**The Decline of the “Good Immigrant Worker” Frame in the U.S. Movement for Immigration Reform**

**and the Stork Theory of Migration**

A Discursive Institutionalist Analysis of Labor Frames in the Movement for Immigration Reform from the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides to the Reform Immigration for America Campaign

*Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting*

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Abstract

President Reagan signed the last comprehensive reform of our nation’s immigration laws into law in 1986. In the 35 years since then, the immigrant rights movement has steadfastly battled to pass another Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) bill. While there have been several near misses, the campaign for CIR has failed repeatedly for decades. Conventional Political Science accounts of why CIR has stalled have generally fallen short of looking beyond “parties and population” to explain CIR’s stalemate in Congress, taking those categories as static and predetermined. This paper adopts the lens of Discursive Institutionalism to examine the discourses of movement advocates themselves to understand better the strategic missteps and institutional choices that have contributed to the repeated collapse of immigration reform. Specifically, I argue that we must examine the role of labor and labor frames in movement discourse. As such, this paper seeks to “bring the labor back in” to the study of immigrant social movement discourses. By examining interviews with movement leaders, analysis of campaign documents, and news coverage, I find that organized labor’s involvement in the immigrant rights movement has receded over the last decade. I argue that following the massive immigrant marches of 2006, the Great Recession coupled with the Obama Era of concessionary politics plus internal challenges within the labor and immigrant rights movements led the immigrant rights movement to deemphasize the labor frame and the centrality of the push-pull factors of immigrants as workers. The decline of labor frames has led to the evisceration of one of the main sources of power of the immigrant rights movement in favor of public opinion strategies aimed at appealing to the benevolence and sympathy of voters. As a result, the movement replaced the language of power and labor with the “story theory of migration,” whereby innocent DREAMer youth are dropped from the sky by elite pollsters, thus erasing the push-pull forces that drive migration in the first place. While strategies aimed at shared liberal values can be a beneficial component of successful strategies, values decoupled from the underlying economic forces that drive migration in the first place undermine a significant source of migrant power.

1. **The Labor of Explaining Stalled Immigration Reform Since Reagan’s IRCA**

On November 6, 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control

Act (IRCA) aptly calling it “…the most comprehensive reform of our immigration laws since 1952.”[[1]](#footnote-2) In the thirty-five years since then, immigrant advocates have persistently failed to pass Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) legislation,[[2]](#footnote-3) despite their tenacious, if not outright obstinate, efforts and several near misses. Meanwhile, the unauthorized immigrant population has held steady at around eleven million residents with no legal mechanism to adjust their immigration status, so the urgency of the need for reform has also remained constant across the fluctuations in party control of the federal government.[[3]](#footnote-4) Why has the fight for immigration reform been stalled for over three decades? Should we blame it on partisanship? The exogenous ebb and flow of globalization and economic forces? Is the culprit of CIR’s demise racist backlash against demographic changes?

While these factors certainly play a role in explaining the thwarted efforts to pass CIR, this paper joins a burgeoning literature in Political Science and other disciplines that looks to the *discourses* of immigrant rights movement advocates themselves and the communications strategies of political actors to understand better the strategic missteps and institutional choices that may have contributed to CIR’s repeated collapse. This paper begins with a brief overview of the major strains of arguments about why immigration reform has failed. Secondly, I outline how a Discursive Institutionalist (DI) approach, as defined by Vivien Schmidt, which attends to historical continuities and fissures across discursive regimes, is crucial for revealing the promise and pitfalls of movement strategies.[[4]](#footnote-5) I argue that the DI approach allows us to witness the presence and disappearance of discursive protagonists (e.g., the DREAMer, “the worker,” and the “good immigrant”)[[5]](#footnote-6) over time, which is key to understanding the underlying power dynamics of movement politics. Finally, by connecting language and institutions, DI methods allow us to better observe the political landscape gaps and attend to the question of power. Who has the resources and skills to make change? What are they saying about immigration? Who is speaking on behalf of immigrants? Who is missing from the conversation? Are those silences intentional and strategic, or, as I argue, do they point towards relatively silent institutional players who could be the key to unlocking policy change?

More specifically, this paper examines the frame of the “good immigrant worker” and the role of labor unions in the discourse of immigrant movements in the United States over the last two decades. By examining news coverage, primary documents from movements themselves, and interviews with movement leaders, this paper traces the rise and fall of a focus on immigrants as laborers in the movement’s “communicative discourse.”[[6]](#footnote-7) I argue that to understand the failure of the CIR movement, we need to focus on how the movement talks about immigrants. How and why did the immigrant rights movement shift its primary discursive frame from the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride of 2003 to the We Are Home campaign of 2021? How can this shift illuminate the successes and failures of the immigrant rights movement? This paper examines the discourses of movement advocates themselves to better understand the strategic missteps and institutional choices that may have contributed to repeated collapse of immigration reform.

In the wake of the massive immigrant marches of 2006, I contend that the Great Recession coupled with the Obama Era of concessionary politics plus internal challenges within the labor movement itself led the immigrant rights movement to deemphasize the labor frame and the centrality of the push-pull factors of immigrants as workers. This resulted in the evisceration of one of the main sources of power of the immigrant rights movement (labor power) in favor of public opinion communication strategies aimed at appealing to the benevolence and sympathy of national voters via deracinated appeals to American nationalism. While strategies aimed at liberal values represent an important component of successful strategies, they cannot be decoupled from the underlying economic forces that drive migration in the first place and are the grounds of a significant source of migrant power.

This examination begins in the early 2000s, when the character of the “good immigrant” and the “immigrant worker” dominated the words and platforms of immigrant movement leaders. In the early 2000s, the frame of the immigrant worker was ascendant, as evidenced by the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides of 2003, which was the national vehicle for immigrant rights mobilizations in that year. By the 2010s, the immigrant worker frame gave way to the “DREAMer” frames of innocent children, normative nuclear families, and American belonging through nationalistic frames and appeals to the liberal values of American citizenship, as seen in the movements Reform Immigration 4 American (RI4A) and the Alliance for Citizenship. Other scholars, notably Walter Nichols,[[7]](#footnote-8) have pointed to the rise of the nationalistic “master frame”[[8]](#footnote-9) in the immigrant rights movement, but this paper examines the ebbs and flows of competing frames, notably that of immigrant as laborer. How does examining the immigrant rights movement through the lens of labor frames help us better understand the successes and failures of the movement? This paper seeks to “bring the labor back in” to the study of immigrant movements and the failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation.

1. **Talking About Immigrants: Discursive Institutionalism and Immigrant Discourses**

This paper makes the case that to fully understand the failure of immigrant rights advocates to pass CIR legislation, we must look beyond the factors typically considered by Political Scientists and many immigration scholars, such as partisanship,[[9]](#footnote-10) the presidency,[[10]](#footnote-11) and demographic change.[[11]](#footnote-12) While these factors are certainly crucial explanatory variables, they fail to answer key questions and tend to obscure the agency and political opportunities confronting political actors as well as endogenous factors within immigrant rights movement itself. Importantly, an overemphasis on the role of parties, partisanship, and polarization in the field of Political Science has left crucial factors unexamined, such as the strategic decisions of key institutional players and the construction and dissolution of social movement coalitions.

Political Scientists typically explain immigration politics in the United States through the lenses of partisanship or demographics.[[12]](#footnote-13) For Casellas and Neal, for example, “…partisanship is the only consistent factor across votes and chambers” that can explain Congressional voting patterns on immigration. [[13]](#footnote-14) Part of the problem of this explanation is scalar, insofar as Congressional politics on a federal level flatten out the state and local contexts that shape positions on migration. As George Hawley demonstrates, partisan positions on immigration are also “context dependent” and “native-born Republicans are more likely to support immigration restrictions when their local community has a large immigrant population and Democrats less likely.”[[14]](#footnote-15) For Hawley, we must look beyond partisanship to demographics to understand the contexts of partisan position. In these accounts, comprehensive immigration reform has failed because of the intractability of partisan politics or because of the facts of demographics.

But these accounts fail to fully explain why ambitious reform agendas have stalled. First, looking to partisanship to explain political outcomes of immigration policymaking take for granted why and how Democrats and Republicans in a two-party system have come to hold relatively restrictionist and expansionist positions on immigration. Why has the Democratic party been classified a party with expansionist immigration platforms, while the Republicans are presumed to be the immigration restrictionists? There is nothing inherent about these parties that requires this alignment on the issue of immigration, and this presumption obscures the fact that there is perpetual contestation within and between parties: immigration platforms are not static or natural and they change over time.

*The “Latino Threat”: Race as Explanation and Intersectional Methodology*

Another strain of explanation looks to demographics through the lens of race and ethnicity. These accounts make the crucial point that if we want to understand the failure of immigration reform, we need to look to the racialization of the question of immigration policy. These accounts often echo Leo Chavez’s “Latino Threat” theory that emphasizes the centrality of Mexican migration. Following Chavez’s work, Latinos have been constructed as an “invading force” that is “…unwilling or incapable of integrating, of becoming part of the national community.”[[15]](#footnote-16) Of course, not all immigrants are of Mexican or Latin American descent; but given the high percentage of Mexican and Latin American origin migrants, it is perhaps unsurprising that Mexicans have come to be the “face” of the Latino threat—Mexicans have come to stand in for all Latinos, in spite of the fact that Mexicans and Latin Americans vary tremendously in terms of race, ethnicity, and cultural traditions [however, groups such as UndocuBlack, Black Alliance for Justice Immigration, MPower Change, and others have done important work to highlight the historic erasure of Black, Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern and North African (MENA)  immigrants from Latino representations and from the immigrant rights movement more broadly].

Massey and Pren argue that “the rise of illegal migration remains inadequately acknowledged as a factor in the rightward shift of American public opinion,” and that the rise of Latin American migration in the United States directly led to the rise of “Latino Threat” ideologies and media framing.[[16]](#footnote-17) The topic of how Latino/Hispanic identity has been constructed has been well studied through excellent scholarship, so this paper will not delve into details.[[17]](#footnote-18) That said, given the general characterization of immigrant workers as non-white, the racialization of immigration is undoubtedly one of the keys to understanding the dynamics of immigration policymaking.

The racialized construction of immigrants as Others has generated an important body of literature that demonstrates the weaponization of race as political projects and helps to explain how the characterization of migrants as a racial message has contributed to the failure of immigration reform projects. While most of this scholarship does not fall into this category, there is a danger in “demography as destiny” explanations for the failure of immigration reform tying increases in migrant flows to an uncomplicated explanation of racialization. To argue to that an increase in immigration *inevitably* leads to an increasing in racist sentiment is a retrospective fallacy – just because it *did* happen that way, that does not imply that the “Latino Threat” narrative was inevitable following the rise of Latin American migrant streams. Looking to understand the origins of this xenophobia among whites themselves, Justin Gest finds the origins of xenophobic sentiment of working-class whites in experiences of nostalgic “political deprivation,” defined as a “perceived loss of power,” among low-income white Americans.[[18]](#footnote-19) It is important to note that this research explores white *experiences* of deprivation, and that targeting immigrants (versus global economic forces that have generated so-called “Rust Belt” politics) was, again, not a necessary product of the fact of migration flows.

In some of these accounts, racial difference is portrayed as though the fact of migration and racial diversity inevitably leads to political strife. While there is a fine line between identifying causal patterns in a specific instance of the rise of bigotry, the paper seeks to avoid the danger of generalizations that come from decontextualization. For example, in this examining the role of labor in the immigrant rights movement, I am careful to emphasize that an increase in Latin American immigration in recent decades did not invariably lead organized labor to back away from taking more expansionist positions on immigration. Labor leaders made strategic choices. Further, this study is informed by an intersectional[[19]](#footnote-20) methodological approach that understands that “worker” is a category that is also subject to racialized and gendered frames.

Rather than presuming race as a static variable, I concur with Lina Newton that, “a more useful question to ask is when is group racialization employed to justify policy designs, and under what circumstances does race receded or disappear from these discussions?”[[20]](#footnote-21) To treat Latinos as though they have always been a threat obscures the fact that previous waves of migrants “became white” over time,[[21]](#footnote-22) and that the racialization of migrants varies over time and depending on political context. While this paper focuses upon the frame of labor, it also attends to the ways in which subjects are racialized and how the “immigrant worker” is also a frame that deploys racial tropes, even when they are not explicitly stated. The phrase “*they* are taking *our* jobs” also means “they [*workers of color*] are taking our [*white workers’]*  jobs.”

Compared to race, less attention has been paid to the role of gender in scholarship of the immigration reform movement.[[22]](#footnote-23) While has there is a growing field of gender in migration studies across disciplines and efforts to bring intersectional analysis into Political Science, [[23]](#footnote-24) gender is less frequently invoked to explain the failure of the project of immigration reform. This paper pursues a methodology that is intersectional, meaning that it examines “worker” by also examining how the frame of the “immigrant as worker” is also gendered and racialized. Jobs such as domestic work and childcare, disproportionately occupied by women and immigrants, have also historically been excluded from federal labor law protections as a result of historical efforts to exclude Black workers from basic rights.[[24]](#footnote-25)

The labor movement has only recently begun to incorporate the concerns of domestic workers and child care workers—as such, the relative silence of the immigrant rights movement on issues of gender (beyond asylees and refugees and intimate partner violence) mirrors the erasure of “women’s work” from the legal and political landscape of formal labor protections. This is not to say that questions of gender and sexuality have been completely absent from the immigrant rights movement. In recent years, queer youth have introduced “coming out” and other tactics borrowed from LGBTQ+ movements in a form of “social movement spillover” into the undocumented youth and immigrant rights movement. [[25]](#footnote-26) However, in the early 2000s, when the Catholic Church and labor dominated national movement coalitions, questions of sexuality and gender were largely absent from national immigrant movement platforms. [[26]](#footnote-27)

*History and Path Dependency of Immigration Policy*

Beyond tending to treat categories such as “race” and “gender” as static or given, the various strains of explanation from “parties and population” to “demography as destiny” share the common feature of examining snapshots of immigration policymaking decontextualized from a broader historical arc. To remedy this, Discursive Institutionalism and its antecedent, Historical Institutionalism, seek to situate political accounts within the longer arc of history to understand how the history shapes opportunities and possibilities of political actors. According to Daniel Tichenor, the “historical institutionalist view…examines how the political activities of government officials and social groups are ‘conditioned’ by distinct institutional and ideological orderings of the national state and political party systems.” [[27]](#footnote-28) Immigration politics and the discursive institutions of the immigrant rights movement are also subject to the historical constraints of movements and politics that preceded them.

Various commentator, such as Elaine Kamarck of the Brookings Institute, places the blame for immigration reform’s failure on the history of the United States itself as generator of the path dependency. Kamarck argues that the United States “is a country that has always been worried about being overrun by immigrants. And this makes reform especially difficult.”[[28]](#footnote-29) In this view, immigration reform has failed because, historically, Americans fear of immigrants has doomed immigration reform, so similar efforts are destined to fail again and again. Others looking to historical trajectories have pointed to how the 1996 wave enforcement-only immigration legislation has conditioned future possibilities for policymaking.[[29]](#footnote-30) Similarly, John Skrentny & Micah Gell-Redman point to William Eskridge, Jr., and John Ferejohn’s theory of “statutory entrenchment” to make the case that the entrenched statutory models—how the law is institutionalized— set constraints for the political landscape that lead to an “uneven force of arguments for reform and an asymmetry of bargaining power among constituencies.”[[30]](#footnote-31) The “cognitive” and “moral” entrenchment of past laws thus makes reform challenging. For Skrentny and Gell-Redman, “The entrenchment of border enforcement that legislators now take for granted thus built on venerable statutory norms of exclusion and the perception of immigration as a threat.”[[31]](#footnote-32)

But Skrentny and Gell-Redman do not take statutory entrenchment as an impenetrable barrier for immigration reform. For a full “constitutional” entrenchment, they argue that law must be entrenched both along “cognitive” and “moral” dimensions. It is notable that they point to the case of workplace enforcement as one that is not full entrenched—even if workplace enforcement is now “cognitively” normalized, employers evading consequences for hiring workers under the table have still not gained the moral sympathies of the American people. Under the 1986 IRCA immigration reform law, employers were into immigration enforcement agents who needed to verify the immigration status of their employees via the completion of the I-8 form for the first time. But workplace enforcement may not be impossible to reverse. “…Workplace enforcement provisions are a part of nearly all comprehensive immigration reform bills and appear to be cognitively entrenched as a rational way to control immigration,” they argue, “but this entrenchment seems weak, and there is little evidence of any moral entrenchment of this part of comprehensive reform bill.” [[32]](#footnote-33) Seeking “weak” forms of entrenchment as “political opportunities,” in the language of Social Movement Theory, a fertile avenue for identifying spaces to engage new political strategies for those seeking reform.

But accounts that seek only to find answers in immutable historical constraints continue to ignore key questions of agency and the role of political actors. Meanwhile, Margaret Peters diverges from these accounts in her examination of the role of business in comprehensive immigration reform. According to Peters, the answer to why we haven’t been able to pass CIR is that business has lost interest in the endeavor. Peters contends that “…if firms have other options—the ability to move overseas, or new technology that will reduce their need for labor­—or simply have closed owing to trade, anti-immigrant groups have the loudest voice, leading to greater restrictions on immigration.” [[33]](#footnote-34) Business is certainly part of the puzzle, but we also must look to *how* business and other institutional actors, including labor, engage in the political arena.

*The Discourse of Immigrants: The Power of Talking about Immigration Reform*

To observe the role labor organizations have played within the immigrant rights movement, this paper looks to the *discourse* of the movement itself*.*  The concept of discourse is an expansive one, so for the purposes of the paper, I will borrow the Vivian Schmidt’s description:

Discourse is not just ideas or “texts” (what is said) but also context (where, when, how, and why it was said). The term refers not only to structure (what is said, or where and how) but also to agency (who said what to whom).[[34]](#footnote-35)

Discursive Institutionalism examines speech acts within their institutional contexts and views language as an ideological constraint (e.g. “third face of power”[[35]](#footnote-36)).

This paper focuses on the “communicative discourses” of the immigrant rights movement – in other words, how the movement communicates with outsiders. Per Vivien Schmidt, “the communicative discourse encompasses the wide range of political actors who bring the ideas developed in the context of the coordinative discourse [communication *within* the movement] to the public for deliberation and legitimation.”[[36]](#footnote-37) As such, this paper focuses of immigrant movement leaders and party platforms. Ruth Wodak explains that “migration can be studied both from an *in-side­ perspective* (i.e. by interviewing migrants, in making focus groups with migrants…); or from an *out-side perspective,* by studying media reports about migration and migrants, policy papers, legislation, manifestoes and programmes of political parties, election campaign materials, and so forth…” [[37]](#footnote-38) This paper takes an *out-side perspective*, paying attention to both what is said and what remains unsaid, “reading the silences.”

This is not to say that the “frame disputes”[[38]](#footnote-39) within social movements and “hidden transcripts”[[39]](#footnote-40) of those who are marginalized within mainstream discourses are not important, rather that they are not the object of this study. The words of elites and movement leaders matter because they are the ones interact with policymakers, and in the world of immigration reform, which has been dominated by a small number of movement leaders generally unaccountable to an immigrant base,[[40]](#footnote-41) their words have direct consequences in policy negotiations and outcomes.

When Political Scientists have studied “discourse” in the context of immigration policymaking, they have tended to focus on public opinion, as measured by public opinion polls. As Tom Wong explains, “whereas national polls may very well capture the pulse of the country, the pulse of the country need not necessarily impact immigration policy outcomes…”[[41]](#footnote-42) However, an emerging body of literature looks at the “framing” of immigration in media accounts of immigration policy debates making the opposite argument, and polling and policy outcomes have become increasingly linked in both academic scholarship and immigrant movement strategies. This research takes seriously the role that media outlets play in framing immigration debates, and in term political results.

As Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan explain, “while many forces shape opinion on immigration, the framing of policy information plays an integral role….”[[42]](#footnote-43) Their research finds “the different frames that individuals are exposed to on immigration have important effects on shaping opinions on particular policies that affect the undocumented population.”[[43]](#footnote-44) In short, framing matters. And it has consequences on public opinions, which in turn impact policymaking outcomes. “In no small measure,” Ron Schmidt argues, “the fact that immigration policy reform continues to be stymied in the U.S. Congress is connected to the way that ideas concerning undocumented immigrants are framed in American political discourse.”[[44]](#footnote-45)

Academics are not alone in believing that framing matters—immigrant movement leaders, often in dialogue with social scientists, have zeroed in on polling as the driving force behind movement strategies in recent decades. As Walter Nicholls describes, “the mainstream movement [has] invested enormous resources in communications.” Leading the charge for decades now has been Frank Sharry, the director the National Immigration Forum and subsequently American’s voice, who

…assumed a leading role in devising the [movement’s] communication strategy. His organizations performed surveys, polls, and focus groups to identify the political predilections of the national public….By mapping out the norms and discursive preferences of the public, Mr. Sharry and his colleagues developed a series of messages and talking points designed to generate support from the public and national politicians.[[45]](#footnote-46)

As a participant in the immigrant right movement myself, I have witnessed this obsession with polling to be an overwhelming force in the movement’s strategic decision-making process.

I contend that the new hyper focus of the immigrant rights movement, buoyed by social scientists on “finding the right frame” that will tilt public opinion, as measured by controlled survey experiments, focus groups, and public opinion polling, have led both social science and the immigrant rights movement to overestimate their understanding of how social change occurs. Public opinion polls and experiments that seek to assess how different frames impact participants occur as snapshots in time, but they cannot account for endogenous shocks or unanticipated critical junctures. Moreover, by building strategies around public opinion polling and focus groups that seek to meet voters “where they are,” immigrant rights organizations themselves participate in re-institutionalizing the status quo of views on immigration. As Orren and Skowronek explain, “…institutions do not merely express or reflect or deflect elements in their political surroundings. Institutions participate actively in politics: they shape interests and motives, configure social and economic relationships, promote as well as inhibit change.”[[46]](#footnote-47) With this in mind, I turn to the institution of the labor movement to examine its discursive engagement within the movement to pass Comprehensive Immigration Reform. This examination begins with the role of labor in the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides of 2003.

Diagram, timeline

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**Figure 1:** Immigration Reform Movement Highlights Timeline

Major Immigrant Frames by Year

* **2000**: AFL-CIO Reverses Course on Immigration
* **2001**: 9/11
* **2000-2003:** The Dawn of the “Good Immigrant Worker” and “Families Not Felons”
* **2003:** The Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides + Civil Rights
* **2003-2006:** The Rise of the “DREAMer”
* **2005**: Change to Win/AFL-CIO Split
* **2006:** The Movement Hits the Streets: A Day Without an Immigrant vs. We are America
* **2006-2020:** America and the DREAMer
* **2020:** We are Home and Immigrants are Essential

1. **The Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides: Labor, Immigrants & Civil Rights Ride Together?**

The relationship between organized labor and immigration politics has historically been a rocky one. While Tammany Hall’s bosses saw opportunity in promoting citizenship (hence voting) among European immigrants in the 1800s, and immigrants were core participants in the New Deal coalition, the nativist strain of the labor movement has long argued that immigrant workers are an existential threat that depress union wages. From the 1980s through the turn of the century, American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) had held strong restrictionist positions and opposed undocumented immigration. But in February 2000, the AFL officially reversed its position, with the Executive Council issuing a formal statement in support of eliminating the IRCA workplace immigration enforcement regime, including the I-9 system verification system and employer sanctions, while endorsing a legalization program for undocumented migrants in the United States.[[47]](#footnote-48)

The shift in the AFL’s position occurred, in part, due to demographic pressures. "The fastest growing unions have been the service sector unions, and those are overwhelmingly made up of immigrants and then family members of immigrants," explained Louis DeSipio. "So… for the unions to represent their membership at some level, they have to be sensitive to the family concerns that drive support for legalization."[[48]](#footnote-49) Kent Wong and Carolina Bank Muñoz described that, “what became apparent was that the AFL-CIO could not continue to encourage immigrant workers to join their ranks while, at the same time, upholding policies opposed to immigrant worker interests.”[[49]](#footnote-50) Further, the workplace enforcement policies initiated by the passage the 1986 immigration reform altered the landscape for labor, as well. According to Rebecca Hamlin, “immigration law had not been used to bust unions before the passage of IRCA, but post-IRCA, “employers were using immigration law to thwart organizing” and to engage in union-busting.[[50]](#footnote-51) At the very least, organized labor needed to address workplace enforcement measures to keep them from undermining organizing campaigns to recruit new members. That said, the shift was not just an automatic response to demographic shifts. As Rebecca Hamlin demonstrates, “immigrants have affected change immigration policy positions in the labor movement as a bottom-up push.”[[51]](#footnote-52) Labor’s shift on immigration was both a result of outside economic forces and grassroots organizing from below.

The 2000 policy reversal was heralded as a new dawn for immigrant-labor relations. Frank Sharry, then executive director of the immigrant rights advocacy organization the National Immigration Forum, applauded the announcement as sea change in labor-immigrant relations, forecasting that this moment had “the makings of a business-labor compact that could draw new immigration policies for the next decade.''[[52]](#footnote-53) Over two decades later, the promise of this coalition remains unclear. But in 2003, the organizing of the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides appeared poised to usher in a vibrant new partnership between labor and migrants.

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Figure 2: Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride Map

**Figure 3:** Freedom Ride Statement and Map

The Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides ( IWFR), modeled after 1960s Civil Rights Era Freedom Rides challenging Jim Crow segregation and voter disenfranchisement were primarily a labor-driven endeavor, but they were the public face of the immigrant rights movement in the year 2003. And the event was widely proclaimed as a turning point for both immigration and labor (for transparency, I was an organizer of the New York events in my role at the time at the New York Immigration Coalition). In September 2003, 900 immigrant workers and allies embarked on busses from ten U.S. cities and were greeted in over 100 towns and cities in 42, culminating on October 1st with a rally attended by over 100,000 participants in Flushing Meadows, Queens in New York City. Prior to the 2006 immigrant marches, this was “one of the largest immigrant rights demonstrations in U.S. history.”[[53]](#footnote-54)

The momentum had been building towards the 2000 AFL-CIO announcement of its policy change throughout the 1990s with the Justice for Janitors campaign, but the attacks of September 11, 2001 had set back the movement for immigrant rights, putting robust immigrant-labor revival on pause. As Wong and Muñoz describe, “in the context of this setback, the launching of the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride in 20003 took on an even greater significance…Although the AFL-CIO had changed their policy in 2000, the Freedom Ride represented the first nationally coordinated campaign to build an aggressive movement for change.”[[54]](#footnote-55) The ride had several goals: 1.) building new coalitions and forging a new powerful immigrant-labor alliance, especially gearing up for the 2004 elections.; 2.) bringing visibility to the struggles of immigrant workers through direct action; 3.) drawing connections between immigrant struggles and the civil rights movements; and 4.) developing a new narrative of the “good immigrant worker” as part of movement framing strategies.

*Forging New Coalitions: Immigrants and Labor*

Perhaps the clearest goal of the IWFR was to build solidarity through a new immigrant-labor coalition. Riders included some surviving participants from the original Freedom Rides as well as family members of immigrant workers who lost their lives in the World Trade Center terror attacks. [[55]](#footnote-56) The riders on the bus comprised, “unions, chapters of community organizing networks such as ACORN and Jobs with Justice; affiliates of church- or faith-based organizing networks such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Gamaliel , and Interfaith Worker Justice, chapters of United Students against Sweatshops; and immigrant organizations.”[[56]](#footnote-57) These were often groups that did not ride on the same busses either literally or figuratively. As such, riding on the bus together created physical spaces to encourage new bonds, both among riders seated inside the buses and through the relationships built at the stops along the route. In the words of Wong and Muñoz, “one of the Freedom Rides greatest contributions was the building of diverse coalitions across the country.”[[57]](#footnote-58)

Organizers on the buses spent time during the rides teaching storytelling, encouraging riders to tell their “immigration stories.”[[58]](#footnote-59) While Francesca Polletta extols a more nuanced view of the role of storytelling in social movements (including its potential downsides), she summarizes a voluminous literature on the positive role of storytelling in struggles for justice with her explanation that

storytelling sustains groups as they fight for reform, helping them build new collective identities, link current actions to heroic pasts and glorious future, and restyle setbacks as way stations to victory. Even before movements emerge, the stories that circulate within subaltern communities provide a counterpoint to the myths promoted by the powerful.[[59]](#footnote-60)

Likewise, Sziarto and Leitner find that, “the dialogic practices among Riders on the bus es of the IWFR… promoted…the production of a collective identity and solidarity.”[[60]](#footnote-61) Sziarto and Leitner also point to the fact that “many participants in the IWFR began to refer to themselves as becoming Riders (with a capital R),” an identification they refer to as ‘identity-in-alliance.”[[61]](#footnote-62) IWFR The bus rides were not just spaces to physically connect with other people from different social groups, they also allowed people to develop new self-stories and identities both individually and as a collective. Accounts from the bus riders affirm this role that stories played as part of the rides. In the words of one freedom rider, Mako Nakagawa,

I learned some things about myself that I never expected [to learn]. I never expected to get so caught up in it. I just thought I was there for an intellectual purpose—to speak out. I never expected to get so close to those people and get so caught up in their stories. There was a little bit of magic that happened on that trip, and everybody on the bus acknowledged that….As far as politics go, I have been to D.C. and lobbied, but this was a different experience. [[62]](#footnote-63)

In sum, the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides allowed participants to tell themselves a new story about themselves while also writing new collective stories, with the buses as figurative pens redrawing their story of themselves and America across the nation’s roads.

*Visibility Through Direct Action*

Storytelling was not the only social movement tactic employed by the IWFR, however. The IWFR also sought to emulate the direct actions enacted by the original Freedom Rides of the 1960s that inspired the 2003 rides. The riders of the IWFR buses were of mixed immigration statuses – citizens rode seated next documented as well as undocumented immigrants. Given the reality of immigration checkpoints along the route, riders needed to be prepared to be stopped and face the very visceral possibility that some undocumented riders would be torn off the bus and ripped away from their homes and families. Accordingly, riders were trained in nonviolent direct action training in the event that they were stopped by immigration officers. While the buses were also met with anti-immigrant protesters and contemporary neo-Nazi groups,[[63]](#footnote-64) they did not face physical violence at white supremacists the way the Freedom Riders had.

However, the feared interaction with immigration agents did come to pass. Two buses of Freedom Riders were stopped outside of El Paso by Border Patrol checkpoints.[[64]](#footnote-65) As María Elena Durazo, chairperson of the IWFR recounted, “Show me proof of your citizenship, they [Border Patrol Agents] told me.”[[65]](#footnote-66) Fortunately, the riders had been trained in solidarity and direct action, presenting cards that stated they would remain silent and sang resistance songs in unison. “They asked every single one of us, one by one,” recounted Durazo, “but none of us spoke.”[[66]](#footnote-67) Many riders present on the busses described the experience as transformative, helping those with papers connect to the experiences of fear of undocumented riders. "The detention center cell was humbling for me," explained one rider. “I communicate with many who have gone through this experience, and I now understand the frightening, clinical feel of the detention cells.”[[67]](#footnote-68) As the original Freedom Riders sought to render visible the horrors of Jim Crow segregation and the denial of voting rights, the 2003 Freedom Riders embarked on a mission to make the horrors of immigration detention and deportation visible to a broader public, including many of the documented and citizen riders on the bus themselves.

*Driving (Uneasily) Through the Legacy of American Civil Rights*

Another major goal of the IWFR was to connect to the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, to draw parallels between the struggles of immigrants in the 2000s and those of African-Americans in the 1960s in order to build upon this legacy and to cultivate alliances with present-day African-American communities. This was done both by through the symbolic emulation of the cross-country bus rides, including routes through the Deep South, as well as by recruiting original participants in the 60s Freedom Rides as partners in the twentieth-first century incarnation of the rides. Among those original Freedom Riders was Reverend James Orange, an associate of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was beat at a Birmingham bus station as a participant in the rides of the 1960s. “When a worker is packed in the back of a truck and suffocates trying to get across the border, or when someone comes through the airport and gets detained just because his name is Abdullah, those are civil rights issues,” said Orange. “The rights we fought for in the ‘60s are the same rights people are fighting for now.”[[68]](#footnote-69) Further, Orange drew the overt linkage that, “this is a continuation of some of the same fighting we did 40 years ago.”[[69]](#footnote-70)

The efforts to draw parallels to by IWFR organizers to the original Civil Rights struggle were explicit. When IWFR chairperson María Elena Durazo describing the experience of having been detained by Border Patrol, she explained that “in that moment of danger, we became children…of the African American fighters for Civil rights.”[[70]](#footnote-71) Speaking to another rider, one of the organizers outlined the thread that connected “Martin Luther King, he was arrested like we were arrested like you and me,” the organizer explained. “When we did the picket lines, he was also arrested.”[[71]](#footnote-72) Buses on the IWFR also made stops at key Civil Rights Era destination, including the Civil Rights Museum and site where a Freedom Ride bus was firebombed. [[72]](#footnote-73)

The National Sponsoring Committee of the IWFR attempted to reflect African-American leadership, but was heavily skewed in terms of labor representation. Of the 27 members of the organizing committee, 13 were labor organizations (including the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists), 5 were immigrant rights organizations, 5 were community organizing or student groups, plus three African-American leaders from the Civil Rights Movement (Rev. James Lawson, Congressman John D. Lewis, and Rev. Joseph Lowery). Endorsers of the IWFR tracked a similar ratio, with 150 labor, 53 immigrant, 79 faith, and 33 civil rights organizations. Only 13 business groups endorsed the rides.

Barbara Ellen Smith and Jamie Winders call attention to the lopsided engagement of African-Leadership and attention to African-American contemporary issues in their work on immigration in the American South. “For the IWFR, the civil rights movement stood largely as a symbolic historical resource that this new initiative could mobilize.”[[73]](#footnote-74) Smith and Winders attribute the IWFR’s inadequacies in addressing anti-Blackness and racial tensions to IWFR’s apparent driving focus upon building bridges between labor and immigration causes. “The primacy of the desired link between immigrant rights and organized labor may account in part for the IWFR’s uneven engagement with the legacies of the civil rights movement, as well as for its failure to confront the sometimes-uneasy relationship between immigrant rights and anti-racist organizing.”[[74]](#footnote-75) For Smith and Winders, the shortcomings of the IWFR with respect to race mimic those of the broader mainstream immigrant rights movement, as they highlight by pointing to the repeated use of the frame “nation of immigrants” as part of immigrant advocacy narratives and strategies:

Mainstream immigrant-advocacy groups like the National Immigration Forum have long based their appeals on a comfortingly egalitarian version of US history as “a nation of immigrants.” In the nuevo South of the early 2000s, as activists mobilized local and statewide organizations to advocate for immigrant needs and rights, they often adopted similar rhetorical strategies. In Tennessee groups waged campaigns that asked residents to “embrace the immigrants they once were.” The implicit racial content of this appeal, which presumes that all Tennesseans share the same past and want to revisit it, may have resonated with whites; but it suppressed histories of slavery, genocide, colonialism, and forced migration disproportionately linked to people of color, not all of whom identify as “immigrant.”[[75]](#footnote-76)

Smith and Winders thus elucidate the failures of the IWFR to be truly intersectional and demonstrate how it fell prey to the oft-repeated pattern of borrowing the language of civil rights without taking action to address its content or meaning.



*Forging Narrative of the “Good Immigrant Worker”*

While the IWFR fell short of doing justice to the civil rights past it appropriated in attempts to forge a present-day solidary between immigrants and African-Americans, the IWFR simultaneously sought to unleash a new narrative about immigrant vis-à-vis labor. In addition to the other strategies employed by the IWFR (coalition-building, direct action, and linking to the legacy of civil rights), another goal of the IWFR was to reframe immigration through the lens of labor. And for the organizers of the IWFR, the ride accomplished its mission. Textile workers’ union vice-president May Chen proclaimed that, “In a few intense months we have challenged and changed American’s attitudes about immigrants.”[[76]](#footnote-77)

But what were the new attitudes that the IWFR was trying to instill in the American imaginary? Ultimately, the framing of immigration that the IWFR sought to promote was that of the “good immigrant worker.” Following the definition of Kibrian, O’Leary, and Bowman, the “good immigrant worker” is a “race-blind trope that melds US nationalist narratives of immigration with an ethos of neoliberalism that upholds individual merit and market value to create a notion of ‘deservingness’ that affirms the worth of immigrants as diligent workers.”[[77]](#footnote-78) Indeed, the goal of the Immigrant Workers’ Freedom Ride was largely to introduce the “good immigrant worker” to the American people. If immigrants (of color), Black Americans, and (coded white) labor union workers stepped onto the bus, the unified rhetoric that stepped off the bus at the end of the journey was the “Good Immigrant Worker” (GIW).

The rhetoric of the GIW was deployed by the IWFR to combat the pernicious frames of “immigrant as terrorist” that had proliferated in the years following 9/11. I will delve deeper into the good immigrant/bad immigrant dichotomy in the following section of this paper, but suffice to say that the GIW was contracted with immigrant as terrorist, rapist, and criminal that had captured the restrictionist American imagination throughout the early 2000s. The Good Immigrant Worker appears constantly throughout the speeches and laudatory discourses of the IWFR. In the documentary about the IWFR, the Long Ride, UFCW 770 VP and Organizing Director Rigo Valdezrehearsed the underling architecture of the GIW frame:

Workers that are undocumented often get the worst jobs, the most dangerous jobs, they work the least desirable shifts, and often their wages are stolen from them. Lowering work standards affects everyone, affects people with documents, affects U.S. citizens.[[78]](#footnote-79)

The Good Immigrant Worker is always in relation the to the “bad” immigrant, who “takes ‘our’ [white male citizens’] jobs.” In their analysis of the GIW frame in the case of 2013 U.S. Senate Bill 744, Kibria, O’Leary and Bowman refer to the GIW as operating according to a logic of “immigrant complementarity.” “In this framing, immigrants did not take away American jobs because they performed *immigrant jobs,*” they explain. *“*Indeed, there were “natural” boundaries between immigrant and American workers in terms of the jobs that each were suited to perform.”[[79]](#footnote-80)

The underlying logic of GIW is embodied by the IWFR statement of purpose from its web page:

Immigrant workers work hard, pay taxes, and sacrifice for their families. They work as construction workers, doctors, nurses, janitors, meat packers, chefs, busboys, engineers, farm workers, and soldiers. They care for our children, tend to our elderly, pick and serve our food, build and clean our houses, and want what we all want: a fair shot at the American Dream.[[80]](#footnote-81)

And the trope of the GIW is repeated as the first tenet of the IWFR’s outlined principles:

1. [**Reward work**](https://web.archive.org/web/20031207191334/http:/www.iwfr.org/legalization.asp) by granting legal status to hardworking, taxpaying, law-abiding immigrant workers already established in the United States;
2. [**Renew our democracy by clearing the path to citizenship**](https://web.archive.org/web/20031207191334/http:/www.iwfr.org/citizenship.asp) and full political participation for our newest Americans;
3. [**Restore labor protections**](https://web.archive.org/web/20031207191334/http:/www.iwfr.org/workrights.asp) so that all workers, including immigrant workers, have the right to fair treatment on the job;
4. [**Reunite families**](https://web.archive.org/web/20031207191334/http:/www.iwfr.org/reunification.asp) in a timely fashion by streamlining our outdated immigration policies; and
5. [**Respect the civil rights and civil liberties**](https://web.archive.org/web/20031207191334/http:/www.iwfr.org/civil.asp) of all so that immigrants are treated equally under the law, the federal government remains subject to checks and balances, and civil rights laws are meaningfully enforced.[[81]](#footnote-82)

In this frame, the GIW should be “rewarded” with a path to citizenship because s/he is “hardworking,” “taxpaying,” and “law-abiding. ” In her speech during the IWFR, Linda Chavez Thompson of the AFL CIO echoed the GIW rhetoric, proclaiming that “what it’s all really about... is that as immigrants, we have a contribution to make. You are having jobs today that no one else wants to do.” [[82]](#footnote-83) Immigrants are contributors. They do jobs no one else wants to do. They are, in short “deserving” contributors to the American economy.

Meanwhile, the economic question remains as to whether immigrants do, in fact, displace citizens from jobs. For example, according to the Michal Piore’s “dual market theory” or theories of labor market segmentation, “international migration is caused by a permanent demand for immigrant labor inherent to the economic structure of developed nations.” [[83]](#footnote-84) Further, in Piore’s theory, low-skilled immigrant workers operate in different labor markets than native-born markets, and therefore do not compete with them. Muzaffar Chisti, of the Migration Policy Institute, has claimed that he introduced this theory to the immigrant rights and labor movements in his then capacity as the Director of the Immigration Project of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial & Textile Employees (UNITE) in the early 1980s.[[84]](#footnote-85) Likewise, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine’s 2017 study, “The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration,” found that the consequences of immigration to the United States were net positive over the long term.[[85]](#footnote-86) The National Academies study finds that immigrant workers have an undeniably positive impact on high-skill workers, but it should be noted that the report did find a very small negative impact on wages of prior immigrant subgroups and low-wage native-born workers without a high school degree. While the National Academies study is well regarded among economists, various theories about the push-pull factors driving migration proliferate.

This paper cannot go into a full-depth exploration of the economic theories of migration to refute or affirm the claim that “immigrants take American jobs,” but it is important to note the ideological dimension of economic claims. Further, we must consider that certain frames about the “economic facts” function as political forces in the interest of political elites who push those analytic frames. According to Douglas Massey, the changes in migration patterns between the Immigration and Nationality/Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 and and 1986, when IRCA was signed. It is worth quoting Massey in depth here, as he explains that the rise in undocumented migration after 1965…

did not occur because of changes in labor demand, relative wages, cross-border integration, migrant networks, or because of a changed ideology or a new political balance between employers and workers. Rather the driving force was the behavior of self-interested bureaucrats, politicians, and pundits who sought to mobilize political and material resources for their own benefit irrespective of what effects their actions had on immigrants themselves…The [border enforcement] actions taken by actors in the federal bureaucracy did not emerge in response to the competing demands of workers, employers, and ordinary citizens, so much as the desire to accumulate power and resources…..Although little had changed in practice terms before and after [1965] (roughly the same number of migrants were migrating from the same regions of Mexico to the same places in the United States), the situation had changed dramatically in symbolic terms for after 1965 the vast majority of Mexican immigrants were “illegal” and thus by definition “criminals” and “lawbreakers.” [[86]](#footnote-87)

In other words, due to the end of the Bracero Program and the passage of Hart-Cellar, the same workers doing the same jobs in the same places were suddenly transformed from Mexican nationals who happened to be working in the United States to “illegals.” What changed was not economic forces, but rather, the language we used to describe the same exact workers doing the same exact work. As discussed earlier, discourse and framing matters, as is perhaps most evident when discourse is enshrined in law through legislation or juridical language.



1. *DREAMErs and the Rhetoric of Nationalism*

Meanwhile, “good immigrant workers” were not the only ones riding the bus together with U.S. citizen allies during the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides. Sitting next to the GIW on the bus was the nascent protagonist of the DREAMer, who had been conjured into being by a piece of legislation, the **Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act**, first introduced in 2001**.** The DREAM Act would provide a pathway to citizenship for young undocumented immigrants below a certain age who meet certain criteria. The impetus behind the DREAM Act was the belief that the “DREAMers,” meaning young children who would benefit from the DREAM Act, were an imminently more sympathetic demographic than their parents. In this view, it was the parents who were “guilty” of breaking the law by crossing the border without authorization, whereas the children were just the “innocent” bystanders punished for the sins of their parents. I use the term “DREAMer” frame to allude to a stylized frame, largely deployed by mainstream immigrant rights movement, but I note that many undocumented youth reject this frame,[[87]](#footnote-88) and I do not embrace this term uncritically. Undocumented youth are not a monolith, and neither are the framing strategies of the so-called DREAMer movement. In the context of this paper, however, I am tracing the usage of “DREAMer” as a specific movement frame as it travels through time, even if such a frame is contested and problematic.

Central to the concept of the frame of the DREAMer is the “American DREAM” itself, as Walter Nicholls has also elucidated. One of the reasons DREAMers elicit such sympathy is that they are true believers in the American DREAM itself, and as such, in the project of America. For that reason, the “DREAMer” is best described as a sub-frame within the “master frame”[[88]](#footnote-89) of immigrant rights as a nationalist project. Although the focus of this paper is the frame of the “Good Immigrant Worker,” and the role of the labor movement in framing immigrant issues within the immigrant rights movement, it is important to discuss the frame of the frame of the DREAMer and the nationalist master frames. “The process of creating a political group with a legitimate voice does not simply result in discourses that affirm a single idea of citizenship,” explains Walter Nichols. “Rather, it produces multiple discourses, ideas, and schemas of citizenship, some of which complement one another and some of which conflict.” [[89]](#footnote-90)

As mentioned previously, the early 2000s witnessed the emergence of a new protagonist for the immigrant rights movement: the “good immigrant,” as contrasted with the frame of the “bad immigrant,” the felon and the terrorist. Following 9/11, the immigrant movement itself embraced a discourse and rhetorical strategy that reproduced the War on Terror’s us/them good guys/bad guys dichotomy. As young Arab and Muslim men were being racially profiled through the “Special Registration” program, immigrants held aloft placards proclaiming they “we are not criminals” and “families not felons.” President Obama himself reproduced the dichotomy in his November 20, 2014 remarks to the nation:

Even as we are a nation of immigrants, we’re also a nation of laws. Undocumented workers broke our immigration laws, and I believe that they must be held accountable -– especially those who may be dangerous. That’s why, over the past six years, deportations of criminals are up 80 percent. And that’s why we’re going to keep focusing enforcement resources on actual threats to our security. **Felons, not families.** Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who’s working hard to provide for her kids. [[90]](#footnote-91)

While some within the immigrant rights movement resisted the felon/family divide, many others continued to reproduce this language well in the 2010s. Presidential candidate Donald Trump later made starkly evident the racial connotations of the “bad immigrant” frame by referring to the “bad hombre,” conjuring racialized caricatures of Mexicans as criminal threats to the nation’s security.[[91]](#footnote-92) The “bad hombre” trope had followed the gendered introduction of Mexicans as “rapists,” conjuring fears of the violation of the [white] American women by the Mexican menace pouring over the southern border. [[92]](#footnote-93)

The “good immigrant” trope has generated a substantial body of scholarship, which documents how immigrant rights organizations embraced and deployed “good immigrant” rhetoric. Kibria, O’Leary, and Bowman conducted a study of how immigrant movement organizations framed their demands in the 2013 vote for the immigration reform legislation Senate Bill 744, finding that advocates for expanding immigration used “American values terms,” such as “deserving,” “family,” and “hardworking” in opposition to the restriction fames including “aliens,” “crime,” and terrorism.”[[93]](#footnote-94) Kibria “drew on the language of ‘worthiness’ to construct the notion of the ‘good immigrant worker.”[[94]](#footnote-95) Abigail Andrews notes that the good/bad deserving/undeserving distinction has “long complemented the policing of racial minorities and the poor…[and] the criminalization of immigrants has gone hand and hand with the policing of African-American men.” [[95]](#footnote-96) Ironically, studies have found that the use of the frame “we are not criminals” simply reinforces the perception that immigrants are criminals in audiences receiving the message. So while the “good immigrant/bad immigrant” frame may be objectionable because it reinforces negative perceptions about “bad” immigrants unfairly caught up in a racist criminal justice system, they also may backfire and sweep up “good” immigrants into the frame of criminality as collateral damage.

But where did the “good immigrant/bad immigrant” frame come from? I argue that the framing of the immigrant rights movement, generally led by middle-class elites obsessed with public opinion polling and small sample size focus groups conducted by an ever-increasing number of beltway consultants who claim to have access to the “truth” of public opinion. This is not to say that polling and focus groups should not be part of social movement strategies. Rather, that the quality of much of the polling would often not meet the standards of most peer-reviewed social science research journals. Polling, surveys, and even many focus groups are expensive and thus inaccessible to most small community-based organizations. As Chung-Wha Hong, former Director of NAKASEC and the New York Immigration Coalition commented, there is tremendous pressure for immigrant rights to base their organizing and advocacy on polling. “People push you to spend a whole bunch of money on polling or you’re not a politically mature,” Hong explained. “The DC culture is so dominated by polling. It’s a reality…polling should be a tool that you can use to inform yourself, but it became the reverse.”[[96]](#footnote-97) As such, the method of polling and surveys as the basis for immigrant movement strategy reinforces the elite-driven bias of immigrant movement strategy.

As an example of this kind of research (of a more sophisticated ilk), Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan’s *Framing Immigrants: News Coverage, Public Opinion, and Policy* makes an important contribution to the study of media framing of immigration issues. As scholars speaking to an audience of advocates, Haynes, Merola, and Ramakrishnan seek to make their research relevant to movement leaders. Their prescriptions for advocates seeking victory are based on research that includes content analysis of media coverage as well as a series of original survey experiments conducted between 2007 and 2014. In *Framing Immigrants,*“ Haynes et al. find that the use of the “child frame” can help increase support for the DREAM Act legislation. “In three out of the five studies,” they write, “…the mere mention of coming to the United States as young children increases support for the DREAM Act, although the size of the effect gets smaller in later years. This pattern of findings suggests that the child frame is the most effective in increasing support when the public knows little about the policy” (as a caveat, they note that the effectiveness of the child frame decreases over time as baseline support for the DREAM Act increases overall). [[97]](#footnote-98) The question remains, however, whether experiments that look to understand how “public” attitudes about immigration change are best assessed within the context of experiments that occur at fixed moments in time, which are decontextualized from the highly local contexts in which political positions are shaped and evolve. That said, for the purposes of this discussion, it is enough to say that the social science research methods of public opinion polling, surveys, and focus groups conducted by movement elites were a driving force of the DREAMer frame’s early ascendancy in the immigrant rights movement.

We do not need to discuss the rise of the DREAMer frame at length here, as Walter Nicholls and others have already written definitive texts on the use of framing in the DREAMer movement. In *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate,* Nicholls provides an excellent history of how the “DREAMer” came to be as a social movement frame and political protagonist. Nicholls encapsulates the basic components of the “DREAMers” frame in mapping how DREAMers themselves

…argued that they were raised in America, they only knew this country, and they were important contributors to its economic, civil, and moral life. They were not a ‘foreign’ threat because they were Americans. They had played by all the rules and they now had the right to live out the American dream, just like anybody else.[[98]](#footnote-99)

If the immigrant rights movement of the early 2000s was obsessed with the good/bad immigrant dichotomy, the DREAMer was the perfect good child, untainted by the mistakes of their bad “law-breaking” parents. The only “mistake” the DREAMer made was being born to “bad” parents. (The same could be said that their parents only made the mistake of being born in the “wrong” country, but that is a conversation for a different paper…). Note that many DREAMers resisted this frame, refusing to “throw their parents under the bus,” just as many undocumented youth have resisted the “DREAMer” narrative overall, and the the DREAM movement no longer uses the “through no fault of our own” frame. [[99]](#footnote-100)

The purpose of an emphasizing the DREAMer frame is simply because the frame was victorious, ultimately eclipsing other frames that were deployed by the immigrant rights movement. Moreover, the success of the frame was directly correlated to movement strategy that resulted in strategic legislative choices. For the first ten years of the twenty-first century, the immigrant rights movement had tousled over whether to pursue the DREAM Act as “the best we can get” versus the “whole enchilada” approach to CIR. By 2010, the DREAMers had convinced the movement that the DREAM Act was the goal to pursue. This is a clear example of how discourse matters, and in this case, words would have legal and political repercussions. If signed into law, the words in the legislative text of the DREAM Act would directly determine who benefited, who was cut out, and what rights the new DREAM Act beneficiary would be entitled to.

*Immigration as a Nationalist Project*

The DREAMer frame is, by its very name, contingent on a broader frame, that of the “American DREAM,” and, indeed, of America itself. As Nicholls and Uitermark have argued, throughout the twentieth century, the immigrant rights movement adopted a nationalist frame that “centered on the virtuous nation and its deserving immigrants.”[[100]](#footnote-101) Eschewing more progressive alternative frames such as rights or belonging, the immigrant rights movement full-throatedly embraced a frame that emphasized the red, white, and blue flag-waving patriot.

The debate over the use of American nationalism in the immigrant rights movement originated in the 1994 debate over immigration restrictionist Proposition 187 in California. During the demonstrations against Prop. 187, participants proudly waved Mexican, Central American, and other flags of their nations of origins, a fact which was deployed by anti-immigrant groups to make the case that immigrants were anti-American. Reflecting on these events, Frank Sharry at the time the head of the National Immigration Forum, said,” “If those people had used American flags instead of Mexican ones, we might have won this thing,” of the efforts to combat Prop. 187*.*[[101]](#footnote-102)While not all immigrant movement members agreed with this assessment, the lesson the immigrant rights movement took away from the events was to suppress foreign flag displays at protests. Ever since then, “the move to embrace American symbols and silence displays of foreignness and otherness has been a central plank of the movement’s representational strategy.”[[102]](#footnote-103)

Nicholls and Uitermark offer several reasons for the adoption of the nationalist frame by the immigrant rights movement. “First, leading advocates… wanted to achieve broad resonance with a broad audience and counter the negative portrayals of anti-immigrant adversaries. Second, the need to maintain consistency across the country resulted in the creation of a discursive infrastructure.”[[103]](#footnote-104) Another reason for the flag’s adoption is the role of the National Immigration Forum in leading the communications strategy for the movement. The Forum “performed surveys, polls, and focus groups to identify the political predilections of the national public.”[[104]](#footnote-105) But as mentioned early, these methods are not unproblematic. As Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss point out, “The ‘public’ is a heterogenous category.,” and I concur with their analysis that “subgroups within the public sphere matter…research already shows that frames that persuade some people to become or remain activists can be counterproductive for winning the support of others.”[[105]](#footnote-106) Further, I argue that the immigrant rights movement’s obsession with pandering to “public opinion,” may also have undermined major sources of power that have greater sway in changing policy than winning the “hearts and minds” of an elusive “public.”

1. **2008-2016: The Obama Era + the Failure of Reform**

To assess the effectiveness of the social movement strategies of framing immigrant claims through the lens of nationalism, we simply need to look at the historical record. Put simply, the immigrant rights movement failed to achieve its goals—we still have not passed either comprehensive immigration reform or a less ambitious piecemeal legalization plan such as the DREAM Act. Part of the reason for failure is certainly due to party politics. While the struggle for reform lasted over two decades (and is ongoing), I will focus on the years of Democratic presidential control during the Obama Era. During the first two years of Obama’s presidency, Democrats controlled all three branches of government, but Obama continued to suffer devastating blows in subsequent elections. Republicans took the House in the 2010 midterms, holding the House for four years until winning control of both houses of Congress for his last two years in office. Further, the Obama presidential record on immigration was characterized by his title of “deporter-in-chief,” a leader who played his immigration enforcement cards early and often, pandering to more restrictionist members of Congress. Nonetheless, Obama was a Democrat who had vowed to pass immigration reform, even if his ambitions left immigrants empty-handed.

There are multiple factors that contributed to failure that were outside the control of the immigrant rights movement (the Great Recession of 2007-2009, for one); but this paper’s focus is upon the use of framing strategies by immigrant rights groups, so I highlight the main frames used by the major national CIR campaign during this period, Reform Immigration for America (RIFA or RI4A), which was launched in 2009. While its successor, the Alliance for citizenship in 2013, also merits attention, this paper will focus on RIFA. The focus on RIFA is warranted because it was the movement that produced the cleavage in the immigrant rights movement that resulted in the movement giving up on a comprehensive immigration bill in favor of the more modest DREAM Act, and yet still coming up short when it failed to break a filibuster in the Senate in 2010.

*Reform Immigration for America*

According to Rich Stolz, the campaign’s director, “the fundamental goal of RI4A was to enact comprehensive immigration legislation in the 111th Congress.”[[106]](#footnote-107) The campaign was heavily bankrolled by major philanthropic donors, including Atlantic Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundation [[107]](#footnote-108) Its mission statement was the following:

If you want a common-sense solution to our broken immigration system that strengthens **equal opportunity** and **the rule of law**, treats **hardworking immigrant families** with **respect and dignity**, and moves all **communities and families in America** forward together... join us.

While the mission included “good immigrant worker” and “family” frames, its communication guidance to its member groups was much more abstract generic. Stolz explains that “extensive polling and focus groups” were conducted to develop the campaign’s top tier message: *“America needs workable solutions now that uphold our nation’s values and move us forward together.”* [[108]](#footnote-109) What is notable about the primary messaging frame of the campaign was how completely devoid of substance it was. The word “immigration” does not even appear in the main message frame that consists of the communication strategy for the RI4A campaign. However, the word “America” and the phrase “nation’s values” are included in the top tier frame. While it is not uncommon for top tier messaging for national campaigns to be generic, this message is exceptionally so to the point that, in contrast with the same-sex marriage top-tier frame of “love is love,” it fails to communicate the basic issue it seeks to convince voters about.

*CIR versus DREAM*

For the decade preceding RI4A, the immigrant rights movement had struggled internally with a major strategic disagreement: pass Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) that would provide a path to status for all undocumented workers or set a less ambitious goal of passing the DREAM Act, which would legalize the more sympathetic population of young immigrants who had been brought to the country as children and thus ostensibly face better odds of passing. During the RI4A campaign, the CIR versus DREAM debate erupted into a boil, with dissident DREAMers splitting off from RI4A and demanding a focus on swift passage of the DREAM Act, against the strong objections of RI4A leadership, who insisted on staying the course with the CIR goal. This cleavage has been extensively documented by Walter Nicholls and others, who describes how “by fall 2010, [dissident DREAMers] had shifted the strategic focus of the whole immigrant rights movement from Comprehensive Immigration Reform to the DREAM Act as a stand-alone bill.”[[109]](#footnote-110)

The decision to give up on aspirations for a comprehensive bill in favor of DREAM is consequential not only because it proved that even a pared-down legalization bill was doomed to fail. The role of labor in the fissure between is also consequential for this analysis of labor framing in the immigrant rights movement. During the conflict with RI4A and mainstream immigrant rights leaders, dissident DREAMers had reached the leaders of the two teachers unions as well as AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka to ask for his support in their efforts to abandon CIR in favor of DREAM. Back in June 2010, Trumka had come out strongly in support of the comprehensive plan, even amidst push-back from his base:

And yet today I hear from working people who should know better, some in my own family –

that those immigrants are taking our jobs, ruining our country. Haven’t we been here before?

When I hear that kind of talk, I want to say, did an immigrant move your plant overseas? Did an immigrant take away your pension? Or cut your health care? Did an immigrant destroy American workers’ right to organize? Or crash the financial system? Did immigrant workers write the trade laws that have done so much harm to Ohio?[[110]](#footnote-111)

But when the DREAMers asked for his support, Trumka and the AFL-CIO shifted course. As a result, “Trumka’s strong support for the DREAM Act played an important role in shifting the balance in favor of the dissident DREAMers,” explains Nichols. “It signaled to congressional leaders that the national labor movement was now supporting the DRAM Act as a stand-alone bill.” [[111]](#footnote-112) On August 10th, the AFL-CIO Executive Council issued a statement in support of the DREAM Act, and on November 29th, 2010 Richard Trumka penned a letter to Congressional leadership urging DREAM’s passage.

Once the movement had finally come to agreement about the DREAM Act stand-alone strategy, House passed the bill and sent it to the Senate; but the bill failed to become law when it fell five votes short of the sixty votes needed to overcome a Senate filibuster. The movement had conceded DREAMers’ demands for compromise, and it had still failed. The vote was devastating for undocumented youth, families, and allies across the country and set the movement back for years. At the same time, the shift to a DREAM stand-alone strategy had cemented the DREAMer frame for the movement. Addressing Congressmemembers who had voted against DREAM, Frank Sharry, mastermind of RI4A communications strategy, accused them of, “standing at the schoolhouse door saying no to the best and the brightest of the Latino immigrant community.”[[112]](#footnote-113) The frame of the DREAMer as exceptional was here to stay. As was the characterization of all DREAMers and immigrants as Latinos, thus erasing the existence of non-Latino immigrants, who also would have benefited from the DREAM Act. The DREAM had died again in Congress, but the discourse of the DREAMer was very much alive.

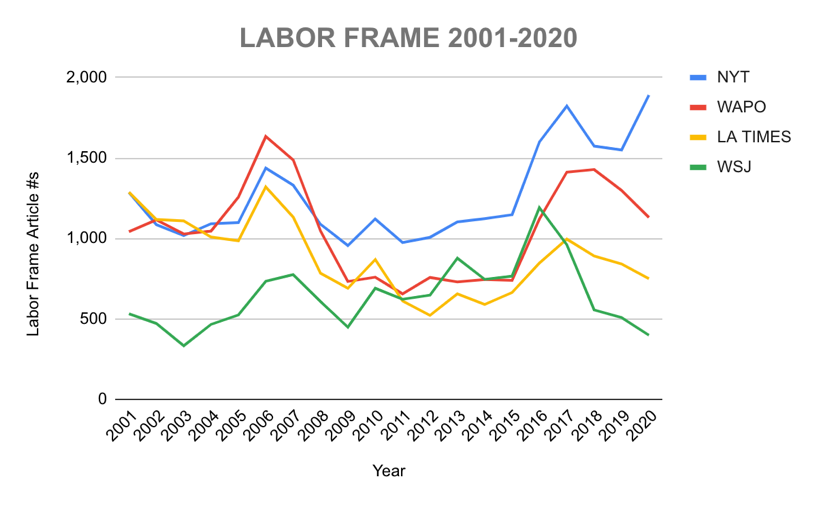
1. **Testing the Frames: DREAMers and Workers Go Head-to-Head**

This paper set out to test the theory that the role of labor had changed in the immigrant rights movement over the last twenty years. More specifically, this paper looks to assess how the frame of labor and the “good immigrant worker” have shifted through the immigrant rights movement to test the hypothesis that the labor frame has declined in the immigrant rights movement in recent years. To put the frame to the test, I first looked to media coverage of the frames of “immigrant worker” and “DREAMer” by searching for proxy terms. [[113]](#footnote-114) Secondly I conducted an analysis of the instances of articles where the two competing national labor unions, AFL-CIO and SEIU, made statements about immigration policy from 2001-2020.

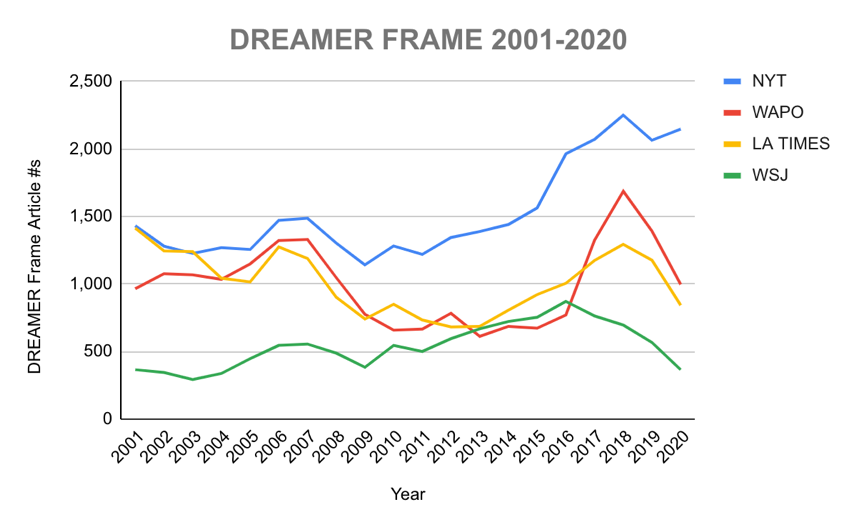
|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| FRAME | Key Concepts |
| Nationalist | * Loves America * Is *already* American * Contributes morally, economically, culturally to American project |
| Good Immigrant | * Not a criminal (vs. terrorist/criminal) * Honest * Law-abiding * Loves heteronormative family * Faithful/church-going |
| DREAMer | * Innocent/parents were “guilty” * Young * Assimilated/“Already American” * Believes in the American DREAM * Loves America * High achiever * Hard worker |
| Good Immigrant Worker | * Hard-working * Feeds “us” * Takes care of “our” families * Cleans “our” houses * Pays taxes * Contributes to the economy * Pays Taxes * Doesn’t take “our” jobs |
| Immigrant as Family Member | * Values heteronormative family values * Faith values * Loyalty * Values family unit as bedrock of American society |

**Figure 3**: Key Immigrant Social Movement Frames

Consistent with the broader framing literature, Haynes et al. find that “…the ways in which immigrants and immigration policy are described will vary across liberal, mainstream, and conservative media outlets” [[114]](#footnote-115) While this is generally true beyond immigration, the results of my study confirm that more liberal-leaning outlets, such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, tend to provide more coverage of immigrant movement leaders espousing expansionist immigration positions compared to more conservative outlets, such as the Wall Street Journal (see: Figures 4, 5).



**Figure 4:** Number of Articles Reflecting “Labor” Frame in the NY Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal



**Figure 5:** Number of Articles Reflecting “DREAMer” Frame in the NY Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal

The incidences of each frame over time show similar patterns of a steep decline in both frames following the flurry of national immigrant activity in 2006-2007. The labor frame seems to hit its peak in 2006, around the time of the massive immigrant rights marches, whereas the DREAMer frame peaks closer to 2007, when the DREAM Act S.744 fell seven votes short of a cloture vote in the Senate. It is also remarkable that the labor frame shows no noticeable increase during the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides in 2003, indicating that the IWFR were not successful in reframing the immigration narrative. Despite small increases in 2010 when DREAM and CIR nearly passed again, both the labor and DREAMer frame exhibit patterns of decline throughout the Obama presidency, spiking again when Trump takes office. However, I was expecting to see a steeper decline in labor framing following the movement’s shift towards a DREAM stand-alone strategy. Testing a different metric, I looked to statements by labor on immigration organizations, specifically the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) on immigration over the last 20 years.

Figure 6: AFL Immigration Statements

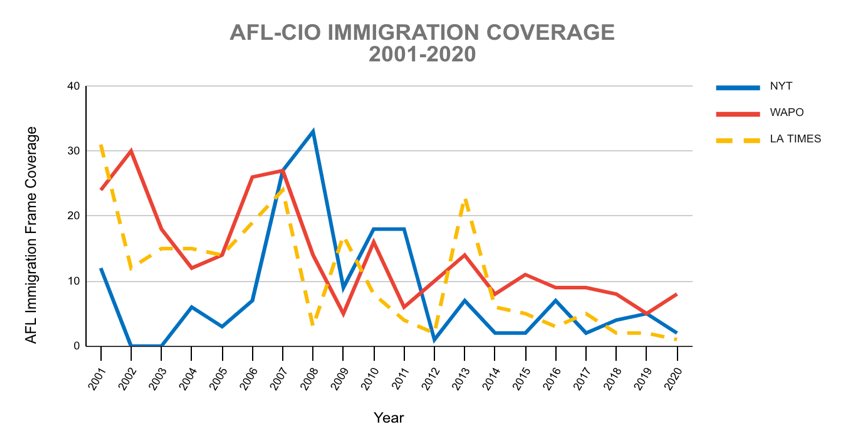
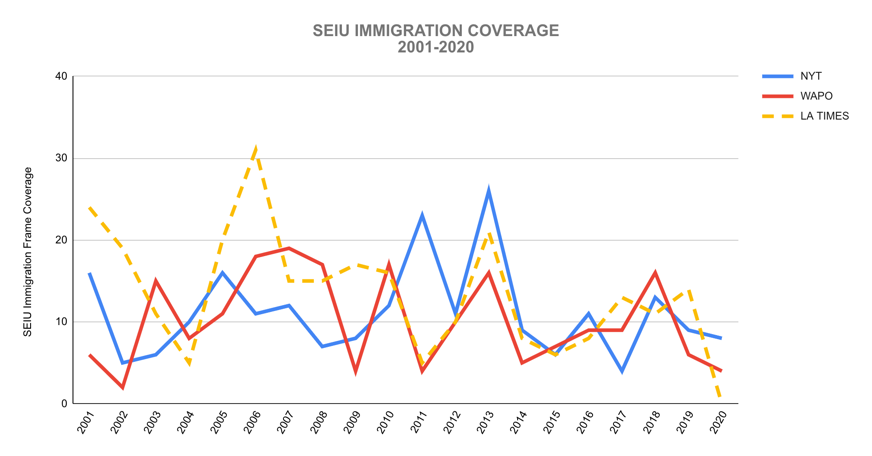


Figure 7: SEIU Immigration Statements



Here, looking at the number of statements by the AFL and SEIU on immigration (Figures 6 and 7), it is clear that while the media coverage of the labor frame itself rebounded following the election of Donald Trump, the voice of mainstream labor organizations was muted. While this may reflect bias on the part of media outlets in terms of whom they are covering (much as the first two charts may reflect bias in *what* topics they are covering), these findings remain significant. Another notable finding from these figures is the difference between the prevalence of AFL-CIO and SEIU immigrant statements. Both labor organizations’ immigration statements decline in the years following the last major immigration reform bill the so-called “gang of eight” bill, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013 (Bill S.744), but the immigration statements of SEIU increase following 2005, when SEIU broke from the AFL-CIO in the historic Change to Win labor movement cleavage, taking with them unionized workers in sectors with the highest concentration.

Media coverage is not the only evidence of the decline in labor movement’s investment in immigration reform. In examining the years that followed the Immigrant Worker Freedom ride, there is strong evidence that the role of labor in the immigration reform movement declined. Interviews with movement participants provide some of the strongest evidence of the inside-view of this phenomenon. Muzaffar Chisti points to the fact that the representation of the top tiers of labor staff has declined in recent years. “The evidence is that ten years ago, you would have a top labor leaders would be head of the table [at an immigration reform meeting],” explains Chisti. “That doesn’t happen anymore.”[[115]](#footnote-116) Every movement leader I interviewed for this paper conceded that while labor still was nominally a leader in the immigrant rights movement, their role had receded in recent years. This trend has been exacerbated by the election of President Trump, as former AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka (correctly reading the rightward drift among his rank-and-file members) publicly agreed with several of Trump’s stances, including on immigration.[[116]](#footnote-117)

The data from this research signals that the labor-union alliance peaked in the early 2000s, prior to the Change to Win split. Echoing Muzaffar Chisti, Joshua Bernstein of SEIU (and original author of the DREAM Act), argues that “the whole AFL-CIO was never bought into the immigrant rights thing…it was UFW, HERE, UFCW that were most bought in.”[[117]](#footnote-118) If unions that were most bought in were the ones that left the AFL, then it stands to reason that the AFL has become less attentive to immigration issues in recent years, even if SEIU’s support did not decline at the same rate. Nonetheless, the role of “labor” has been diminished in the movement for comprehensive immigration reform. Richard Stolz, former director of the Reform Immigration for American Campaign assesses the role of labor in these words:

Labor has changed pretty significantly. The labor movements are still the largest institutions in the [immigration reform] fight, but I feel like the leadership has not caught up or kept up with the rank and file in the labor movement. I see collaboration, but I don’t see a unifying strategy between the immigrant rights movement and the labor movement. Labor doesn’t have the same cache among the younger generation of leadership labor hasn’t had the same visible role.[[118]](#footnote-119)

In sum, while labor has not completely vanished from the coalitions, it has transformed at the national level.

Shannon Gleason and Els de Graauw also point out that to speak of “labor” only in terms of national associations misunderstands that “the AFL-CIO [and Change to Win unions are] comprised of dozens of state federations and thousands of central and regional labor councils, each with a distinct immigrant base and facing varied local conditions that shape their work.”[[119]](#footnote-120) In their examination of the role of labor unions in building local solidarity for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) programs, Gleason and de Graauw find how labor engagement in immigration issues varies according to local political and civic contexts and uncover instances of strong transversal solidary between labor movements and immigrant communities. These local studies are an important corrective to nationally focused studies that obscure subnational realities by treating “labor” as a monolithic whole. Nonetheless, this study on national labor frames remains important as national labor organizations play a role in disseminating resources, both financial and symbolic, and Congressional leaders look to the AFL-CIO and SEIU to gauge labor support for policy proposals and legislation. As such, it remains crucial to examine how and why it came to be that national labor organizations spoke less about immigration reform and participated less actively in immigration reform coalitions in the second decade of the twentieth century.

**III. Why Did the “Good Immigrant Worker” Get Off the CIR Bus?**

Given that national labor organizations have been less vocal on immigrant reform in recent years, the question remains: what led labor to “get off the immigration reform bus” following the display of force of the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides in 2003 and its role leading the immigrant marches of 2006? I contend that there are six major reasons: 1). *External threats to labor*: in the form of subcontracting, globalization, court challenges, and the Great Recession, even if such threats were ultimately symbolical in nature; 2.) *Internal rifts within the labor movement:*specifically, the Change to Win labor movement fissure, which severed the unified labor movement into two competing factions; 3.) *Labor’s failure to adequately integrate immigrant “alt-labor” and large sectors of immigrant workers*. Alt-labor was missing from the bus at a time when precarious labor force sectors were growing in importance to the national economy and the immigrant rights movement; 4.) *Democratic party cooptation of labor and immigration movements:* increasingly, both immigrant and union leaders have substituted Democratic party support for a politics that attends to specific policies*;* 5.) *An overreliance on polling as movement strategy:* a path-dependent phenomenon driven by movement elites and the philanthropic sector; 6.) *Scalar shifts in immigrant movement strategy****:*** particularly the new focus on the stand-alone DREAM Act and a focus on subnational policies and immigration enforcement issues by state and local law enforcement officials, which rendered labor less relevant to the cause.

*External Threats to Labor? From The Great Recession, Subcontracting, and the Janus Decision*

The external threats to the labor movement during the period of 2003 to the present are perhaps too numerous to count: the ongoing menace of outsourcing of manufacturing due to the ongoing process of the globalization of the economy, subcontracting, the gig economy, the shifting density of union membership concentrating in the public sector, and legal threats, such as the Supreme Court Janus v. AFSCME, which prohibited unions from applying public sector union fees to non-members Speaking of the main challenges faced by labor, the Shannon Lederer, Director of Immigration Policy for the AFL-CIO, explained:

We hit peak density for the labor movement in the late 60s and been in decline ever since and take a look industrially where that happened in manufacturing…Water Reuther and visionary leaders around the working-class identity breaking down racial barriers got demolished, and aside from getting demolished and the employment structure got diffused. It used to be anyone who worked in an auto plant from pushing a broom to assembly line was all together. There was Wall-to-wall solidarity with everyone in the same bargaining unit. But then you have subcontracting, so now that’s over.

The labor union has spent most of the last few decades feeling under existential attack, and this political opportunity structure has impacted its perceptions of what was politically possible.

However, Ruth Milkman and Stephanie Luce compellingly outline that, contrary to some perceptions, “the Great Recession does not appear to have been a significant factor in the long-term decline of union density, which had been under way for many decades.” [[120]](#footnote-121) That said, while the Great Recession did not hammer the final nail into labor’s coffin, as many had predicted,[[121]](#footnote-122) it “nevertheless did impact the labor movement,” argue Milkman and Luce, as “it opened up political space for right-wing attacks on the rights of unions to exist and bargain collectively in both the private and public sector, further eroding an already hostile institutional environment.” [[122]](#footnote-123) For the purposes of analyzing the framing of labor in the immigrant rights movement, it suffices to say that the existential threats to labor proffered a strategic justification for labor to back away from investing in immigration issues as its resources dwindled––or were perceived to have.

While threats, including global economic transformations, have been looming darkly over labor’s back for years, it is notable that the question of global economic forces have simultaneously vanished from labor’s vocabulary compared to the heady days of the late 90s/early 2000s, when globalization and free trade agreements were the words of the day. Lederer makes the point that right when global economic forces posed the greatest threat to labor unions, the global perspective began to recede from labor strategizing. “We lost lots of capacity to understand the global picture even as it became more relevant, explained Lederer.” [[123]](#footnote-124) Chung-Wha Hong, a long-time immigrant movement leader, echoed that a similar dynamic had occurred in the immigrant rights space. By the mid-2000s, the “the global dimension was flagrantly missing—the root causes of global migration,” she explained. RIFA former director Richard Stolz reiterates that, “there isn’t enough recognitions of the international worker movements and what is actually happening globally.”[[124]](#footnote-125) The recognition that the global frame has vanished is a crucial one. As Alfonso Gonzales points out, “It is impossible to disentangle the migration and labor question today without a deep understanding of the nature of contemporary capitalism, namely, neoliberal globalization.” [[125]](#footnote-126) Given the implications for unmasking the push-pull global forces that drive international migration, this subject warrants more scholarly attention in future research projects.

*Internal rifts within the labor movement*

This centrality of the Change to Win/AFL-CIO fissure has already been discussed at some length, but to summarize: tensions internal to the labor movement also played a factor in diminishing labor’s role as an advocate for CIR. The Change to Win movement had riven the labor movement into two factions led by the AFL and SEIU, respectively. As the AFL-CIO labor monopoly unraveled, SEIU took its largely immigrant base with it during the split, thus AFL no longer brought workers to the immigrant rights table. Muzaffar Chisti places the blame for labor’s declining involvement in immigration reform efforts on the infamous Change to Win split. Referring to the historic year 2000 resolution reversing its position on undocumented immigrants, Chisti argues that “after the famous [immigration position reversal] resolution passed, soon after, the AFLCIO split…major pro-immigrant unions left the AFL-CIO to join Change to Win…the AFL was left with a shell resolution, there was no one left to fight for it. How can the shell produce results when everyone who has produced shell has left…? The principle driving force of the resolution had left.”[[126]](#footnote-127) The simple fact of this split helps explain why “labor” writ large, or at the very least, the AFL-CIO has become less active in immigration reform campaigns in recent years.

*An Overreliance on Polling as a Strategy Coupled with Democratic Party Cooptation*

As discussed previously, beltway immigration advocates have developed a pernicious fixation with polling and prognostication technologies peddled by the beltway consultantocracy.[[127]](#footnote-128) In short, Washington is obsessed with polling and public opinion as the primary, if not only, campaign strategy. Further, strategy diffusion from successful movements, notably the same-sex marriage movement, have convinced a generation of movement leaders and advocates that the way to win political campaigns is to win “hearts and minds,” as measured by focus group results and polling data. The obsession with polling stems from a long history of movement leaders who have taken their strategic guidance from Clinton Era insights shaped by the work of George Lakoff and his theory of moral reasoning in political campaigns.[[128]](#footnote-129) This polling obsession by immigration advocates has been reinforced by the philanthropic sector, which has bankrolled pricey polling and survey experiments and has pushed the immigrant rights movement to base their advocacy on public opinion prognostication data. A full discussion of the limitations of polling and public opinion research are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is vital to acknowledge this root of how the immigrant rights leadership develops and disseminates its communication frames. That said, it is important to note that the strategic guidance of following the message was also fully adopted by the nascent DREAMer movement. As one DREAMer articulated:

I think the function of messaging is really to start to get people to think differently, especially those on the right and have this very antagonistic and very hostile point of view of immigrant rights and immigration. If the messaging is correct and effective, then the message will be able to trigger hearts and minds, for them to be able to start thinking differently. And that has been really key for the DREAM movement. [[129]](#footnote-130)

Even as DREAMers became independence from the mainstream immigrant rights movement, it is worth noting that the movement “repertoires” [[130]](#footnote-131)

Relatedly, the immigrant rights movement, while having developed more sophisticated political strategies over the last two decades,[[131]](#footnote-132) has increasingly become inextricably led by the Democratic Party apparatus. In the words of Muzaffar Chisti, “essentially the immigrant rights movement is an auxiliary of the democratic party. And that doesn’t help.”[[132]](#footnote-133) Describing her experience as the executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition over 12 years and her relationship with unions, Chung-Wha Hong explained that,

The problem is that the unions were so political. Their approach to immigrant rights was 90% political and self-interest. At times, I think the dominant motivation was political.  So, for example, I’d get a union pushing me to flop a seat from Republican to Democrat, even though the democrat was not pro-immigrant.

In this way, immigrant advocacy organizations echo the circular logics of many Political Scientists, who seek to explain all political outcomes through the lens of partisanship. By this logic, reason for why immigration reform has not passed in Congress is partisanship, but the solution to pass immigration reform is also partisanship. This logic has produced the ouroboros of the immigrant rights movement/Democratic Party as a hybrid creature that continues to wonder why it never succeed at eating its own tail.

*Who Missed the Bus: Worker Centers, Border Groups, Human Rights, and Radical Organizers*

Finally, an assessment of the role of labor in framing the messaging “Good Immigrant Worker” must also attend to the immigrant workers were left out. The 2003 Freedom Rides occurred during a time when the worker center movement was ascendant, but worker centers and other alt-labor organizations were generally excluded from mainstream labor organizations. To borrow Janice Fine’s definition, worker centers are “community-based mediating institutions that provide support to low-wage workers,”[[133]](#footnote-134) and by the early 2000s, “worker centers [had] emerged as central components of the immigrant community infrastructure,…[providing a] combination of services, advocacy, and organizing.”[[134]](#footnote-135) More specifically, worker centers operate in “low-wage, loosely organized labor markets inhabited by day laborers, housekeepers, hospitality workers, and agricultural workers, who have always been underrepresented within the ranks of organized labor.”[[135]](#footnote-136) Worker centers played a crucial role because “in part, worker centers [had] emerged because of the void in representation that has been left by the decline of organized labor and the institutional narrowness of the contemporary labor movement…”[[136]](#footnote-137)

Much like the relationship between immigrant rights groups and labor, the relationship between worker centers and organized labor organizations such as the AFL-CIO has been complicated. While worker centers and “alt-labor” groups are often lumped together, Tom Juravich makes the vital point that “community-based worker centers…and unions largely operate in distinct areas of power against fundamentally different adversaries.”[[137]](#footnote-138) Worker centers do not just fill a gap in the space carved out by declining union density in sectors traditionally organized by the labor movement—this is not the organizing within the walls of the Fordist factory with set hours and fixed geographic spaces. Rather, worker centers organize on street corners, domestic homes, and the gig economy. If labor unions organize on the shop floor, worker centers and alt-labor operate in Home Depot parking lots and inside the private cars of Uber drivers.

In the early 2000s, the freewheeling organizing style of worker centers often conflicted with the hierarchical, rigid organizing model of traditional labor. Further, under the umbrella of coalitions such as the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), worker centers did not follow the lead of organized labor in the immigrant rights movement. As Chung-Wha Hong describes, “major constituency groups like day laborers, domestic workers, the worker center movement were leading with worker rights didn’t want to be subsumed under immigration reform. There were so many policy intersections—where does immigration law or labor law take precedent?”[[138]](#footnote-139) Worker centers were scrappy and fiercely independent. As a result, Hong explains, “those groups didn’t trust the national coalition, so they didn’t really join…that was one of the issues with why immigration reform work was so reformist. Some of the more radical organizing was happening outside.”[[139]](#footnote-140)

Further, groups like the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) opposed enforcement concessions and were often reluctant to endorse CIR proposals that excluded their members. As one former Center for Community Change organizer explained “…Many day laborers, no matter what [reform legislation] passes are potentially left out because they’ll either have trouble proving things [e.g. identity documents, work history, or physical presence required to apply to adjust immigration status under CIR proposals] or they’re newer and they might not fit.” [[140]](#footnote-141) While the fact that labor unions have not managed to incorporate these workers into union membership would seem to contradict basic labor organizing principles, whereby more members equal more power, there is historic precedent for such institutional divisions within labor. “One cannot assume that transnational workers will be organized into existing unions,” explains Immanuel Ness. “In fact, the period of large-scale immigration from the 1880s through the early 1920s witnessed the creation of specific ethnic and national union structures, particularly among garment and mining workers.” [[141]](#footnote-142)

The fact remains that, despite the AFL-CIO’s pivot on undocumented immigrants, many undocumented workers remain unrepresented by national labor organizations. When asked about the role of worker centers in the national labor movement, AFL director of immigration policy Shannon Lederer responded, “I would say that the day labor issue is a place where overall the progress is local progress, when you think our national institutions, change doesn’t emanate from DC…”  This local (versus national) focus of the worker center movement also parallels the scalar shift of the immigrant rights movement, as the devolution of focus among immigrant advocates increasingly turned away from CIR and towards much “smaller” goals, both geographically and in terms of political ambition.

*Strategy Shifts Within the Immigrant Rights Movement: Scalar Pivots to DREAM and State/Local Enforcement*

Finally, two scalar shifts discussed previously further explain why labor’s voice has been less prominent in the struggle for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) over the last decade. First, the shift in both substance and scale of the immigrant rights movement to a focus on state/local enforcement following the passage of Arizona’s SB 1070 in 2010. Second, the pivot to abandon a more ambitious CIR strategy as dissident DREAMers broke away from the RI4A comprehensive immigration reform strategy in favor of a stand-alone DREAM Act approach in 2010. Both represented a major strategic break from the movement by two major constituencies: day laborers and DREAMers, where much of the grassroots energy of the movement had been concentrated. Nicholls details how groups like NDLON broke away from dominant national vehicle of RIFA because “they needed to fight against repressive enforcement measures and push for smaller measures that stood much better chances of passing (like the DREAM Act).”[[142]](#footnote-143)

The first shift was the decision to focus less on policies in Washington DC in favor of fighting back against state and local enforcement policies targeting immigrants, such as Arizona’s SB1070. Arizona’s law had highlighted the increasing adoption policies such as 287(g) agreements, through which local law enforcement officials signed up to enforce federal immigration laws. While national immigrant advocacy groups led by elite leaders, usually with the privilege of citizenship, focused on steering voluminous philanthropic resources to pass a far-shot bill in Congress, the more grassroots and marginalized members of the movement were facing a new enforcement regime of a state and local police apparatus. These newly deputized local policing forces that had been redirected in the service of enforcing federal immigration laws illustrated a scalar contradiction—on one hand, per the “plenary power” doctrine, only the federal government and Congress had authority to define and enforce immigration laws; on the other hand, it was the guns and handcuffs of local, county, and state law enforcement agencies that were being mobilized to target undocumented the lives and bodies of undocumented immigrants. In response, NDLON and DREAMer groups, who were directly impacted by this scalar reconfiguration, redirected their energies to fight the new state and local level threats to their daily lives. As Monica Varsanyi describes, “the contradictions of neoliberal membership have given rise to a vibrant and contentious politics of rescaling.”[[143]](#footnote-144) While movement elites stayed the CIR course on Capitol Hill, grassroots leaders transformed their focus to the state and local levels where their bodies and those of their friends and community members were physically and politically on the line.

Although the shift of to state/local “crimmigration”[[144]](#footnote-145) policies reflected the will and urgent needs of directly impacted immigrant communities, this scalar transition also had implications for the role of labor. Whereas labor had a clear stake in immigration reform, as legalizing immigrants would bring in a new cadre of immigrant workers to the union fold, labor’s role was less clear in the enforcement context. In fact, in many cases, the self-interest of labor would dictate that they should stand with unionized state and local law enforcement officers who were already members.

Similarly, the shift to a stand-alone DREAM Act represented a scalar transformation that also undermined labor’s contribution to the movement. While many DREAMers were also workers, the framing of immigrants as innocent youths and students put them outside the constituency of the labor movement. Many were too young to be “Good Immigrant Workers.” While the DREAMer frame relied upon notions of DREAMers as “deserving contributors,” for the most part they represented the promise of *future* contributions. The iconic images of DREAMers in caps and gowns in graduation ceremonies was intended to highlight the contradictions of the valedictorian captain of the football team who demonstrated exceptional promise, but then was faced with the impossibility of legally entering the labor force to bring those skills and talents to serve the American economy. The DREAMer’s American DREAM was, by definition, deferred. And so the role of labor as an institution representing “workers” became less relevant as the DREAM Act became the main goal of the immigrant rights movement. The scalar transformations of the immigrant rights movement pivoting to enforcement and the DREAM Act thus had institutional consequences insofar as those strategic turns made labor less relevant as the national ambitions of the movement were pared down. As the scale of the immigrant rights movement shrank, so did the role of national organized labor groups.

**V. Conclusion: The Stork Theory of Migration and The Future of Labor in Immigrant Movements**

As this paper has demonstrated, the role of national labor organizations in the movement for comprehensive immigration reform waned in the second decade of the 2000s. The evidence for this decline includes interviews with movement leaders, analysis of media statements of labor leaders on the topic of immigration, and charts of the prevalence of the frame of “immigrant as worker” versus that of the “DREAMer in major national news outlets over the last twenty years. I contend that labor’s diminished role is attributable to a variety of factors, including external and internal pressures upon organized labor, labor’s failure to integrate emerging sectors, immigrant movement dynamics, the cooptation of the movement by the Democratic Party, a fixation on polling, and scalar shifts in immigrant movement strategy.

While the frame of the “Good Immigrant Worker” never fully disappeared, and multiple frames can coexists on parallel tracks, the DREAMer frame clearly prevailed following the movements’ coalescence around the stand-alone DREAM in 2010, even following another failed attempt at CIR through the “Gang of Eight” bill in 2013. I argue that the dominance of the DREAMer frame had important consequences for the role of labor and labor framing in the battle for comprehensive immigration reform. Meanwhile, the announcement of the DACA program by President Obama in 2012 had numerous of impacts that reinforced this frame while also contributing to demobilization of DREAMers as political constituency: 1.) DACA gave quasi-legal status to the discourse of the DREAMEr, breathing tangible legal protections into what was previously just a social movement frame; and 2.) DACA status also took some of the steam out of the DREAMer movement, as students in graduation robes gained temporary legal protections and work authorization that allowed gave voice to a new constituency of DACAmented (versus DREAMer) protagonists. As the DREAMer grew into the DACAmented immigrant (although many were not able to benefit from the new status), they traded the graduation robes for work authorization and a precarious, liminal semblance of the American Dream. But even though the DREAMer was all grown up (nearly a decade after the launch the program, many no longer qualify as “youths”), the DACA program enshrined the DREAMer frame into policy, and thus entrenched the DREAMer into the basic architecture of the immigrant rights movement and American law. Any future immigration reform movement would necessarily be required to make permanent the contingent status bestowed upon the DREAMer by the DACA status. In many ways, the DACA program allowed the DREAMer youth to “grow up” while simultaneously imprisoning them in a perpetual frame of youthful precarity. So long as the DACA program exists, beneficiaries of the program will always be framed as youth in a legal Neverland.

It is important to note that the DREAMer frame was likely the only political resource available to undocumented youth within the landscape of their political opportunity structure. As many of them were too young to work, appealing to the sympathies of voters was the only option available to them as political subjects. While DREAMErs could conduct direct actions and symbolic school walk-outs, they lacked the political resources of capital and labor that would allow them pour money into political campaigns or hit the bottom line of business with a strike or work stoppage. They did not have the resources of dollars and fists, so they fought their battles with “hearts and minds.” Although the DREAMer frame was originally not conceived by documented youth themselves, many had fully embraced the frame and the made it their own.[[145]](#footnote-146) As the young activists, and their political strategies, matured, they sought to sever the frame from some of its problematic origins. I argue that the consequence of this severing has been the development of the problematic narrative of the “stork theory of migration.”

**The Stork Theory of Migration**

The original DREAMer was essential a narrative ploy to absolve the undocumented youth of their parents’ “guilt” or having broken the law to cross the border. Initially, DREAMers deployed a messaging frame that emphasized they were in their situation through “no fault of their own.” Within this frame, it was their parents who broke the law, not them. But as the movement matured, children backed away from assigning blame to their parents. While they retained the DREAMer frame, they dropped the “through no fault of their own” component of the message.[[146]](#footnote-147) Although some emphasized the sociopolitical and economic factors that drove their parents to migrate in the first place, in much of the mainstream representation of the DREAMer, their parents simply disappeared from the narrative. To avoid assigning blame to their parents for breaking the law, in practice many stopped talking about their parents as part of their origin stories altogether. The parents, whose bodies and labor made the DREAer possible in the first place, simply vanished from the discourse and the political strategy. When the parents did appear in the retooled DREAMer frame, it was as a family member who might be a secondary beneficiary of the immigration status of their children through family-based derivative immigration status (e.g. the DAPA program).

The result has been a “stork theory of migration.” With the disappearance of the parents of the DREAMers from the narrative of migration, the labor of their parents has also vanished. By flying over the question of labor and the push-pull factors that led the parents into the country in the first place, the immigrant rights movement has invented a mythical *deus ex machina*, the stork that hovers above power and politics to drop innocent baby DREAMers on the shores of the United States. Consequently, the DREAMer narrative has been stripped of the global forces that brought the undocumented youth to the United States in the first place: the labor of their parents. While the stork solves the political problem of the good immigrant/bad immigrant dichotomy, it does so at the expense of power, and the very force that might offer DREAMers a chance to leave the Neverland of DACA status once and for all.

**Reconstructing the Centaur: Bringing Labor Back in**

I conclude this paper by making a theoretical case for “bringing the labor back in” to both theorizing about immigrant social movements in the United States and to the immigrant rights movement itself. To illustrate my case, I use the image of Antonio Gramsci’s political protagonist of the *centaur*, a mythical fusion of force and consent. For Gramsci, the party, or in this case, the immigrant rights movement, is represented as the centaur. In Greek mythology, the *centaur* has the head of a man and the body of a beast. The centaur cannot be divided – his power derives from his hybrid nature. Although force always coexists with consent, consent is the preferred method of maintaining political control. “…There are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force,” write Gramcsi. “The first method is that of men, the second of beasts; but as the first method is often insufficient, one must have recourse to the second.”[[147]](#footnote-148)

For Gramsci, hegemony is the process by which the ruling class maintains its control of ideological and material production by acquiring the consent of the ruled.[[148]](#footnote-149) As such, there is *power* in consent. Consent is the most *strategic* entry-point into for those seeking to challenge the dominant power on the battleground of ideas. In an ideal world, American voters will consent to providing DREAMers with a path to citizenship. Similarly, it is preferable for labor unions to win concessions from employers through the *consensual* process of collective bargaining. But labor unions also have access to another tool: the strike. Looming over every collective bargaining negotiation is the real possibility that the worker will withhold their labor power if the employers fail to concede to their demands, thus costing the employer real dollars. The DREAMer has consent, but failing a Congressional vote, undocumented youth are left only with only their bodies to force Congress to provide them with basic rights.

In other words, the strategies of framing, moving public opinion involve speaking to the face of the centaur. The facial strategy of social change seeks to win “hearts and minds” and sway public opinion, that is – to gaining the consent of the governed/the American citizen who governs and is governed in turn. But this is not the only strategy available to political actors. On the other hand, power of labor—to generate capital and stop production through strike actions— is the body of the beast. Thus, by severing the DREAMer frame from that labor movement’s framing of the immigrant as laborer, the immigrant rights movement threatens to undercut one of the movement’s key sources of migrant political force: labor power.

The key point here is that the relationship between force/consent must be understood as mutually productive and inseparable. The centaur enters the world of man with a human face, but he cannot rule effectively without an understanding that his head is attached to the body of a beast. In this way, hegemony *conceals* the bestial element of force, which makes its power possible in the first place, behind the human face of consent. But the nature of power, is always *both* human face and beastly body – ideology and economics.[[149]](#footnote-150)

To conclude, I argue that the DREAMer frame has developed in such as way that it has severed the

beastly body of labor from human face of the democratic consent. While multiple factors were responsible for the decline of the frame of immigrant as worker, it is not too late to bring the frame of labor back into discourses of the immigrant rights movement. While public opinion is an important tool in any social movement’s repertoire, bringing labor back into the immigration reform debate may be the beastly kick that the movement needs to finally free the DREAMer from Neverland and rejoin the cause of workers to the global economic forces that shape their worlds. To reanimate the centaur of the immigrant rights movement will require eliminating the “stork theory of immigration” and replace it with global economic narratives that have the legs to take the movement for comprehensive immigration reform over the finish line.

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26. The role of the Catholic Church in this dynamic is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is one that I am exploring for future research.) Again, this paper calls attention to the silences in the discourses and how they change over time. While “undocuqueer” is a familiar term in 2021, early immigrant movements were fractured over the inclusion of same-sex couples and major immigrant rights coalitions refused to take positions on legislation that would allow same-sex partners to sponsor spouses prior to the overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
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