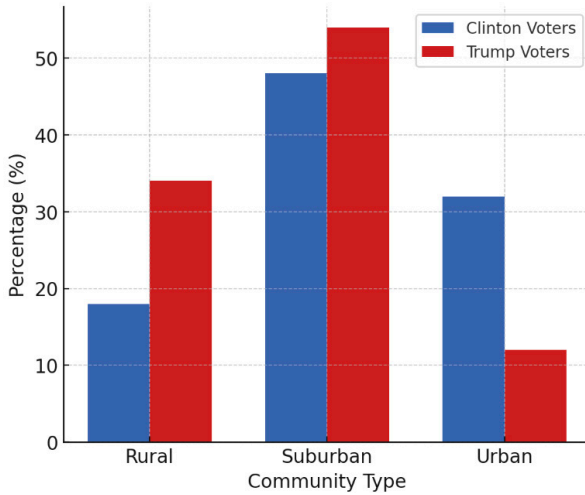


Figure 20 — Types of Communities of Clinton and Trump Voters.

As described by Shea and Jacobs (2023), the rural vote has played a crucial role in U.S. elections, particularly amid the polarization of cultural wars surrounding contemporary politics. This dynamic is further intensified by the region’s deindustrialization, which has led to its socioeconomic marginalization. Trump extensively leveraged this context, using rhetoric that positioned him as a representative of those who felt forgotten (Hochschild 2024).

The third tweet in this filtering serves as a propagandistic endorsement of his campaign, emphasizing that his proposal to build the border wall was his primary electoral agenda, which he presents as a solution to mitigate illegal immigration.



Figure 21 — Third most engaged tweet filtered by the term “wall”.

The fourth tweet in this filtering, illustrated in Figure 24, presents a new dilemma by suggesting that illegal crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border are so unregulated that terrorist groups could enter the United States with ease. Once again, Trump leverages identity-based stigmas, associating undocumented immigrants — specifically Syrians from the Middle East — with terrorist threats. In this context, his strategy on Twitter relies on the use of “security engineering” to amplify fears and thus sensationalize his political project of building a border wall. This tweet illustrates how securitization has become a routine political strategy to manufacture insecurity for electoral ends, reinforced by post-9/11 stigmas against Muslim-origin immigrants. It shows how political actors exploit audience predispositions rather than simply addressing passive recipients.



Figure 22 — Fourth tweet with the highest engagement filtered by the term “wall.”.

Upon analyzing the second filtering, we found that the term “border” was the most frequently used among all the terms examined. This observation aligns with Jason Ackleson’s research, which highlights a political-electoral interest in framing the region as a problem (Ackleson 2005a; 2005b). This set of political intentions regarding the border can be observed in the policies implemented to address the issue. However, as we showed, these initiatives not only increased expenditures but also created a new problem: the rise in migrant mortality as individuals resorted to more dangerous crossing routes (Martínez et al. 2014; Slack et al. 2016; Chambers et al. 2021; Neivns 2023).

Since the same tweets appeared in the previous filtering with the term “wall,” we excluded the second, third, and fifth most engaged tweets from the analysis of the term “border,” as they contained repeated content.

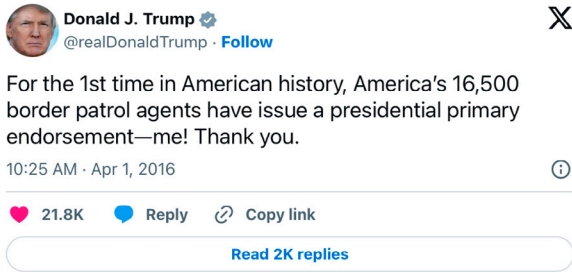


Figure 23 — First tweet with the highest engagement from the filtering of the term “Border”.

In this tweet, we can observe that Donald Trump sought to demonstrate that he has the support of those who experience the daily reality of border protection. By doing so, he aimed to authenticate his commitment and validate his project to build a wall along the border. This strategy is further emphasized in his fifth most engaged tweet, in which he appears in a photo with border enforcement personnel.



Figure 24 — Fifth most engaged tweet from the filtering of the term “Border”.

These tweets underscore a key insight from the Paris School: the audience plays an active, constitutive role in securitization, rather than functioning as a passive recipient of discourse.

Narrowing the search for the motivations behind his campaign for the construction of a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, despite previous high-cost projects that failed to progress, but which introduced new challenges in mitigating the humanitarian migrant crisis in the region (leading to increased migrant mortality) we will now analyze the fifth and final filtering, focusing on the term that shaped Trump's rhetoric in engaging with those in the Rust Belt region.

As observed, tweets highlighting job losses in the manufacturing sector due to NAFTA garnered exponential engagement. However, the primary factor reinforcing the connection between job reductions in this sector in the Rust Belt is its association with refugee inflows. This approach further complicates the discussion, as refugee situations differ significantly from illegal immigration. This tweet reveals the imprecision of Trump's argument on illegal immigration, as it generalises refugee inflows and wrongly links migration to job losses, despite evidence that such losses stem largely from the globalization of capital. It also underscores how today's media environment enables securitization by amplifying misinformation as a key driving force.

Nonetheless, Donald Trump frequently suggests, when addressing the issue of the U.S.-Mexico border, that both represent similar challenges, as illustrated in Figure 25 below.

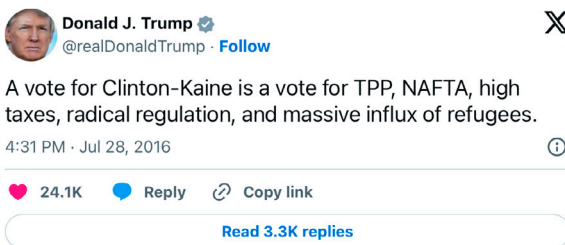


Figure 25 — First tweet with the highest engagement filtered by the term “NAFTA”.

In this tweet, Trump seeks to associate the policies of Bill Clinton's administration with a potential continuation under Hillary Clinton's presidency. However, he specifically focuses on the state of Pennsylvania and steelworkers and miners, blaming the Clinton administration for the de-

cline in manufacturing jobs. In doing so, he directs his message toward a specific audience: those who feel marginalized by the American political establishment.

This group becomes a key pillar in the acceptance of the “demonized foreigner” rhetoric, fueled by opposition to globalism and reinforced by recent declines in U.S. industrial production. This process aligns with the dissatisfaction of Rust Belt workers, who feel unrepresented following factory closures and the outsourcing of jobs to countries with cheaper labor. Trump capitalizes on this discontent, transforming it into a rallying force — though the issue lies in how this is achieved, through the exploitation of stigmas and identity-based attacks on immigrants.



Figure 26 — Second tweet with the highest engagement filtered by the term “NAFTA.”.

It is observed that Trump’s rhetoric, at times, was directed toward unskilled workers employed in low-tech sectors, amid a backdrop of growing economic inequality in the United States. This context reflects institutional and technological shifts, as well as China’s expansion, which has absorbed a significant portion of mid-level industrial jobs.

The combination of these factors — changes in production, increased productivity, and automation — has led “stagnant sectors” (low-productivity industries) to absorb most new jobs, while sectors such as information technology, wholesale, retail, agriculture, and manufacturing have experienced massive job losses. This process, further intensified by automation, has also contributed to the slowdown in employment growth, making it more difficult for young workers to enter the industrial workforce.

CONCLUSION

Grounded in the Paris School’s approach, this study demonstrates that the securitization of immigration in Trump’s 2015–2016 campaign was

enabled by the interaction of four constitutive elements: a securitizing actor, an active and co-constitutive audience, a stigmatized referent object, and a set of enabling contexts — economic, cultural, technological, and political. The analysis shows that Donald Trump operated as a securitizing agent who framed “illegal immigrants” and, at times, refugees and Muslim-origin migrants, as an existential threat to the United States. This construction relied on discursive strategies that ignored available empirical evidence, including crime and incarceration rates demonstrating that native-born Americans are more likely to commit crimes than undocumented immigrants (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

Central to the process was the role of the audience, understood through the Paris School not as a passive receiver of speech acts but as an active agent shaped by socio-historical conditions and predispositions. Trump’s audience — predominantly white, rural, male voters from the Rust Belt — was already affected by the socioeconomic dislocations of neoliberalism, deindustrialization, automation, and the globalization of capital. Their frustrations were intensified by job losses linked to offshoring and NAFTA, as well as by the decline of manufacturing communities (Conniff 2022; Autor et al. 2021). Trump strategically tapped into this politics of resentment, exploiting emotional, racialized, and anti-elite narratives that resonated strongly with this group.

In this context, the referent object — the figure of the “dangerous immigrant” — was constructed through disinformation, fear-based appeals, and post-9/11 cultural anxieties. Trump repeatedly conflated distinct categories such as migrants, refugees, and criminals, contributing to a homogenized and demonized portrayal of foreigners. This symbolic construction ignored the statistical evidence consistently showing low criminality among immigrants while amplifying misinformation that circulated widely on social media, where sensationalist content performed better than factual communication.

The context made the securitization move particularly effective. First, decades of neoliberal restructuring had generated profound socioeconomic insecurity, weakening labor markets and eroding community stability — especially in the Rust Belt. Second, the digital media environment and the rise of twiplomacy created fertile ground for affective communication, algorithmic amplification, and the spread of conspiracy theories. Platforms such as Twitter allowed Trump to bypass traditional mediating institutions, forging a direct emotional connection with his supporters through polarizing, simplistic, and fear-laden messages. Third, the post-9/11 security paradigm and the commodification of fear provided symbolic resource-

es for framing immigration as a national-security emergency, despite the absence of empirical grounding.

These findings reveal that securitization in this case did not emerge as an exceptional response to an extraordinary threat, but rather as a normalized political strategy — one that instrumentalized insecurity to mobilize resentment, consolidate power, and reshape the political agenda. The proposed border wall functioned less as a practical response than as a symbolic device channeling anxieties about deindustrialization, globalization, and cultural change. Meanwhile, technosolutionist approaches at the border — such as surveillance systems and biometric technologies — reproduced the illusion of security while failing to address structural issues, and in some cases exacerbated migrant deaths and humanitarian crises.

Overall, the case demonstrates how digital media ecosystems reshape the conditions of securitization by intensifying affective polarization, distorting public perceptions, and making fear a central currency of political communication. The U.S. example also illustrates how neoliberal rationality, economic decline, racial hierarchies, and algorithmic infrastructures interact to produce favorable conditions for exclusionary securitizing moves.

Future research should compare these findings with European cases, where securitization strategies similarly blur distinctions between migrants and refugees, exploit disinformation, and mobilize grievances associated with deindustrialization and cultural anxieties. Investigating cross-national patterns may illuminate how contemporary democracies confront an emerging model of political communication in which insecurity becomes a governing technique, audiences become co-producers of fear, and digital infrastructures function as amplifiers of securitizing narratives.

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NOTA

1. Data collection available at docs.house.gov/meetings/JU/JU01/20250122/117827/HHRG-119-JU01-20250122-SD004.pdf

AN ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S SECURITIZATION STRATEGY (2015–2016)

ABSTRACT

Social media, by prioritizing affective communication and disinformation, has been making society increasingly captive to distorted perceptions of migration. From the theoretical perspective of securitization under the Paris School approach, this research analyzes how social media influences securitization strategies. The applied case study focuses on Donald Trump's 2015–2016 electoral campaign, during which Twitter served as the primary channel of communication with his electorate. Following the Paris School's analytical framework, Trump's tweets were analyzed based on a literature review of the context in which he operated, his political profile, and the specific audience aligned with this dynamic. The study shows that Trump positioned himself as a securitizing agent, mobilizing his audience (primarily white, rural, Rust Belt men) to perceive immigrants as a threat despite the absence of concrete evidence, reinforcing stigmas and fears. His strategy, focused on capitalizing on the socioeconomic insecurities generated by decades of neoliberalism and deindustrialization, was thus dependent on specific social and economic contexts.

Keywords: Securitization; Misinformation; International Migration; Deindustrialization

RESUMO

As redes sociais, ao privilegiarem a comunicação afetiva e a desinformação, vêm tornando a sociedade refém de percepções distorcidas sobre a migração. A partir da perspectiva teórica da securitização sob a ótica da Escola de Paris, esta pesquisa analisa como as redes sociais influenciam estratégias de securitização. O estudo de caso aplicado é o da campanha eleitoral de Donald Trump (2015–2016), na qual o Twitter foi utilizado como principal meio de comunicação com seu eleitorado. Por isso, seguindo o quadro analítico da Escola de Paris, foram analisados os tweets de Donald Trump com base numa análise da literatura sobre o contexto em que ele atuou, qual era o perfil político dele e quem era a audiência específica alinhada nesta dinâmica. O estudo apresenta que Trump se apresentou como agente securitizador, mobilizando a audiência (seu eleitorado, sobretudo homens brancos, rurais e do Rust Belt) a perceber os imigrantes como ameaça, mesmo sem evidências concretas, reforçando estigmas e medos. Dessa forma, sua estratégia, focada em capitalizar inseguranças socioeconômicas geradas por décadas de neoliberalismo e desindustrialização, dependeu de determinados contextos sociais e econômicos.

Palavras-chave: Securitização; Desinformação; Migração Internacional; Desindustrialização

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