

Self-Deportation and Forced Choice as Discursive Maneuver: Force and “Voluntary” Migration

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Abstract

The words we use to understand migration underpin how we attempt to control it. This paper uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to trace the use of “self-deportation.” I find the word was framed in different ways by media, academics and political experts. I focus on how political experts used self-deportation as a form of dog-whistle politics and associated it with a variety of enforcement-only approaches to immigration policy. I consider the relatively consistent political framing participated in shifting policy debates because they normalized the force and coercion implied by deportation.

Keywords

Forced migration, deportation, immigration policy, self-deportation

First submission: April 2018; Revised: February 2019, Accepted: April 2019

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Introduction

An analytic distinction between voluntary and involuntary migration traces back to the beginning of modernity and language remains critical to how we understand this fundamental difference between freedom and coercion. This paper uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explain how “voluntary” movement is implicated in efforts to control migration. For instance, Israel encourages “voluntary return” by offering financial incentives. Other countries have developed more elaborate and expansive programs that include support with formal reintegration once they go home (Plewa 2012). In the United States, legal definitions of voluntary departure and voluntary return are used to contrast deportation. My analysis elucidates how “self-deportation” became a discursive innovation that capitalized on the presumption of voluntary movement.³⁰ I find political experts used the word to mask the force and coercion of deportation.

Political experts understand “dog whistle politics” as discursive conventions in speech. These conventions are of particular analytic significance in democratic societies because they send messages that are “heard only by a certain group of people” (McCaskill in Palmer, 2016; Goodin and Saward, 2005). The discursive appeals persuade in-group members and avoid negative reactions from outgroups (Albertson, 2015). In this analysis, self-deportation was a whistle signaling political support for expanding interior enforcement, cooperating with states and local agencies to detain a greater number of immigrants and increasing deportation.

I suggest that the relatively consistent framing of self-deportation by experts in the period from 1993-2018 enabled a political strategy to develop that centered on deportation, despite significant challenges. For instance, California Governor Pete Wilson appropriated what had been an administrative term in 1993. He passed self-deportation legislation as Proposition 187, which was subsequently deemed unconstitutional.³¹ In May 2005, Mark Krikorian codified self-deportation as part of an “attrition through enforcement” strategy. He used it to frame a political alternative to mass deportation, which had been a dominant theme in debates before passing HR 4437. In 2007, the estimated costs of mass deportation “featured prominently in the congressional hearings” on U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Camacho 2010: 9-10). In 2008, following the largest ICE raid in U.S. history, self-deportation became a way for ICE to defend “Operation Scheduled Departure,” despite their press release indicating it was not a form of voluntary departure or voluntary return. Self-deportation again featured prominently in media coverage of the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaign. Republicans then blamed the term for candidate Mitt Romney’s loss of the election, but media commentators nonetheless inferred President Trump referenced the term again in 2016 when he said “Day one, my first hour in office, those people are gone. And you can call it deported if you want. The press doesn’t like that term. You can call it whatever the hell you want. They’re gone” (Preston, 2016).

³⁰ U.S. immigration law distinguishes between voluntary departure, voluntary return and deportation. For instance, under U.S. President Trump’s “zero-tolerance” policy, families are separated at the U.S.-Mexico border. Desperate parents sign “voluntary departure” forms in order to improve their chances at returning to the United States. This paper focuses only on the discourse surrounding self-deportation and deportation.

³¹ Wilson was the first politician in my dataset to use the word self-deportation. Proposition 187 allowed California to deny social services to undocumented immigrants, including emergency medical care and enrollment in public schools. The courts ruled that the legislation was unconstitutional, but scholars consider it “was a symbolic protest that marked the beginning of a new politics of immigration that would involve states and municipalities to a much larger degree than in the past” (Provine and Varsanyi, 2012: 106).

This paper begins with a discussion of why speech acts are important to our understanding of state coercion. I also explain how different frames lead scholars to misrecognize self-deportation and focus instead on choice and effectiveness. I then outline my methodological approach to CDA and explain why a word (self-deportation) is the subject of my analysis. My approach distinguished expert and media frames that misrecognized self-deportation and that introduced the concepts of voluntariness and choice into discussions about its meaning. Finally, I analyze expert quotes on self-deportation to mediate the potential that its use in media coverage was taken “out of context” (McGlone, 2005).

1. Literature

There is a burgeoning literature on European migration policies that encourage “voluntary return” (Koch 2014). For instance, Frances Webber (2011) notes voluntary return schemes have recently become popular in order to accede to the principle of voluntariness outlined by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), but they don’t meet the UNHCR criteria. Analyzing the case of Afghans granted refugee status, Brad Blitz et al (2005) similarly find that, despite having an ostensibly secure legal status, “choice” had little meaning amidst harassment, violence, deportation of co-nationals, and threats of repatriation. Other scholars echo that “assisted voluntary return” should recognize the role of the state and international organizations in enforcement as “soft deportation” or “state-induced returns” (Arjen Leerkes et. Al 2017; Koch 2014). Antoine Pécoud suggests an alternate explanation for attempts to control mobility in the European Union (EU). Reflecting on the benefits of labor mobility, he argues immigration control is about creating the conditions for mobility to take place without disturbing the “national order of things” (Malkki in Pécoud, 2013).

In contrast, President Theodore Roosevelt suggested the United States should promote order by speaking softly and carrying a big stick. His reference implied the use of force to achieve policy objectives. In this paper, I identify a form of “soft speak” used by politicians in order to advance unpopular ideas. This form of speak can frame an issue in multiple ways, depending on its author. Sociologists have used frame analysis in a variety of ways, but most endeavor to define or distinguish different frames (Feagin, 2010; Matthes and Kohring, 2008; Scheff, 2005; Entman, 2004; Goffman, 1974). Thomas Scheff (2005) suggests a frame can be identified by a word. My analysis of self-deportation led me to distinguish media and political frames because the latter functioned like a dog whistle, “inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another” (Haney López, 2015: 3).

What seemed inaudible to media led it to develop an alternate frame that introduced concepts of choice and voluntariness in defining self-deportation. In other words, media invented opposed metaphors and limited the terms of public debate. Opposed metaphors have long characterized debates surrounding immigration in the United States. For instance, public claims that the immigration system is “broken” can refer alternately to “poor, hardworking migrants [who] cannot obtain visas or work permits for legal entry and employment in the United States” [or] federal authorities [who] have allowed the undocumented population to reach the astonishing sum of 12 million people, who reside within U.S. borders without any imaginable claim to naturalization” (Camacho, 2010: 18). Metaphors are part of how media mobilizes frames than can, for instance, mobilize voters to support anti-immigrant legislation and politicize immigration “in often inflammatory and blatantly populist ways” (Joppke 1998: 18; Haynes et al 2016; Santa Ana, 2002).

The media frame of self-deportation is echoed by scholars who have studied both self-deportation and Attrition through Enforcement (ATE) assert it involves “choice.” For instance, Walter Ewing defines the goal of ATE “to make life in the United States so difficult for unauthorized immigrants that they *choose* to leave, or self-deport” (2010: 114). Luis Fernandez and Joel Olson interpret “all that is needed [by attrition through enforcement as strategy]... is to induce enough fear and terror about being caught that once *chooses* to go away” (2011: 414). Lisa Sandoval argues the “policy [ATE] behind the law [Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070] is...making their lives so difficult that they *voluntarily choose* to leave the country rather than be subject to deportation” (2011: 48). Angela García argues ATE policies are “formed to trigger the *voluntary* exit of undesirable immigrants” (2012: 1850). Alexandra Filandra challenges ATE proponents who are argue it “will work because ‘rational’ individuals will *choose* to ‘self-deport’ (2012: 8).

The scholarship on ATE indicates other ways limited frames constrain our analyses. For instance, the literature asserts related policies, including 287(g) programs and Secure Communities, are *ineffective* in fulfilling their stated objectives of encouraging outmigration.³² Alternately, they suggest the effect is unclear and endeavor to redefine “effectiveness” in terms of other considerations. For instance, some analyses present effects in terms of ATE’s collateral damage on households and children (Suárez-Orozco, 2012; Waslin, 2012). Anna Ochoa O’Leary and Azucena Sanchez (2011) suggest policy goals may be met, but restrictions may impact eligible children. They argue the “highly adaptive and cohesive household forms, including those of mixed immigration status,” make enforcement untenable (128). In a similar vein, David Thronson finds the number of immigrants arrested is less significant than the impact of immigration raids on children and the “unmistakable message of loss and fear” communicated to families (2008: 417). The analysis assumes fear is an *unintended* consequence. In contrast, Adam Goodman (2017) considers fear is the intended consequence that force people to move or live on the margins of a society. Other scholars focus on how ATE policies do not effect settlement and residency (Johnson, 2009; García, 2012). For instance, Emilio Parrado argues the effects of ATE policies are “unclear” because they have been “variably enforced” (2012: 19-20). Although Parrado documents instances of civil and human rights violations related to enforcement, he vacillates in his arguments that ATE “is not very effective at eliminating the undocumented worker population,” “policies are successful only if they are enforced with extreme vigor,” and “extreme application of these programs does in fact reduce the local immigrant population” (2012: 34-35). In essence, Parrado ties the problem of effectiveness to the severity of enforcement. In summary, scholars focus on predicting migrants’ movements and emotions, including fear (Gunkel and Wahl, 2012; Hing, 2010; Mendieta, 2011). Common perspectives on self-deportation also do not elucidate self-deportation as a strategic effort or how it is related to a broader framework of civil and human rights violations. These perspectives also fail to elucidate how self-deportation is a discursive instrument that can serve other purposes, such as promoting increased spending to further militarize a border or to expand the “immigration-industrial complex” (Trujillo-Pagan, 2014).

³² The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act was passed in 1996 and included Section 287(g), allowing ICE to enter into formal agreements of cooperation with state and local law enforcement agencies. 287(g) programs deputize non-federal police officers as immigration agents and gives them the ability to detain undocumented immigrants and begin the deportation process (Coleman 2009). Secure Communities expands officers’ ability to check immigration status by sharing Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) data with ICE via a vis finger prints. Chand and Schreckhise (2014) find local political attitudes played a role in use of Secure Communities program.

The use of data to predict the actual incidence of self-deportation is also reflected in non-academic discourse. For instance, journalists and politicians critical of ATE also share a paradigm that emphasizes efficacy and utility. This presents several problems. First, it obfuscates ATE as a broader *strategy* whose aims span beyond the actual incidence of settlement or outmigration, which is readily apparent from its use in political campaigns. Second, references to social and economic ties unwittingly reify immigrants as subjects whose rights are (or should be) premised solely on the citizenship of children who are “born here” rather than, for instance, the mobility of capital or the human right to work. Third, although migrants are constructed in different ways by ATE proponents and opponents, both reify immigrants as outsiders and may unwittingly render broad entitlement to legal protections a matter of debate. Finally, the shared paradigm emphasizes migrants’ behavior at the expense of critiques directed at ATE as strategy and its influence on enforcement and immigration law.

Current perspectives treat “undocumented migration...as a self-evident problem” (De Genova, 2007). My analysis of self-deportation is particularly significant because it focuses on the word rather than migrant behavior. I find self-deportation is not about choice or even the law’s ineffectiveness in discouraging undocumented migration. Instead, the term is part of a discourse that promotes the law’s ability to expand state control. Self-deportation emerged before the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act was passed in 1996. After that point, political experts were quoted by media. These quotes consistently associate self-deportation with deportation and increased law enforcement, particularly at the local and state level. This association becomes a more systematic whistle after 2005 when Mark Krikorian presented the “attrition through enforcement” strategy.³³ His paper outlined an enforcement-only approach to immigration control, but presented ATE and self-deportation as if there were compromises between two poles in the immigration debate: mass deportation and amnesty. In other words, the word has a political history that both precedes and that follows what seem to be more recent political trends.

An online map of people who have used or promoted ATE identifies John Tanton as “the Architect” of an anti-immigrant movement.³⁴ He founded the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) in 1985. As its Executive Director, Krikorian’s paper took on an air of “non-partisan research” that was legitimized by media. In other words, by quoting political experts on self-deportation, the media became complicit in normalizing a discourse that expands law enforcement. Indeed, the online “who’s behind the plot against DACA” map includes a variety of actors currently at the front lines of the anti-immigrant movement and the U.S. government, including Kris Kobach, Jeff Sessions, and Stephen Miller.

2. Methods

I use an approach to critical discourse analysis that has an affinity with other socio-cultural analyses. Norman Fairclough (2013) underscores the relationship between social practices that shape texts and, in turn, how texts frame social issues. He outlines four stages of analysis that include identifying semiotic obstacles to addressing social wrongs and their role in depoliticisation and politicization. His approach to critical discourse analysis emphasizes how

³³ The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) identifies “CIS as an anti-immigrant hate group” whose deceptive research and reports are used by politicians and conservative media. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/center-immigration-studies>

³⁴ <https://www.plotagainstdaca.com/network/#graph>

decoding texts can be a significant form of social research because they help elucidate the relations between “social history and social reality” (Fairclough 2013, p. 229).

This study builds on Fairclough’s insights and analytic approach to CDA by treating discourse as historical and dialectical process (earlier texts influence subsequent ones) and by paying close attention to the socio-cultural and historical context in which text is produced and consumed. I conducted the study in three stages. The first began in 2012 as media buzzed about what “self-deportation” meant. I began an exploratory online search and created a list of the definitions that followed the term’s use in the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign. I found no consensus on what the word meant. Indeed, a single article could refer to self-deportation in contradictory ways. A sample of the definitions are categorized in Table 1:

Table 1: Online References to Self-Deportation (2012)

Words Associated with Definition	Themes
“idea” and “fantasy,” (Editorial Board, 2012) “myth” ³⁵	Idea/concept
“proposal,” ³⁶ “solution,” ³⁷ “policy” ³⁸	Policy
“fantasy,” ³⁹ “dream,” “nonsense”	Psychology
“movement” ^{40, 41}	Collective/social movement

The lack of consistency in how the term framed social reality shaped my approach to a second stage of analysis, which was more systematic in considering how mainstream media defined self-deportation. In this stage, I relied on what is now called “Nexis Uni,” and formally called Lexis Nexis, which is a widely-referenced database that indexes domestic and international news in a variety of formats. I used the keywords “self-deport” and “self-deportation.” My preliminary analysis indicated “self-deport” was used narrowly to refer to human movement and the term was dropped from further analysis. In contrast, “self-deportation” was used in politicized and ambiguous ways that elicited clarification. Sources referenced in this second

³⁵ <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/myth-self-deportation>

³⁶ States News Service. "CRACKERJACKS, BAY OF PIGS SEQUEL AND SELF-DEPORTATION". States News Service. January 23, 2012 Monday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:54T4-R9B1-DYTH-G02B-00000-00&context=1516831>.

³⁷ Elizabeth Stuart Deseret News. "Gingrich mocks Romney's 'self-deportation' solution to illegal immigration, Romney swings back". Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City). January 25, 2012 Wednesday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:54TH-NC01-JBRG-X18H-00000-00&context=1516831>.

³⁸ States News Service. "ROMNEY DECIDED TO BE THE MOST EXTREME CANDIDATE ON IMMIGRATION". States News Service. May 8, 2012 Tuesday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:55KN-1PD1-JCBF-S28R-00000-00&context=1516831>.

³⁹ Editorial Board. "The 'self-deportation' fantasy". The Washington Post. January 29, 2012 Sunday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:54V5-K2V1-JBFW-C55Y-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁴⁰ David A. Fahrenthold. "A test for architects of bills on migrants". *The Washington Post*. April 25, 2012 Wednesday. <https://advance.lexis-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:55GN-Y6M1-DXXY-33TD-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁴¹ Targeted News Service. "Fifth Circuit Affirms Farmers Branch Housing Ordinance As Unconstitutional Targeting of Undocumented Immigrants". *Targeted News Service*. March 21, 2012 Wednesday. <https://advance.lexis-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:557F-W7C1-DYG2-R0PR-00000-00&context=1516831>.

stage of analysis included major newspapers, magazines, news wires, television broadcasts, and blogs.

One consideration that required further analysis was that Nexis Uni results included news reports reproduced across multiple sources. This meant there was a high number of duplicates among the 5,339 records in the period from 1988-2019 (see Figure 1). Another concern with the data from stage 2 was that journalists defined self-deportation ambiguously and failed to identify agents or the cause of action (see Table 2). The discursive ambiguity highlights the ways media associated self-deportation with a variety of strategies and perspectives on immigration policy. A third concern was that media was not only inconsistent in defining the term, but also in when it paid attention to its use. Nexis Uni includes a timeline of articles, which indicated references were particularly pronounced in the period surrounding Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign (see Figure 2). This meant that 2,935 of the records were in the period between 2011-2013 (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Media References to Self-Deportation (1988-2019)

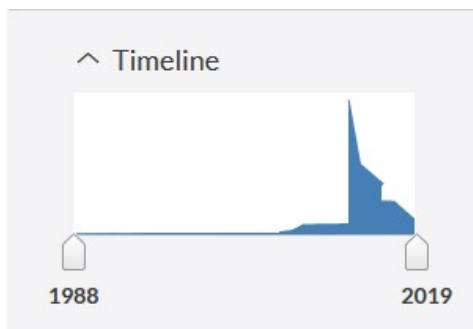


Figure 2: Media References to Self-Deportation (2011-2013)

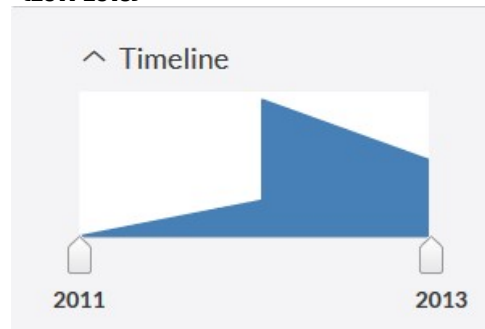


Table 2: Media Frames of Self-Deportation

	agent/subject or cause	Adverse outcome		Implied choice (voluntary)
No agent/cause identified	None	life	life becomes hard	leave of their own accord ⁴²
			making life so difficult	choose to return ⁴³
			lives unbearable	want to leave
			life so inhospitable	flee rather than face legal proceedings
			life so miserably unlivable for Hispanics--documented and undocumented alike	no other viable option but to move from the jurisdictions in which we currently live, to return "home".
		conditions	conditions so unwelcome	leave voluntarily
			making economic conditions so difficult	choose to leave the country
		children	dividing children from their families	none
jobs	Tough...to get jobs	force them to leave		
agent/cause identified	every transaction with a government worker into an effective checkpoint	life	making life unbearable	forcing them to move back
	tougher enforcement measures		making life more difficult	inducing illegal immigrants to leave voluntarily
	stricter immigration laws		make life ... so unbearable	they will leave on their own ⁴⁴
	laws	conditions	make it so hard to get a job or do business	leave voluntarily
	a legal environment		a) so hostile b) work so hard to come by	choose to depart of their own volition
No Adverse outcome	before ICE gets to them first	None	lived in the United States for decades	should decide to pick up and leave by themselves
	if citizenship laws and restrictions are enforced		NONE	leave on their own
	strict enforcement of laws		NONE	encourage ... to leave
No Adverse outcome No agent/cause	NONE		NONE	leaving the country voluntarily
Misc	equivalent to 1070's stated intent of " attrition through enforcement. "			
	undocumented immigrants will get their affairs in order, return to their native countries and try to reenter the United States by legal means--"getting in line" though no such line exists			

As a result, and following other qualitative research on media frames, in Stage 3, I focused on quoted references in the news in order to analyze how experts defined self-deportation. In

⁴² "Arizona Primary 2012: What to Watch For". International Business Times News. February 27, 2012 Monday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:552D-6TH1-DXX7-H2HV-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁴³ Alan Gomez, USA TODAY. "In voter tug of war, both conventions play to Hispanics". USA TODAY. September 7, 2012 Friday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:56HG-43X1-JC8N-K3P2-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁴⁴ "Romney says he favors 'self-deportation'". The Associated Press. January 24, 2012 Tuesday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:54T8-C3G1-DXYN-605S-00000-00&context=1516831>.

other words, media relied on experts who had a professional interest in immigration. By focusing on expert quotes, I mediated the potential that politicized statements were taken “out of context” (McGlone, 2005). My final sample of 205 unique quotes were authored by politicians, enforcement officers (ICE), Campaign Advisors and Supporters (both Democrat and Republican), organizations (immigrant rights advocates, conservative groups), immigration attorneys and migrants. Only 6 quotes fell outside these categories, but were nonetheless retained in the final sample.⁴⁵ Word counts were highest for federal government politicians, Presidential candidates and conservative organizations.

In Stage 3, I identified an important shift in how Republicans thought about self-deportation after Mitt Romney lost the 2012 election. This shift was signaled by the publication and subsequent deliberations surrounding the Republican Party’s “Growth and Opportunity Project” Report, which was referred to as an “autopsy” of why they had lost (Barbour et al 2013). The value of that analysis is not tied to public debates or even the ways media misrecognized self-deportation. Indeed, after 2012 the media used the term repeatedly and politicians avoided it. One politician responded to a journalist’s query about self-deportation that he didn’t speak in whistles. Because the signaling of self-deportation shifted so significantly after 2012, my analysis is centered on the period before that date.

3. Data

a. the Opposed Metaphor of Choice/False Choice

Politicians and other political experts associated self-deportation with enforcing immigration policy. Their references treated force as an abstraction and removed it from the criticisms that have long accompanied the ways ICE detains and deports people. Meanwhile, although the media emphasized choice, experts who were proponents of self-deportation did not. For instance, the opening premise of the 2005 paper that initially outlined “attrition through enforcement” as strategy involved a fundamental rejection of choice.

“Since the federal government can't quickly deport the 10-12 million illegal aliens, the only alternative is legalization -- i.e., amnesty. But there is a third way that rejects this false **choice**, and it is the only approach that can actually work: Shrink the illegal population through consistent, across-the-board enforcement of the immigration law” (Krikorian 2005).

In this use, choice is the “false” outcome of two options that immigrants do not act upon. Migrants are referenced in abstract terms, as a population that can “shrink” through enforcement. In the sentences that followed, Krikorian underscored the systematic elimination of choice through force.

By **detering** the settlement of new illegals, by **increasing deportations** to the extent possible, and, most importantly, by increasing the number of illegals already here who **give up** and deport themselves, the United States can bring about an annual decrease in the illegal-alien **population**, rather than allowing **it** to continually increase. The point, in other words, is not merely to curtail illegal immigration, but rather to bring about a steady **reduction in the total number** of illegal immigrants who are living in the United States. The result would be a shrinking of the illegal population to a **manageable nuisance**, rather than today's looming crisis. This is analogous to the approach a corporation might take to downsizing a **bloated**

⁴⁵ These included a comic strip cartoonist, business people, a resident of Arizona and a University student.

workforce: a hiring **freeze**, some **layoffs**, plus new incentives to encourage excess workers to leave on their own” (Krikorian 2005).

In this construction, forced migration and deterrence act on objects: illegals, aliens, population, number and nuisance. The state becomes a corporation. Incentives do not give choice, but instead systematically deny it. Self-deportation compliments a strategy focused on deterrence and deportation.

b. The Opposed Metaphor of Legal / Illegal

Self-deportation emerged in relation to a state politician’s effort to expand his control over immigration regulation. Prior to 1993, media references to self-deportation treated it as an act undertaken by an individual to leave a country and relinquish his/her legal claim to belonging in a country, typically while the person had a pending status adjustment application or under an order of deportation. California Governor Pete Wilson appropriated the term in 1993 when he claimed “you’d see self-deportation” result from enforcement and a law that denied public benefits, including education and health care, to “illegal immigrants” (Sesno 1993). Despite many important influences in the intervening years, Wilson’s initial reference to self-deportation was a blue-print for many associations mirrored almost twenty years later in the Republican Primary Presidential debates of 2012.

For instance, in 1993, Wilson explained

“the **denial** of needed services to legal residents, many of them, I might add, **legal immigrants** who have recently arrived, and it is they who **suffer most** in terms of depressed wages, lost jobs and even the crimes committed by people who comprise 13 percent of the state’s prison population” (Sesno, 1993).

Wilson associated illegality with indirect and direct threats (wages, jobs, crimes) to legal immigrants. Similarly, Romney blamed “illegal immigrants” for the problems of

“four to five million people who are **waiting** at home in their own nations trying to get here legally...Grandparents and uncles and aunts. Those are the people we have a responsibility for...Let’s focus our attention on how to make **legal immigration** work and stop illegal immigration” (Blitzer, 2012)

Romney implied “illegal immigration” explains why people are “waiting...to get here legally.” He reinforced this association in other quoted references to “the line,” which tied immigration to the ideas of competition, fairness and deservedness. Wilson suggested legal immigrants suffer because of illegal immigrants, while Romney implied potential legal immigrants wait because of illegal immigration. These associations defined “illegal immigration” as the cause of denial, suffering, and waiting and blamed “illegal immigrants” for problems related to legal immigration. They also constructed both politicians as defenders of vulnerable and legitimate (“legal”) victims of illegality. At the same time that they dissociated immigration policy for problems associated with legal immigration, both politicians referred to “obligation” and “responsibility” in order to suggest their plans to introduce new policies would correct the problem of “illegal immigration” and “illegal immigrants.”

In two other quotes, Wilson and Romney similarly advocated developing of a “card” that would prove legality. The card became symbolic not only because its absence would create the conditions that would ostensibly encourage self-deportation, but also because they loaded

it with anxiety about fraud. For Wilson, driver's licenses "are easily **counterfeited**" even though they include a picture and a thumbprint (Thurm, 1994). He focused on "the **technology** of the card" (Press, 1994). Eighteen years later, the arguably advanced technology of the E-verify system allowed Romney to charge it with an ability to inform "employers...if it's ["identification card"] been **counterfeited**" (Blitzer, 2012). One of the critical limitations of E-verify is that it cannot detect counterfeits. Instead, its use often results in a high number of false positives that force people with the legal ability to work to prove their status. They often lose money and/or a job opportunity.

c. *The Opposed Metaphor of Home: Here / There*

In 2008, the majority of statements on "self-deportation" referred to a program launched that year and reflected broader debates around enforcement, detention, and deportation. An ICE program dubbed "Operation Scheduled Departure" followed shortly after the May 2008 raid in Postville, Iowa, which was the largest in U.S. history. The raid and subsequent detention of almost 400 workers reflected the broader erosion of immigrants' rights to due process and judicial review. An ICE press release that described Operation Scheduled Departure claimed "**thus far** in FY 2008, they **arrested** more than 26,000 **fugitives and other immigration status violators**. There are 90 **active** fugitive operations teams, with 14 more scheduled to be **deployed** in the next two months." Beginning the press release by associating Operation Scheduled Departure with "arrest and removal" bolstered the implied threat of detention. The release used numbers and time to amplify the threat of deportation and attributed an indistinct criminality to "fugitives and other immigration status violators." The release mobilized military imagery in reference to "active fugitive operations teams" and others "to be deployed." Although the program was widely considered an experiment with "self-deportation," the release explicitly clarified "the program is **not a form of voluntary** departure or voluntary return," which implied removal orders. The ban on re-entry to the United States would also not be suspended. Presented in the context of constraint, the release defined avoiding detention as an "opportunity."

Of the 28 quotes published in 2008, nine were issued by immigration enforcement officials. Their quotes were consistent in explaining the program was a response to criticism ("many have criticized us for" (Martin, 2008), "organizations who have asked us" (McCombs, 2008) and "issues were brought forward to us...asking us"(Tareen, 2008)) and as an

"**alternative** methods to enforce the law...This was a program we thought we could to do in **affording** them the opportunity to come forward without being arrested, without having detention time and **allowing** them to minimize impact it's going to have on the **family**" (Tareen, 2008).

The quotes displace attention from enforcement methods onto a "them" who were made responsible for minimizing the impact of deportation on their family. The ICE official implied the family was in the United States and threatened by arrest and detention, but the actor is not ICE, but "them." In contrast, the quotes presented ICE as responsive ("affording," "allowing") and concerned about families.

Two quotes that challenged the program referred more specifically to children. For instance, one migrant argued "It's [Operation Scheduled Departure] not **right**...people have **children** who are U.S. **citizens**. They'll be left **alone**" (Tareen, 2008). The shortness of the quote reflects how media reproduces power, authority and influence, but its existence suggests important areas of overlap with the discourse on self-deportation. The migrant's reference to

citizens was associated with needs and protection in ways that were comparable to how Wilson and Romney had constructed legality. From the migrant’s perspective, however, it was enforcement that threatened citizens. The migrant destabilized the association of enforcement and law, implying instead that enforcement compromises rights (“It’s is not right.”) Whereas the dominant discourse on self-deportation assumed enforcement protects, the quote highlighted how enforcement had become the threat. It emphasized citizenship and its associated rights to protection. The quote implied children should not be left “alone” by the people who “have” them. In the quote, children symbolized a shared familial vulnerability that expanded the rights of citizenship to protection from forced migration.

A secondary theme in 2008 was reference to “home.” The quotes varied in the implied location of “home” within or outside the United States but shared an assumption that it was jeopardized by potential enforcement. As one officer explained, “it’s getting too hard to **hide**. They have the **stress** of looking over their shoulders...they know there’s a lot of law enforcement looking for them. This is their way to go **home**” (Weiss, 2008). Among quotes that challenged Operation Scheduled Departure, “home” was only referred to once. Joshua Hoyt, Executive Director of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, noted “The vast majority of immigrants are trying to stay in the U.S. because they have American citizen **children**, they have **homes** and they have **jobs** they've been working at for years” (Press, 2008). His quote associated “home” with important ties to the United States that include children and jobs. Unlike the discourse on self-deportation that used “home” as an abstract place one returns to, in this quote, home is here in the United States.

Fourteen quotes dismissed or challenged the discourse surrounding self-deportation and “Operation Scheduled Departure.” Rather than assume its goal was effective self-deportation, however, Hoyt wondered “Perhaps it's [the program] trying to make them [ICE] **look** more **humane**...It's not designed to work” (Hsu and Lydersen, 2008). His reflection implicated a fundamental characteristic of modern discipline. Modern enforcement and corrections are premised on “humane” forms of regulating groups and ostensibly reject pre-modern forms of physical punishment and torture (Foucault 1977). The popular consensus that enforcement should be humane explains why mass deportation and enforcement measures like “Operation Wetback” did not have widespread support. Similarly, polls indicate most voters oppose family separation at the U.S.-Mexico border (Matthews, 2018; O’Neil, 2018). The political demand to manipulate the appearance of humane immigration enforcement and control continue to inform political critiques. Four of the remaining quotes echoed related efforts to manipulate the ways ICE was perceived.

d. *The Opposed Metaphor of Workers and Employers*

In the years leading up to the 2012 Presidential debates, use of the term “self-deportation” was infrequent and elaborated themes that had been previously identified. In 2012, most of the 72 quoted references focused on **jobs** (35) and **deportation** (15).⁴⁶ Mass deportation was only mentioned once, but Kris Kobach suggested legislation could have “massive effects” on self-deportation at a national level when he referred to the effects of Arizona’s 2007 law. His claim reflected a new pattern of associating law with jobs. In particular, law was implicated in

⁴⁶ The majority of quotes published in 2012 implicated Romney’s political position on self-deportation (45/72). Many statements considered his advocacy of self-deportation had a negative effect on his campaign (19/45) and a majority used this position to dismiss or oppose his candidacy (28/45). A minority of quotes was limited to Romney’s candidacy (8/45), however, and most statements (64/72) also referred more generally to self-deportation.

denying work opportunities and in establishing a “guest” worker program, an identification card and an E-verify system. Quotes focused on workers, job-seekers, and work permits rather than employer practice. **Employers** were infrequently mentioned (3) and no quote implicated the law in regulating employer hiring practices beyond general references to post-hoc “sanctions” and “penalties.” For example, Romney implied employer discretion when he argued E-verify “allows employers to check.” Other quotes similarly referred to employers’ ability or used more abstract terms, such as “tools,” to obscure the relationship between law and employers.

Although self-deportation was not often explicitly implicated in human rights and/or humane enforcement in 2012, it remained associated with ideas of vulnerability and deservedness that distinguished between immigrants whose opportunities required protection, such as “young, talented Hispanics,” and others whose marginality was reinforced by their status as single and unrooted in America. For instance, during the campaign, Newt Gingrich (2012) associated self-deportation with “fantasy,” but specified “the one group I singled out were people who have been here a **very long** time who are **married**, who may well have **children** and **grandchildren**” (Blitzer, 2012) His quote made age, marital status, and family the basis for a legitimate claim to stay in the United States. The opposed metaphor contrasted heterosexuality with persons who were not tied to citizens who are “**children** and **grandchildren**.” In other words, Gingrich did not challenge the legal basis of citizenship, but instead, implied enforcement should be reserved from some groups and based on selective criteria.

Conclusion

Self-deportation was reproduced by media and scholars who provocatively associated it with choice. This misrecognition undermines public efforts to mobilize symbolic capital against local and state anti-immigration policies, measures, and practices. The relationship of self-deportation to enforcement was notably absent in media critiques of self-deportation, Analysis of political expert quotes on self-deportation demonstrated how enforcement was simultaneously emphasized and presented in abstract terms. For example, abstract references to enforcement as “measures” and “tools” camouflaged the force and coercion implied by deportation. The emphasis on specific terms that were repeatedly associated with self-deportation was thereby used to justify enforcement in the broadest terms. Presented as an aspect of existing law, measures associated with self-deportation seemed palatable. Experts repeatedly emphasized the distinction between the “attrition through enforcement” approach and mass deportation. Their opposed metaphors used self-deportation to obfuscate criticism of increased deportation and the use of forceful methods. Similarly, conservative politicians contrasted the extreme of mass deportation to make their support for deportation seem more legitimate. In this context of eroded human rights, self-deportation was reframed as not only deportation, but also humane enforcement.

My data finds scholars and the media reified and reproduced the idea that the political objective of self-deportation included choice. In contrast, conservative politicians and lobbyists have not associated self-deportation with choice or voluntariness. This finding suggests that the whistle of self-deportation was effective in obscuring the force inherent in “en-force-ment.” Similarly, the idea of “forced choice” is an oxymoron that contributes to distancing self-deportation from coercion. In these ways, scholars fetishized migrants’ behavior.

“A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx, 2018:46).

Like “a very trivial thing,” scholars abstract human movement from the social and political context that determines its legality. My analysis revealed how politicians endeavored to expand state control in a variety of ways and how they implicated a variety of actors in normalizing coercion and forced migration. In the original version of self-deportation (1994), even teachers and hospital workers would police the spaces that people can “legally” occupy. Eventually, local police officers were drafted to the task. Self-deportation indicates the ways enforcing otherwise controversial immigration policies has enlisted even journalists and scholars in the task of normalizing coercion through knowledge.

My analysis revealed that self-deportation was revealed as more than an idea, policy, or movement. Instead, it was a symbolic technique used to legitimize the increase and expansion of state control. State officials and political experts used self-deportation and a pattern of opposed metaphors to constrain debates about immigration overall, e.g. beyond unauthorized immigration. Self-deportation was framed as a compromise, a “third way” between the policy alternatives of mass deportation and amnesty. This discursive strategy co-opted public and Congressional debates about mass deportation, but nonetheless promoted increased enforcement. In this way, references to self-deportation were like a dog whistle that helped move political debates on immigration to the right. Even in purportedly unsuccessful proposals, references to self-deportation nonetheless shifted the meanings and implications of illegality and expanded the scope of enforcement at the local level. My data also indicated that media references to self-deportation deflected challenges to state authority and inhumane deportation practices. Politicians and lobbyists presented self-deportation as a symbolic alternative to the excesses of deportation, as if it made the costly and disastrous specter of mass deportation obsolete. By 2012, the ridicule Romney faced for insisting on self-deportation at the national level suggested the whistle had lost its sound. It appeared to have been out of tune. It was nonetheless present in its absence when President Trump recognized a term “the press doesn’t like” and insisted on mass deportation.

Scholars, politicians and immigration activists continue to debate immigration policy in ways that remain ensnared by opposed metaphors. One debate involves whether self-deportation reduced the number of immigrants in the United States. Another whether it is humane. Yet another debate surrounds who should have rights and who should protect them. That these matters are subject to debate indicate how “the problem” was taken for granted, normalized and constrained consideration of a broader field of solutions. My data demonstrated that self-deportation muddled the possibility of democratic approaches to governing migration. Most immigration discourse following Pete Wilson’s invention has not required any voter input in order to be effected and/or enacted. For instance, 287(g) and Secure Communities are products of collaborations between federal agents and local law enforcement. The expansion of policing and law enforcement has developed to the point that the United States enjoys the dubious honor of having the largest incarcerated population in the world.

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