

The Effects of Political Rhetoric on Refugee Policy and Communities in the United States and Germany

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ABSTRACT

International events today put into light the role of rhetoric and the impact on the development of government policies. One of the most prevalent international focuses on policies are those that deal with refugees. This paper analyzes the United States and Germany's refugee policy over the last decade to analyze the trends and potential future for refugee policy.

Keywords: international, refugee, rhetoric, United States, Germany

INTRODUCTION

International events today put into light the role of rhetoric and the impact it has on the development of government policies. One of the most prevalent international focuses on policies are those that deal with refugees. Considering the rise of civil wars, and as the international community struggles with the effects of the Arab Spring, many nations have focused their energy on how to handle the surge of refugees while maintaining their national security (Stepan and Linz, 2013). Refugees are not a new challenge for leaders of the world's nations, but the rhetoric surrounding refugees has come to represent a broad spectrum of attitudes. In some instances, this rhetoric has affected movements, resulting in an increase of hate crimes and newly proposed policies that may block the movement of refugees (Stone, 2016). While many national leaders work to resolve these problems in many ways it is important to look at proposed policies and the rhetoric that these political leaders are using.

Rhetoric has the ability to shape public opinion, affect change and to persuade constituents for the support of policies. Therefore, it is important to analyze how rhetoric is being used to influence different nations (Gottweis, 2007). For example, in 2017 the United States has seen a rise in violence as right-wing nationalists have gained a broader, more public audience. Events like the attacks in Charlottesville have been encouraged by political rhetoric (Perliger, 2017). These instances are not solely limited to the United States. In 2017, Austria elected Sebastian Kurz, a right-wing nationalist, as Chancellor; France battled an election against the known right-wing party, National Front, barely securing a win against Marine La Pen; and Angela Merkel. Most recently struggle against the right-wing nationalist party, Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Karnitschnig 2017; Chrisafis 2017; Henley 2017). Therefore, in light of international events and trends, connecting rhetoric and policies is key to analyzing the rhetoric of leaders. This research will analyze the political rhetoric related to refugee policy in the United States and Germany from 2016–2017.

POLITICAL RHETORIC AND REFUGEE POLICY

Before analyzing the current rhetoric, refugee policies and political leaders in the United States and Germany, one must first analyze the importance of political rhetoric and how it can shape policy. Political rhetoric plays a large role in how the public evaluates policies. A clear example was how the George W. Bush administration portrayed the Iraq war, using terms like “coalition forces” rather than “American forces” (Krebs and Jackson, 2007). This specific rhetoric shaped the public view in this situation, which attempted to portray the United Nations working together, attempting to avoid the portrayal of United States imperialism in the region. While there were other factors that played into the public support of the Iraq war, rhetoric played a comparatively large role in shaping public support. This is important as public support of policies change what actions are taken. As seen above, the United States continued to pursue action in Iraq instead of pulling out due to public support of the war.

The United States in 2016–2017 witnessed a stark intrusion of harsh rhetoric. President Trump's rhetoric has led to multiple changes in policy and has dramatically changed the public sphere. This can be seen in the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in the public sphere as people continue to claim that immigrants steal jobs, do not assimilate well in society and are more

prone to violence. Many studies, like one from the Cato Institute, have determined that legal and undocumented immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated than native citizens. (Rubin, 2017; Berardi, 2017). The fact that many false claims from anti-immigrant groups have been disproven continues to show that rhetoric, and not facts, play a larger role in the public's opinion on issues of importance. The platform that President Trump ran on focused on the building of a wall on the southern border of the United States and ending the rampant crime and violence. Trump stated during his Republican Nomination Acceptance Speech that, "We are going to build a great border wall to stop illegal immigration, to stop the gangs and the violence, and to stop the drugs from pouring into our communities" (Trump, 2016). While rhetoric can affect public perception on policies, it is also important to look at how else rhetoric can influence a nation. Gottweis in his 2007 book chapter "Rhetoric in Policy Making: Between Logos, Ethos and Pathos" stated, "Rhetoric is typically defined as an integral moment of policy making, and the idea of rhetoric points to the necessity to convince, persuade, and communicate efficiently in the context of shaping and implementing public policies." With this analysis in mind, one can see the importance of looking towards rhetoric to see where and how leaders will act in the future. The ability to analyze how the political atmosphere is shaped is key to insights in international relations, public policy of the future and predicting the trajectory of another country.

What has risen to the forefront of the 21st century is how social media has become an important method of rhetoric. President Trump has retweeted multiple videos that were unchecked and later found to be false in some sense, these videos perpetuated hatred towards Muslims. Even after Trump was called out for this atrocity he continued to double down on his decision to retweet and support the false videos. He has been called an entertainer and is known to create a spectacle, therefore, as he has supported many policies and perpetuated hateful rhetoric, people have been drawn in by the entertaining gestures and spectacle of it all, allowing Trump to become an unlikely populist (Hall, Goldstein and Ingram, 2016; Kazin 2016). While labeled as a spectacle, his rhetoric has taken an effect on policies in the United States and is the questionable start of a sweeping international movement that has pushed alt-right groups up in legitimacy globally.

POLITICAL RHETORIC AND REFUGEE POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES

President Trump

When analyzing President Trump's rhetoric this paper will look at the rhetoric used in his Republican Nomination Acceptance Speech on July 21, 2016 and the Inaugural Address on January 20, 2017. This paper will also examine President Trump's rhetoric on his social media accounts, mainly focusing on his use of Twitter. This paper will first start by looking at President Trump's speeches, noting first that his platform to the presidency was built off of rhetoric that pushed anti-elitism and collectivism (Kazin 2016; Barbers, Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). In President Trump's GOP Nomination Acceptance Speech, he stated, "We are going to build a great border wall to stop illegal immigration, to stop the gangs and the violence, and to stop the drugs from pouring into our communities" (Engel, 2016). Similarly, during his Inaugural Address, he stated, "Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our

borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.”

A week after President Trump’s inauguration in January of 2017, he passed an executive order that barred all refugees from Syria from entering the United States indefinitely and also barred all other refugees for 120 days. Additionally, his executive order barred all visitors for 90 days from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen (Kiely, 2017). As President Trump signed the order at the Pentagon he stated, “I’m establishing new vetting measures to keep radical Islamic terrorists out of the United States of America. Don’t want them here. We only want to admit those into our country who will support our country and love deeply our people” (Unknown, 2017). President Trump was met with severe backlash, as lawyers rushed to combat the executive order that President Trump had just put in place. After the lawyers succeeded in stopping President Trump’s executive order, President Trump responded by stating: “My policy is similar to what President Obama did in 2011 when he banned visas for refugees from Iraq for six months.” While President Obama’s policy dealt with Iraqi refugees, it did not ban visas but was a temporary freeze over the processing of Iraqi refugees. The larger issue to note regarding President Trump’s statement is that President Obama’s actions were taken in response to a terror threat that was happening at the time. President Trump’s executive order was not in response to a certain event, it was in response to the push from his voters to take action on the policies he had promised. His rhetoric attempted to downplay his actions by focusing on President Obama’s policies, simplifying the issue and distracting the public from what actually happened. Therefore, the best first action he could take to fulfill the “Muslim ban” he had promised was to bar refugees and suspend those with visas.

While this was the first major event in Trump’s presidency regarding what policies may affect refugees, it was the first of many as President Trump has worked to build a wall and strengthen border security to keep immigrants and refugees alike out of the country. The Trump administration has now taken steps to pull out of the United Nations’ Global Compact on Migration and has also set a new 45,000 cap on the refugees the United States will accept, which is the lowest it has been in over 70 years (Lind, 2017). Trump has justified his actions making statements like, “Use the monies saved on expensive refugee programs to help place American children without parents in safer homes and communities, and to improve community safety in high crime neighborhoods in the United States” (Lind, 2017). President Trump pushes collectivist rhetoric, calling on people to pull together and work to overcome troubles in America as well as minimizing issues for the betterment of what he sees as the whole. The rhetoric that President Trump uses is that the United States says the nation needs to refocus on its own national sovereignty and its own people, which his immigration proposal has promised.

As the President continues to support this rhetoric, the push against refugees not only has gained legitimacy, but continues to spread through legislation and anti-immigrant behavior. His rhetoric continues to paint immigrants and refugees as those who don’t belong, and those who have stolen American values:

You say what happened to the old days where people came into this country, they worked and they worked and they worked and they had families and they paid taxes

and they did all sorts of things, and their families got stronger and they were closely knit. We don't see that. Failure to enforce our immigration laws had predictable results. Drugs, gangs, and violence (Lind, 2017).

This style of rhetoric compares modern day immigrants with a 100-year-old story of immigration history. President Trump gives more credit to those from European nations as being hard working rather than from Mexico. This labeling of one group as superior and the other as inferior allows his base to see themselves as hardworking and recent immigrants as criminals.

In conclusion, President Trump entered office on a campaign that bolstered and openly used rhetoric that was anti-immigrant, yet he created a base of people who enjoyed his show and who were happy that someone was finally talking about their hurts and harms. Therefore, since his election into office, President Trump has continued to use and support forms of speech that target non-white populations. His rhetoric has similarly reflected in his policies as he has taken action to bar refugees from the United States and after the failure of his first executive order, has now set the cap for the number of refugees allowed into the United States, which is the lowest it has been in 70 years.

POLITICAL RHETORIC AND REFUGEE POLICY IN GERMANY

Chancellor Merkel

Stepping back from the United States and moving into Germany, one first must look at the history of Germany to better understand the politics and complexities of where Germany is at today. Germans live in the shadows of an aggressive nationalistic front since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, but Germany has continued to attempt to break down this nationalism. Many towns have worked to start grassroots movements that push back against the rampant xenophobia and violence in the region (Fijalkowski, 1993). Germany has worked to accept many immigrants into their country and Chancellor Merkel has taken the lead in shifting the immigration policy in Germany and the European Union. In 2015, there were over 1,300,000 refugees and immigrants who flooded the southern EU states but soon moved their way up to the central continental Europe, where Germany has vowed to take in many of those refugees (Benedikter and Karolewski, 2016). However, the flood of refugees and overall acceptance from Merkel has been met with different views from native Germans. Some believe that for Merkel it was just a humanitarian gesture, while others believe that it was Merkel's way of combating Germany's historically low unemployment rate (Benedikter and Karolewski, 2016). While some have questioned the motives of Merkel in 2015, in the meantime there has been a rising popularity with the AfD (Alternative for Germany). The AfD has a radically different approach to refugees. They continue to win more seats in each election and in correlation with their rising popularity, there has been a rise in violent attacks against asylum seekers.

When looking deeper at where Merkel lies in this mix of political agendas, one can see that she is stuck between a national and an international perspective. In a speech by Federal Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel at the opening of the Supporting Syria and the Region conference in London on February 4, 2016, she stated, "We must also send a clear signal today that this current period of reflection must be used in order to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria, including a

cease-fire this is what the people expect—in order to actually drive the political process forward.” At an international level, Merkel has been working to help the overall region, as thousands of refugees continue to flood out of war-torn states in the Middle East. Yet, as Germany attempts to help set a long-term policy trend for the EU, the population in Germany face the direct struggles of migration flows and how to handle all of the current short-term solutions. Similarly, as Germany has aimed to leave the shadows of Nazi Germany, some observers of the refugee crisis state that, “[Germany’s] response to the refugee crisis represents a seminal shift in Germans’ view of their role in the world” (Karnitschnig, 2015). Therefore, as Merkel has continued to create a progressive atmosphere in regards to policies that pertain to refugees, Germany has continued to shape how they interact in the international community, and Merkel’s policies have continued to reflect her hardline stance on the issue. Stating at the Supporting Syria and the Region conference in London, “Three hundred thousand people have already lost their lives and millions have been uprooted. This catastrophe must end.” Even as Merkel has faced pushback from many on her policies and stances on refugees, she continues to state that it is the road that Germany is walking and the road that they will continue to walk. Her hardline stance has gained praise from some but as one can see in the most recent elections, the AfD has continued to win more seats and some are projecting that this is the start of Merkel’s fall (Henley, 2017; Feldenkirchen, 2016). Even President Trump spoke out against Merkel stating, “The German people are going to riot. The German people are going to end up overthrowing that woman. I don’t know what the hell she is thinking” (Feldenkirchen, 2016).

In summary, there are many pieces that play into Merkel’s decisions on refugee policy. As Germany fights to continue out of the shadow of Nazi Germany and work against the nationalistic and xenophobic mindsets, Merkel has taken many progressive steps to push Germany forward. Over the last few years, she has worked to open the borders of Germany, drawing in many refugees from the war-torn Middle Eastern countries. Some claim that Merkel’s motivation is to help fill the dangerously low unemployment rate, while others say it is just a humanitarian effort. Whatever her reasoning, Merkel has continued to hold a hardline stance in keeping Germany’s borders open for more refugees. This has brought on an onslaught of backlash, as people in Germany have felt the immediate effects of migration movements. While Germany may have a long-term goal of guiding better long-term refugee policies in the European Union, there may not be opportunity to succeed in that area, as Merkel continues to lose seats to the rising far right group, Alternative for Germany.

ANALYSIS

Over the last couple of decades, there have been two very distinct and different leaders who have had many different effects in regard to their rhetoric, between the United States and Germany. When looking at the campaign that President Trump ran on, and when analyzing the rhetoric that he continues to use, one can see the direct spike in violence and hate crime that has occurred nationally and globally. As Trump stepped into the position of President of the United States in 2016, the nation observed an immediate rise in hate crimes spotlighting Muslim-Americans, immigrants, and refugees. Not only did President Trump’s rhetoric reflect many of the stereotypes that generate fear and hatred towards these communities, but he continued to support the speech of hate groups, the most recent event being his support of a far-right extremist group in

Britain called Britain First (Dearden, 2017). As President Trump has continued to make and support hateful language, many groups have started to gain legitimacy and confidence in the actions they take and the words they speak.

Yet, when looking at Merkel, she has used continuously progressive speech in regard to Germany and their acceptance of refugees, yet there is still backlash from far-right groups and there is still continued violence against refugees. The difference between Chancellor Merkel and President Trump, however, is that the violence that is occurring in Germany is not because of what Merkel is saying but is because of the direct impact that German's feel with the strain of refugees in their country. Similarly, the hate in Germany is spurred on by the rise of the AfD and similar groups in the European Union. As these groups gain more legitimacy internationally, the globe has started to see more pop up.

Therefore, political rhetoric has the ability to affect different communities in differing regions. President Trump's speeches and affirmation of certain organizations has left the globe in shock, and has also worked to legitimize the rhetoric and actions taken by these groups. On the other hand, Merkel has worked to create a progressive nation of Germany by continuing the flow of refugees into the nation, yet there has been a rise of anti-migration movements in Germany. She hasn't had the profound effect she wanted, but she is willing to give up her career to fight it to the end.

In conclusion, while their rhetoric may not directly play into what policies they pass or how effective their policies may be, these two leaders show a more direct connection between the rhetoric that they use and the communities they affect. Since the start of President Trump's administration, there has been a massive increase in hate crimes and violence against minority groups and there has been a clear change in policy and what people are pushing for in the United States. When comparing this environment to Germany, there is a difference in how policies play out. While Merkel has been progressive and has continued to push for more refugees, her hard-line stance and seeming unwillingness to compromise with Germans stress-filled feelings from so many refugees in the nation has left the AfD on the rise and increased hate crimes against refugees in Germany.

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