

Determinants of North American Chief Executives' Immigration Actions: Racial Ideology, Partisanship, or Ethnic Identity?

Abstract: This paper, a chapter from a book manuscript on the immigration policies of US presidents and Canadian prime ministers, aims to explain why individual chief executives took pro- or anti-immigration actions when proposing, signing, or vetoing bills and when issuing executive orders or orders in council. Based on my newly created database of all available immigration-related actions since 1789 or 1867, the Logit/General Estimating Equations analysis confirms the role of white supremacist ideology in both countries and of ethnic identity in the US but yields no support for the partisanship hypothesis.

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Chapter Six

Quantitative Analysis of Pro- or Anti-Immigration Behavior

Chapter One outlined the three main interpretive schools to be studied in this book: theories emphasizing political, cultural, or economic factors. Political hypotheses are rooted in explanations using partisanship, rational choice, and political time. Cultural theories rely on interpretations based on ethnic competition and stratification as well as in religious and ethnic assimilation over time. And economic accounts emphasize the role of a leader's class background and over-time changes in the national economy.

Focusing on these three broad categories, Chapters Two through Five attempted to tease out more precise causal hypotheses by looking at the historical details of eight key leaders' immigration policies and possible motivations. This analysis suggested several potential political causes: affiliation with a liberal party or subscribing to a liberal abstract ideology may encourage libertarian immigration policy, electoral self-interest or legislative bargaining position may tempt one to throw politically powerless immigrants under the bus, wartime exigencies may undermine

support for the foreign-born, and hailing from a politically disfavored region of the country may increase sympathy with migrants. These four historical chapters also raise a few cultural possibilities: growing up around diverse communities, hailing from an ethnically mixed background, and living abroad in one's youth could increase enthusiasm for immigration, as could religious faith and higher education. Believing in white supremacy or "scientific racism," on the other hand, might undermine solidarity with migrants. Finally, economics could influence immigration policy. Being raised in an affluent family might make one more likely to overlook the plight of destitute refugees or economic migrants. Conversely, prosperous periods in North American history could foster a more generous migration policy.

Literature Review

As indicated in Chapter One, very few scholars have analyzed political leaders' immigration policies quantitatively. But one study that comes close to what I intend to do in this chapter is Timmer and Williamson (1998). Modeling U.S. and Canadian immigration policies from 1860 to 1930, these authors find that rising economic inequality and the government's perception that native-born workers will be significantly harmed by immigrants both drive anti-immigration outcomes. This investigation does not conclude that contemporaneous macro-economic conditions consistently affect policy across all countries, but regression analysis indicates that growth in real wages did fuel more libertarian immigration reforms in the United States. The downside of this article for my purposes, however, is that it measures only overall national policy, not the precise contribution of the chief executive. A second investigation, by Arthur and Woods (2013), does look directly at the President's actions on immigration, especially what he says publicly about the

issue. Focusing on immigration-related public speeches by Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, the article finds that higher inflation rates and lower GDP cause negative treatment of the subject but that whether the speech occurred during an election year does not matter. A third study, by Eshbaugh-Soha, Juenke, and Silva (2024), is quantitative but focuses almost exclusively on American presidential rhetoric about migration rather than on actions or policy per se. Thus, though these three publications have begun working on the causes of chief executive's immigration-related actions, much more research needs to be done.

Data and Methods

To examine this question further, my research assistants and I first created two new databases of all available immigration-related actions by chief executives since 1789 (U.S.) or 1867 (Canada). For U.S. presidents, we searched LexisNexis (2022) for all general (i.e., not private members bills about specific individuals) Federal statutes on immigration except for those signed by the four presidents already analyzed in Chapters Two through Five (i.e., Arthur, Clinton, Reagan, and LBJ). I likewise excluded nationality or citizenship laws, immigration-related budget bills, and measures setting annual targets for refugee admissions. Next, we canvassed the American Presidency Project (2022) for all catalogued, immigration-relevant Executive Orders or memoranda, Vetoes, and State of the Union speeches. The main search terms were “immigrants,” “Immigrants,” “Immigration,” “immigration,” “Aliens,” and “aliens.” In a few cases, we found additional policy documents by searching the internet, especially Wikipedia (2022a; 2022b) and Conservative Caucus (2010). One we located our universe of presidential actions (through August

9, 2022), we coded each one as either as 1 = advances an open-border outcome or 0 = does not advance open borders.

For Canadian prime ministers except for those already studied earlier in this book (i.e., Macdonald, Mackenzie King, Diefenbaker, and P. Trudeau), we performed parallel searches in ParlInfo (2022) for Throne Speeches that mentioned “immigration” or “immigrants.” Discourses that supported expanded immigration or mentioned high immigration approvingly were coded as 1, and all other talks as 0. I included all Throne Speeches that were available as of September 8, 2022. I then entered into the database all Orders in Council that were issued in Ottawa (as opposed to London, UK), publicly available online, and concerned with general immigration policy. Here, the data came from Pier 21 (2022d), Library and Archives Canada (2022), Canada (1874), Bligh (1889), Canada (1950; 1955), Statutory Revision Commission (1978), Government of Canada (2022). Lastly, we attempted to locate all general immigration statutes in Pier 21 (2022d), Library of Parliament (2022), Parliament of Canada (1867-2022), and, occasionally, Wikipedia (2022c). As for the United States, we coded 1 = pro-open borders and 0 = not pro-open borders.

For the U.S. models, my research assistants and I used several independent variables to explain the degree of pro-open borders policy for each president. Treating signed legislation as the default category for type of immigration-related action, we added two dummy variables for vetoing a bill and proposing or approving of legislation during the State of the Union speech. Specifically political regressors included affiliation with the Democratic Party, the percentage of seats in the House or Senate held by the president’s party, whether the country was in a declared war in a given year, whether the country was electing a president that year, and whether the president himself was running for reelection that year. The model also employs such cultural variables as whether the president believed in some form of white supremacy or “scientific

racism,”¹ whether the chief executive was ethnically English or non-European, whether at least grandparent had been born outside the United States, and whether the president regularly practiced a religion. Finally, the regression estimated the effect of two economic regressors: whether the country was experiencing a recession or depression and whether the president was from an upper-class background. Data generally came from the internet (e.g., Wikipedia 2022d) or published biographies of the presidents (e.g., Girard 2019).

The independent variables for Canada were similar. As action types, I employed treatment of immigration in the Speech from the Throne or issuing an immigration-related Order in Council. The political Xs were composed of affiliation with the Liberal Party or participation in a declared war. The other political variables I used for the US were not appropriate in Canada’s parliamentary system. Culturally, the model looked at racial ideology,² French ethnicity, a naturalized grandparent, having lived abroad for more than six months, and being religiously devout. And economic variables duplicated those for the United States. For all such background information, we used such representative sources as the *Canadian Encyclopedia* (2022) and *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (2022).

Because the dependent variable is dichotomous, the models rely on a logistic rather than linear function. Since error terms for all immigration-related actions by a given chief executive are undoubtedly correlated, the analysis also uses Generalized Estimating Equations instead of Ordinary Least Squares. And as close examination of the regression tables will reveal, I have needed to drop some variables from the equations because a given political institution does not exist in the other country (e.g., an executive-branch veto of legislation from Canada’s House of Commons) or because a model including the particular variable failed to converge at all or to a reasonable answer in STATA’s maximum-likelihood routine. This latter outcome typically

prevails when the dataset lacks enough cases in a given category (e.g., immigration-related actions by ethnically non-European American presidents). Finally, the quantitative analysis below begins with simple descriptive statistics of the dependent variable by chief executive (Tables 6.1 to 6.4) and then turns to regressions by type of regressor (i.e., political, cultural, or economic in Tables 6.5 to 6.7) and all Xs (Table 6.8).

Statistical Results

Before diving into the regression analysis later in this chapter, we should first examine a few simple statistics describing chief executives' degree of immigration-related activities and pro-immigration actions. Table 6.1 ranks all non-excluded (i.e., not already discussed in depth in Chapters Two to Five) American Presidents by their total number of relevant actions. While length in office obviously facilitates a higher number of total actions, some of the most active presidents (e.g., Trump and Coolidge) served only 4 or 6 years in office. The most active of the non-excluded presidents was George W. Bush with 41 total actions over 8 years. At the other end of the scale, neither Lincoln nor Nixon was very busy making immigration policy, perhaps because they were overwhelmed with seemingly more pressing concerns (i.e., the Civil War or the Watergate scandal). Table 6.2 summarized parallel data for Canada. North of the border, years in office map closely with immigration-related activity; Laurier made 40 decisions over 16 years, while Thompson had only 2 actions over 3 years. Interestingly enough, Canadian prime ministers' activity does seem more frequent if they are relatively restrictionist; Laurier and Harper, known for their hostility to migration, rank at the top of the list, while the much more libertarian Pearson and J. Trudeau score well below the first two PMs.

Next, Table 6.3 describes U.S. presidents' average level of support for immigration. Surprisingly given his white supremacy and sympathy for the Klan, Wilson ranks at the top if one excludes the four chief executives already covered in previous chapters. Eisenhower is also a surprise if one considers his tepid response to the Civil Rights Movement. Obama and Lincoln, in contrast, are intuitive for the first Black president and the Great Emancipator. As supposedly conservative Republicans, the two Bushes do not necessarily come immediately to mind as champions of racial equality and immigrant rights, but their perhaps less-trumpeted actions nevertheless qualify them as consistent supporters of immigration. At the opposite end of this range, Franklin Roosevelt's many failures during the Holocaust and Benjamin Harrison's Southern ancestry³ make their ranking understandable. Table 6.4 outlines Canadian equivalents, with Irish-Catholic John Thompson (N = 2) and Pierre's son Justin Trudeau coming out on top. Laurier and Bennett (N = 3) bring up the rear, which should not astonish students of the "savage nations" PM or "Iron Heel Bennett."

Remarkably given our initial hypotheses in Chapter One about presidential versus parliamentary systems, American presidents have on average proven more libertarian on immigration than are Canadian prime ministers. Overall, 53.3 percent of all U.S. presidential actions in my dataset are pro-immigration. And on average, 43.4 percent of all parallel Canadian actions in the dataset are libertarian. Another way to approach this question statistically is to average across leaders instead of actions. If one adopts this approach for the leaders in Tables 6.3 and 6.4, one obtains a mean of 49.6 percent pro-immigration actions for the U.S. presidents in Table 6.3 and 49.8 percent libertarian actions for the PMs in Table 6.4. Despite my original hypothesis about the effect of presidential versus parliamentary systems, chief executives' level of

support for immigration seems either equal across the two countries or even slightly higher in the United States.

The next set of Tables report on the various regression equations. In Table 6.5, which focuses on political causes of immigration policy, the analysis suggests that no such variable had any effect in either country. In Canada only, however, prime ministers appear more likely to support libertarian policy if those actions are either Orders in Council or statements during the Throne Speech. Actual statutes tend to be more restrictionist everything else being equal.

Table 6.6 summarizes the effect of action type and cultural regressors only. Here, racial ideology (i.e., white supremacy) appears to reduce pro-immigration actions in both the United States and Canada. In the US alone, being ethnically English, the historically dominant ethnic group in that country, apparently undermines pro-migration policies, but having ancestors from outside of Europe (think one Barack Obama) boosts libertarian approaches. Interestingly enough, the francophone/anglophone divide does not yield statistically significant results in Canada. Religious devotion likewise has no effect anywhere, and neither does the birthplace of one's grandparents.

In Table 6.7 we see the outcome for economic variables. Unfortunately for economic theories, not a single economic regressor achieved statistical significance. Despite studies showing some economic effects on mass-level immigration attitudes (Fetzer 2011; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014), neither a recession/depression nor the class background of the president or prime minister had any influence on the leader's immigration policy. Scholars will therefore need to explore non-economic sources of immigration-related elite behavior.

Lastly, Table 6.8 merges action type plus the three kinds of substantive regressors into a single equation for each country. The results are remarkably similar to those in Tables 6.5 to 6.7,

with action type remaining significant for Canada alone. Racial ideology continues to reach statistical and substantive significance across both countries and all time periods. In the U.S., having English ancestry still yields anti-immigration effects, but the variable for non-European ethnicity unfortunately needed to be omitted from the regression to achieve convergence in the maximum-likelihood routine in the statistical software STATA. No economic or strictly political variables had any discernable influence in the full regression.

To explore these rich datasets further, I also tested another explanation of executive action. One of the most well-known scholarly theories of the U.S. presidency focuses on “political time,” or the opportunity structure presidents face given their own party affiliation and the time-related support their party receives in general in the nation (Skowronek 1997). Though this interpretation is probably better suited to explaining the political success or failure of a given president overall, I was curious to see if it would help understand American chief executives’ immigration policy. I therefore assigned each president to one of the four types of presidential politics (i.e., Reconstruction, Disjunction, Preemption [e.g., Biden], and Articulation) following Skowronek’s model (1997; 2011; 2020) and estimated a full regression model with three additional dummy variables for three of the four types of politics. Unfortunately, no such indicator variable achieved statistical significance, suggesting that the theory does not provide much assistance in explaining a leader’s policy orientation.

Table 6.1: American Presidents’ Level of Immigration-Related Activity

President	Total Actions	Years in Office
GW. Bush	41	8
Trump	28	4
Obama	22	8

Coolidge	17	6
Truman	15	8
Biden	14	2
Eisenhower	13	8
GHW. Bush	12	4
Carter	12	4
Hoover	11	4
T. Roosevelt	11	8
Wilson	9	8
Cleveland	7	8
F. Roosevelt	7	13
Grant	6	8
Harding	6	3
Taft	6	4
B. Harrison	4	4
Lincoln	4	5
Nixon	4	6

Presidents with fewer than two actions and Arthur, L. Johnson, Reagan, and Clinton excluded from the analysis. Years in office rounded up to nearest whole number. Data as of August 2022.

Source: Author's database compiled mainly from *American Presidency Project* and *LexisNexis*.

Table 6.2: Canadian Prime Ministers' Level of Immigration-Related Activity

Prime Minister Office	Total Actions	Years in
Laurier	40	16
Harper	18	10
St. Laurent	15	9
Chrétien	13	11
Borden	12	9
Mulroney	9	9
Pearson	9	5
J. Trudeau	6	7
Bennett	3	6
Mackenzie	3	5
Meighen	3	2
Thompson	2	3

Prime Ministers with fewer than two actions and Macdonald, Mackenzie King, Diefenbaker, and P. Trudeau excluded from the analysis. Years in office rounded up to nearest whole number. Data as of August 2022.

Source: Author's database compiled mainly from *Parlinfo* and *LLMC Digital*.

Table 6.3: Pro-Immigration Proportion of American Presidents' Activities

President	Percent Pro-Immigration
=====	=====
Wilson	89
Eisenhower	85
Obama	82
GHW. Bush	75
Lincoln	75
GW. Bush	68
Taft	67
Coolidge	59
Biden	50
Carter	50
Harding	50
Nixon	50
Truman	47
Hoover	45
Grant	33
Trump	21
T. Roosevelt	18
Cleveland	14
F. Roosevelt	14
B. Harrison	0

Presidents with fewer than two actions and Arthur, L. Johnson, Reagan, and Clinton excluded from the analysis. Data as of August 2022.

Source: Author's database compiled mainly from *American Presidency Project* and *LexisNexis*.

Table 6.4: Pro-Immigration Proportion of Canadian Prime Ministers' Activities

Prime Minister	Percent Pro-Immigration
=====	=====
Thompson	100
J. Trudeau	83
Mackenzie	67
Chrétien	62
Pearson	56

St. Laurent	47
Harper	44
Mulroney	44
Borden	33
Meighen	33
Laurier	28
Bennett	0

Prime Ministers with fewer than two actions and Macdonald, Mackenzie King, Diefenbaker, and P. Trudeau excluded from the analysis. Data as of August 2022.

Source: Author's database compiled mainly from *Parlinfo* and *LLMC Digital*.

Table 6.5: Regression of Whether North American Chief Executives' Immigration-Related Actions are Pro-Immigration: Action Type and Political Variables

Variable	American Presidents b (SE)	Canadian Prime Ministers b (SE)
Proposed legislation	.248 (.321)	1.903*** (.494)
Exec Order/Order in Council	.028 (.336)	1.463*** (.434)
Veto	1.042 (.653)	
Democratic/Liberal Party	.021 (.464)	.106 (.618)
House Percent Pres' Party	-.722 (2.563)	
Senate Percent Pres' Party	-2.433 (3.055)	
War	-.133 (.366)	-1.007 (1.172)
Election Year	.033 (.416)	
Running for Reelection	.299 (.488)	
Constant	1.621 (1.459)	-1.149* (.527)
N	255	136
Groups	26	15
$\chi^2/\text{df.}$	5.38/9	18.50***/4

Results obtained from dichotomous Logit, Generalized Estimating Equations regression in STATA. Chief executives Arthur, L. Johnson, Reagan, Macdonald, Mackenzie King, Diefenbaker, and P. Trudeau excluded from the analysis. Data as of August 2022. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Source: Author's databases compiled mainly from *American Presidency Project*, *LexisNexis*, *Parlinfo*, and *LLMC Digital*.

Table 6.6: Regression of Whether North American Chief Executives' Immigration-Related Actions are Pro-Immigration: Action Type and Cultural Variables

Variable	American Presidents b (SE)	Canadian Prime Ministers b (SE)
Proposed legislation	-.138 (.352)	2.168*** (.571)
Exec Order/Order in Council	-.076 (.340)	1.731*** (.544)
Veto	.809 (.712)	
Racial Ideology	-1.464*** (.384)	-1.545** (.545)
Ethnic English	-2.742*** (.647)	
Ethnic French		-.278 (.479)
Ethnic Non-European	1.598** (.602)	
Naturalized Grandparent	.025 (.401)	.060 (.461)
Religious	-.612 (.358)	-.506 (.569)
Lived Abroad		.236 (.941)
Constant	3.297*** (.649)	-.652 (.703)
N	255	136
Groups	26	15
$\chi^2/df.$	63.58***/8	35.96***/7

Results obtained from dichotomous Logit, Generalized Estimating Equations regression in STATA. Chief executives Arthur, L. Johnson, Reagan, Macdonald, Mackenzie King, Diefenbaker, and P. Trudeau excluded from the analysis. Data as of August 2022. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Source: Author's databases compiled mainly from *American Presidency Project*, *LexisNexis*, *Parlinfo*, and *LLMC Digital*.

Table 6.7: Regression of Whether North American Chief Executives' Immigration-Related Actions are Pro-Immigration: Action Type and Economic Variables

Variable	American Presidents b (SE)	Canadian Prime Ministers b (SE)
Proposed legislation	.195 (.313)	1.862*** (.518)
Exec Order/Order in Council	.009 (.331)	1.422** (.452)
Veto	.944 (.624)	
Recession	.163 (.258)	.392 (.489)
Class	-.318 (.489)	1.935 (1.315)
Constant	-.077 (.337)	-1.401*** (.436)

N	255	136
Groups	26	15
$\chi^2/\text{df.}$	3.32/5	17.39**/4

Results obtained from dichotomous Logit, Generalized Estimating Equations regression in STATA. Chief executives Arthur, L. Johnson, Reagan, Macdonald, Mackenzie King, Diefenbaker, and P. Trudeau excluded from the analysis. Data as of August 2022. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Source: Author's databases compiled mainly from *American Presidency Project*, *LexisNexis*, *Parlinfo*, and *LLMC Digital*.

Table 6.8: Regression of Whether North American Chief Executives' Immigration-Related Actions are Pro-Immigration: Action Type and All Available Variables

Variable	American Presidents b (SE)	Canadian Prime Ministers b (SE)
Proposed legislation	.420 (.382)	2.330*** (.611)
Exec Order/Order in Council	.378 (.401)	1.898*** (.576)
Veto	.948 (.743)	
Democratic/Liberal Party	-.239 (.368)	-.487 (.645)
House Percent Pres' Party	-1.886 (2.553)	
Senate Percent Pres' Party	4.646 (2.980)	
War	.274 (.338)	.259 (1.266)
Election Year	.539 (.357)	
Racial Ideology	-2.801*** (.509)	-1.675*** (.507)
Ethnic English	-4.774*** (.895)	
Ethnic French		.272 (.749)
Religious	.458 (.453)	-.728 (.651)
Lived Abroad		.664 (1.132)
Recession	-.112 (.316)	.693 (.512)
Class	.637 (.402)	
Constant	3.026* (1.296)	-.774 (.696)
N	255	136
Groups	26	15
$\chi^2/\text{df.}$	71.02***/14	43.12*** /9

Results obtained from dichotomous Logit, Generalized Estimating Equations regression in STATA. Chief executives Arthur, L. Johnson, Reagan, Macdonald, Mackenzie King, Diefenbaker, and P. Trudeau excluded from the analysis. Data as of August 2022. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Source: Author's databases compiled mainly from *American Presidency Project*, *LexisNexis*, *Parlinfo*, and *LLMC Digital*.

Discussion

Overall, this quantitative test of the various political, cultural, and economic hypotheses derived from related literatures in Chapter One and detailed biographies in Chapters Two through Five indicates that North American chief executives' immigration policies are principally rooted in ethnicity or race, especially whether or not they believe in white supremacy. Despite the many anecdotal examples of political motivations in the biographic chapters, no political regressor survived the confrontation with large-scale data. And in spite of popular understandings of immigration politics as primarily about economics and the labor market, not such variable came close to having an impact on presidents' or prime ministers' actions in Tables 6.5 through 6.8.

My results do not differ markedly from the two closest studies discussed earlier in this chapter. Like Timmer and Williamson (1998), I find that the state of the national economy plays little or no role in determining immigration policy. This result seems to hold whether one models abstract policy produced by all political actors or simply those immigration-relevant actions carried out by the chief executive. Like Arthur and Woods (2013), I conclude that presidential actions during an election year do not differ systematically from those performed in non-election years. Where this second pair of scholars and I do disagree, however, is on economics. Although GDP would presumably drop during a recession, my regression analysis did not produce any statistically significant effects for years in which the economy soured. In contrast, Arthur and Woods do obtain significant results for high inflation and low GDP, at least for the 1990s and early 2000s. Perhaps a poor economy induces presidents to criticize immigration more in their public

speeches to ordinary voters but not necessarily to veto pro-immigration bills or fail to propose fair migration statutes when interacting with professional politicians. Or maybe immigration policy has for some reason become more susceptible to economic influence since the 1990s.

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¹ We coded as white supremacists presidents who owned slaves (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, James Polk, Zachary Taylor, Andrew Johnson, and Ulysses S Grant), supported the Ku Klux Klan (Woodrow Wilson) or “Teutonic” colonialism (Theodore Roosevelt), opposed interracial marriage (Dwight Eisenhower), tolerated lynching (Franklin Roosevelt), and/or voluntarily associated with known white supremacists (Donald Trump). While other presidents may well have held mildly racist attitudes, this list of American chief executives probably captures the worst offenders.

² Relevant Canadian white supremacist leaders were Wilfried Laurier (in Parliament said OK to take land from “savage nations”), Mackenzie Bowell (tried to ban First Nations dances as unacceptable behavior), John Thompson (gave an arguably racist if not pro-genocide speech in the House of Commons rationalizing the execution of “half-breed” Louis Riel, whom later generations of Canadians have come to regard as a champion of Métis rights, the founder of Manitoba, and a Father of Confederation), Robert Borden (referred to West Indians as “backward races”), Authur Meighen (in 1918 report to Parliament, said law viewed First Nations as wards of government), and R.B. Bennett (appointed Louis Audette to whitewash torture of Indigenous children).

³ In actuality, however, Harrison tried to push pro-Black Civil Rights legislation through Congress and had fought in the Civil War on the side of the Union. His ranking at the bottom of the list probably resulted from his almost complete lack of activity on immigration (N=4) and his apparent willingness to indulge the anti-Chinese and anti-Semitic prejudices of most American voters of the era.