

# ***A Study of U.S. Immigration Policy Towards Latin America 2009-2022***

## ***- From the Realism Perspective***

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**Abstract:** The United States is the world's largest recipient of immigrants, and due to historical and geographic reasons, the United States has a deep connection with Latin American immigrants. At the same time, the issue of immigration has become an issue of greater interest to Latino voters in U.S. elections. Since the end of World War II, the U.S. foreign policy-making process has been primarily tinged with offensive realism. Based on this, this paper will analyze the changes in the U.S. government's immigration policy toward Latin America during the Obama administration, the Trump administration, and the Biden administration (as of December 2022) in three different periods through realism theory. This paper finds that although the policies of the three periods mentioned above differ slightly in subtle aspects due to the leaders' personal governing preferences, they all reflect realism in essence in terms of macro policies.

**Keywords:** U.S. foreign policy, Latin American immigration, realism

## **1. Introduction**

In the relationship between the United States and Latin American countries, immigration has become an unavoidable and complicated topic between the two countries. The immigration issue between the U.S. and Latin America has deep historical roots, plays a vital role in U.S.-Latin American relations, and profoundly affects U.S. foreign policy. Especially after World War II, the U.S. government has always put offensive realism at the forefront of the process of U.S. foreign policy decision-making, and the result of this approach is that the foreign policy of the U.S. government is to a large extent tinged with offensive realism. Based on this, this paper will analyze the U.S. immigration policy toward Latin America from the perspective of realism, taking the changes in the U.S. immigration policy toward Latin America under different administrations as an example.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Current Status of Research in the Chinese Domestic Academic Community**

Compared with foreign scholars, Chinese scholars are late in their research on immigration issues and have not paid sufficient attention to the relationship between immigration and foreign policy. The

author summarized the existing literature and sorted out that the research results of domestic academic circles probably include the following three aspects: First, the summary of the profile of Latino immigrants in the United States. Zhang Fan's article, from the perspective of historical analysis, sorts out the scale, direction, and motivation of Latino migration from the early 19th century to the first half of the 20th century and outlines the positive and negative impacts brought by migration [1]. In Li Qirong's article, he uses the center-periphery theory of international migration to explain the phenomenon of the dramatic increase of Hispanic immigration in the U.S. and to explain the motivations [2]. Du Juan's article explains the roots of the illegal immigration problem in the U.S.-Mexico from a historical perspective and summarizes the relationship between this illegal immigration problem and the huge economic divide between the U.S. and Mexico, among others [3]. The second is a study of the impact of immigration on American politics. Feng Feng and Chen Yuanting's article "The Influence of Latino Immigrants on U.S. Elections and the Adjustment of U.S. Immigration Policy" examines the influence of Latino immigrants on U.S. domestic politics from several aspects, including the population size of Latino immigrants, the strategic position of Latinos in swing states, candidates' means to win over Latinos, and the formulation of U.S. foreign policy [4]. Ji Hong's article compares the basic situation and characteristics of Latino immigrants and explores whether Latino immigrants can fight for their own ethnic interests through the demographic dividend and thus have an impact on U.S. politics [5]. Shi Jialin's "Exploring the Impact of Contemporary Hispanic Immigrants on American Society" discusses the negative impacts of Latino immigrants on American society, such as the increasing unemployment rate of Native Americans and the growing problem of illegal immigrants [6]. The third is a study on the impact of Latino immigration on U.S. foreign policy. Compared with the first two areas, there are fewer studies in this area, but there are still some valuable research results. In her book "U.S. Immigration Policy Reform and the 2008 Election," Ji Hong analyzes how Latino immigrants in the U.S. can have an effect on the formulation of the U.S. immigration bill through their votes [7]. Jiang Shixue's "Immigration in U.S.-Latin American Relations" analyzes the role played by immigration issues in U.S.-Latin American relations, and on this basis, further analyzes the adjustment of U.S. policy toward Latin America under the Trump administration and the adverse effects of U.S.-Latin American relations [8].

## 2.2. Current Status of Research in the Foreign Academic Community

Foreign scholars have started to study migration issues earlier, and their studies are more in-depth and specific. They also combine with other disciplines to conduct cross-sectional studies. The research results of foreign scholars on migration issues can be summarized in the following two aspects. The first is research on the causes of international migration. Among them, the most influential one is the "push-pull" theory proposed by the American sociologist Levenstein in the 19th century, which explains the causes of cross-border population movement. He believed that the causes of cross-border migration were the result of a combination of push and pull forces. The "push" refers to unfavorable factors such as wars, natural disasters, or unexpected factors for a group of people to leave. The "pull" refers to the factors that attract immigrants to the target country, such as a stable social environment, a market with a high demand for labor, or special welfare opportunities for a particular group [9]. The second is to examine the relationship between immigration and foreign policy. Choukry analyzes the impact of this migration on political and economic diplomatic relations among Arab countries by sorting out the migration of Egyptian workers from the Middle East to other Arab countries in the 1970s [10]. Weiner constructs a stability framework for analyzing migration issues, emphasizing the linkages between migration processes and other global processes and placing greater emphasis on the role of national policy-making, especially foreign policy-making than traditional political economy approaches [11].

### **3. A Theoretical Framework of Realism Discussion**

The realism school of theory has long been one of the most dominant schools of thought in the paradigm of international relations theory. The principles of realism originated and matured in the United States. Realism holds that the essence of international politics is power politics and that the vast majority of modern states are rational, self-interested actors. The international community has always been full of competition and conflict, and for a long time it has been in a state of anarchy. There is no authority over national sovereignty, so every state in the international community has to fight for power in order to protect its fundamental interests [12]. Realism believes that power is the ultimate determinant in international politics, and that power is manifested by dominating or controlling the power of other countries, thus maintaining and expanding the power of one's own country, and that the way to achieve growth of one's own power is to continuously weaken the power of rival countries and prevent the growth of the power of others [12]. To summarize, it is to curb the growth of the power of the opponent country by continuously increasing its own power, with the aim of curbing the development of the opponent country. Realism, which has a long history in the United States, emphasizes the centrality of power in international politics and believes that only a strong sovereign state can ensure world peace.

### **4. Latin American Immigration Policy under the Obama Administration**

Since the beginning of his campaign, Obama has attached great importance to the issue of immigration. However, within the first term of Obama's presidency, the immigration issue was slow to advance. In his second term, Obama reflected on the lessons of his last failure and made immigration reform the centerpiece of his term, accelerating the restructuring of his immigration policy. Obama's immigration policy for Latin America can be divided into two measures: increasing the management of illegal immigrants and cracking down on them, and bringing in legal immigrants. The first is to strengthen the control of illegal immigrants, who are subject to severe penalties, deportation and expulsion measures. If illegal immigrants provide false documents, forged documents and have other acts, it will increase their criminal penalties. At the same time, strict restrictions should be placed on the re-entry of illegal overstayers in the United States [13]. The second is to provide a way for the approximately 11 million immigrants already in the United States to legalize their status. For employers in industries such as agriculture, the Obama administration has allowed a portion of low-skilled immigrants to be hired to provide an economical source for their livelihood, provided that it does not affect the employment of U.S. citizens [14]. The Obama administration has also introduced many corresponding measures to pull in legal immigrants. For example, for immigrants who have been granted permanent residency, the Obama administration has encouraged them to apply for U.S. citizenship, enjoy the rights and fulfill the obligations of U.S. citizens by enhancing civic education, raising their awareness of citizenship, and simplifying the relevant procedures [15]. To address this issue, Obama encourages legal immigrants with low participation rates to participate in the federal health care program, and their application information will not be shared with immigration enforcement agencies. For legal immigrants who are underinsured, this policy will benefit their own health care and enhance their sense of identity as U.S. citizens while at the same time addressing the safety concerns of their fellow illegal immigrants. With regard to youth in immigrant families, the Obama administration has further promoted the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. This program is designed to help children and youth in families where one parent is incapacitated, deceased, chronically absent, or unemployed [16]. It is administered by the Federal Department of Health and Human Services in conjunction with the state human services agencies. The federal government pays 55% of the cost of AFDC, the state pays 40%, and the local governments pay the remaining 5% [17]. In fact, the AFDC program is an integral part of the U.S. child welfare

system, a fundamental element of the U.S. public assistance program, and is seen as an attempt by the U.S. government to address the problems of youth in immigrant families. Obama has been practicing the diplomatic theory of soft and smart power in Latin America, using a combination of political, military and economic means to adjust immigration policies in Latin America. The U.S. is also actively engaged in non-traditional security cooperation with Latin American countries in the alliance system, including combating the drug trade, terrorism, organized crime, humanitarian assistance, joint exercises and training, and using the public security products provided in exchange for these countries' support for the United States in various political and military fields. Through the export of moderate "soft power" and the soft use of military "hard power," the U.S. has strengthened its control and deterrence over Latin America in a more covert manner while curbing the spillover of non-traditional security threats from Latin America to the U.S. [18]. In short, the Obama administration's policy toward Latin American immigrants has a realistic tone.

## **5. Latin American Immigration Policy under the Trump Administration**

In 2016, Trump emerged as a "political stranger" on the stage of the U.S. presidency. From Trump's early performance, Trump obviously did not care about Latin American affairs and was indifferent to Latin American affairs. For example, in 2014, Trump said in an interview with Brazilian media that he did not know who Dilma Rousseff was and asked who he was (the president of Brazil at the time was a woman). At the same time, during the election, Trump also unapologetically referred to Mexican immigrants as rapists and publicly accused other members of Congress from Latin America. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that Trump believes Latin American countries can be directly equated with the word "failure." Trump's policies towards Latin America were very strict. It can be summarized as the following three aspects: first, large-scale deportation of illegal immigrants; second, increased efforts to build the U.S.-Mexico border wall; and third, a moratorium on legalizing illegal immigrants and limiting the number of legal immigrants. In 2017, in the U.S. National Strategic Security Report, the Trump administration stated that it would increase its efforts to build a U.S.-Mexico border wall to ensure border security [19]. In addition, in order to significantly reduce the number of Latin American immigrants, Trump also introduced the cruel "separation of flesh and blood" policy, which separates the parents and children of immigrants to achieve the purpose of significantly reducing the number of immigrants [20]. For immigrants at the border, Trump has adopted a "zero tolerance" policy for their deportation and arrest. Different from the Obama administration, Trump not only arrests Latin American immigrants with criminal records, but also lists those who have the potential to commit crimes or even those he personally believes will pose a potential threat to U.S. national security [21]. Compared to the previous administration, Trump has adopted a tighter and more overt approach to Latin American immigration. The Trump administration has directly used measures such as the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall and the "zero tolerance" policy to simply and violently keep Latin American immigrants out of the United States. The essence of Trump's austerity immigration policy is to stop the influx of Latin American immigrants into the U.S. He has raised the banner of "America First", and compared to other presidents Trump's Latin American policy has greatly reduced the humanitarian color, instead, Trump's Latin American policy has a strong nationalist and realist color.

## **6. Latin American Immigration Policy under the Biden Administration (2020-2022.12)**

During Biden's term as vice president (2009-2016), he visited Latin American countries 13 times, and his knowledge of Latin American countries is obviously much more familiar than Trump's. Compared with Trump, Biden obviously cares more about and understands Latin American affairs. On the whole, Biden's policy toward Latin America has both inherited and changed from Trump's.

Biden announced on January 20, 2021, that he would end the national emergency, stop the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall, withdraw funding for the wall, and redistribute the funds [22]. On the day he took office, Biden decided to reinstate the childhood assistance program proposed during the Obama administration and to repeal the “separation of flesh and blood” policy. At the same time, Biden hopes to establish a comprehensive regional framework to fundamentally solve the immigration problem, unify the management of immigration in North and Central America, and open an efficient and secure application channel for immigrants who need to go through the process.

In order to address the root causes of migration in Central America, the Biden Administration released the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America in July 2021, which focuses on five major issues in Central America: economic security, corruption, human rights, violent crime and gender violence, and also explains its relevant policies. Take Mexico as an example; Biden attaches great importance to the relationship with Mexico [23]. On March 1, 2021, Biden and Secretary of State Lincoln held a video conference with Mexican President Lopez and others, in which Biden said that the United States and Mexico are equal, and Lopez asked Biden to legalize illegal Mexican immigrants in the United States, in addition to talking about the epidemic, trade, and other issues [23].

To sum up, the Latin American immigration policy under the Biden administration has both inherited and changed compared to previous administrations. Compared with the Trump administration, Biden’s policy approach is more moderate and adopts a more lenient immigration policy, reflecting his idealistic attempts, but its core is still to maintain the core interests of the U.S. state, without changing the “backyard” status of Latin America in the U.S. foreign strategy, and will continue to maintain the U.S. hegemony in American affairs and reshape the U.S. leadership in Latin America. It is still in line with realism, as it will continue to maintain U.S. hegemony in American affairs and reshape U.S. leadership in Latin America.

## 7. Conclusion

In fact, U.S. policy toward Latin America has undergone a transformation from realism to idealism and back to realism in the end. In 1823, Monroe proposed the concept of “America as America for the Americans,” which is the Monroe Doctrine. The essence of the Monroe Doctrine was to exclude other old European colonial powers from power in the Americas and to consolidate American hegemony in the region. After World War I, then President Wilson proposed the Fourteen-Point Plan, an idealistic attempt to break the balance of power established in Europe since the Westphalian system, but this idealistic policy attempt ultimately failed, and the United States continued to implement the Monroe Doctrine and isolationist foreign policies. From the Obama administration to the Biden administration, although they differed in their specific policies, their core was to safeguard the fundamental interests of the United States and consolidate its hegemonic position among Latin American countries, and the core of the U.S. government’s policy toward Latin America today is still these realist policies.

The author believes that the U.S. government’s immigration policy toward Latin America fully demonstrates the essence of realism. In the process of policy formulation, especially during the Trump administration, the banner of “America First” was held high, and the core interests of the United States were put in the first place. The first was to adhere to the principle of “America First” and take the actual benefits gained by the United States as the evaluation standard of the policy; the second was to reduce the enthusiasm for promoting the values of democracy and human rights, weaken the ideological confrontation, and refuse to take the international moral responsibility. Taking the U.S.-Mexico border wall as an example, Trump avoided the consequences of Mexican immigration by building the U.S.-Mexico border wall in a simple and violent way, choosing to avoid it instead of actively introducing corresponding policies to improve the immigration situation. However, the



writer's academic skills and the space of this paper are limited, this research question is still worth further study, so further study on this topic still needs the collaboration of subsequent scholars.

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