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The Political Economy of Border Wall Construction

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The Political Economy of Border Wall Construction

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April 22, 2022

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“The blood that made this nation great
will now be tested at the gate
to see if it deserves to be
admitted to democracy.
Or rather to the small elite
whose hemoglobin counts can meet
requirements of purity
consistent with security
and with that small and rabid mind
that thinks itself above mankind.”

- Marya Mannes (1959)

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I. Introduction

“Nuestros sueños de justiciar no los detiene ningun muro.”

“Our dreams of justice are not stopped by any wall.”

Whether involved in politics during the 2016 presidential election or not, the mantra of “build the wall!” spread rapidly, making the issue a forefront conversation for much of the nation. With the Trump campaign hinging on the platforms of border wall construction and immigration, national focus on the wall intensified in political discourse among citizens and politicians alike (Gimpel 2017). Even beyond the Trump campaign, political figures running for offices from governorships to Congress made their stance on border security a key priority in their own campaigns. However, the concept of a physical infrastructure between the United States and Mexico was not unique under the Trump administration. Although Trump’s campaign and presidency spent considerable time talking about the border wall, granting contracts to significant national contractors, and allocating large sums of money to construction, the reality is that the Trump administration only contributed 52 additional miles of fencing to the pre-existing 654 miles built under the previous two administrations. Since the early 1990s, the United States has put forth countless efforts and expenses to secure its Southern Border through various prevention policies, increases in border patrol agents, and construction of physical infrastructures. However, the heightened focus across the nation following the 2016 election cycle raises question of the wall’s effectiveness in deterring migrants from crossing the border, limiting undocumented migration in the United States, and protecting the nation from those perceived as a threat.

Despite claims from the Department of Homeland Security that the border wall is “deployed, effective, and disrupting criminals and smugglers” (“The Border Wall System”

2020), significant literature indicates that, although border walls might serve as effective in changing location of border crossing, they do not actually stop migration. Rather, the reality of the situation is that the border wall simply relocates crossing routes. Especially along the Southern Border, the relocation of these crossings has been deadly for migrants attempting to make the journey into the United States. In fact, the impact of the wall has created what has been referred to as a “funnel effect” on migration patterns, pushing migrants away from urban centers like El Paso or San Diego towards the harsh and hostile terrains of areas like the Sonoran Desert, Altar Valley, and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. According to Daniel Martinez of the Binational Migration Institute, “the lethality of crossing... has generally increased over the past twenty years” (“UArizona Releases Report” 2021). Instead of than decreasing attempts to cross the border, policies proposing wall construction have contributed to intensified mortality rates in the hostile areas along the border. Those who have deemed that a migration journey is worthwhile have seldom been hindered by the construction of border walls.

Although one could determine with general ease that border walls do not address the key motives behind such construction, Congress after Congress and President after President have continued to support legislation related to continued construction. Throughout this paper, the argument is made that political actors support construction of the border wall not for reasons related to heightened national security or deterrence of migrants, but rather as an alternative reason that is twofold. The first of these points to the idea that the wall serves as a political favor doled out to companies expecting a return on contributions they have made to political or government affairs, whether it be through lobbying, campaign contributions, or party donations. The second of these implies that the wall has been diminished into a pawn of political theater,

signifying to domestic voters that politicians are actively listening to constituent demands and protecting the nation, all while distracting from an actual solution to the problem at hand.

This argument contributes to existing literature on the Southern Border in an area that has not received sufficient attention previously. Because of the focus that political actors have placed on re-election votes from their constituency and continued financial support from large contractors, inadequate policies regarding border security have been enacted, increasing expenditures that could be more efficiently directed elsewhere, decreasing immigration patterns that could benefit the nation, and causing substantial migrant deaths due to the hostile terrains these policies have forced individuals to cross through. While these pieces of legislation have helped political actors circulate money within the government and garner voter support, as well as securing significant contracts for large companies, the overall impact of the legislation has not been effective in fulfilling its intended objectives.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section II provides a comprehensive history of border policies, wall construction, funding, and public opinion; Section III contains a review on previous literature relating to border walls, the economics of immigration, and counterterrorism; Section IV provides insight on the border wall's function as a political favor; and Section V gives way to the border wall as a token of political theater.

II. History of the Border Wall

“Volemos sin rumbo, sigamos al viento.”

“Let’s fly aimlessly, let’s follow the wind.”

Historical Context through Fiscal Year 2005

Prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, illegal immigration into the United States was virtually unheard-of. In fact, the United States spent most of the 1800s focused on an increase in migration from Northern and Western Europe. Between 1847 and 1854, an influx of 2.7 million migrants entered the nation (Bennett 1). Even more between 1870 and 1875, a wave of more than 80,000 Chinese immigrants moved into the nation. However, this influx of migrants found contention among the rest of America, leading Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, prohibiting the migration of Chinese immigrants. This prohibition led to an increase in the flow of Chinese migrants into Canada, incentivizing them to create their own restrictive policies across Canadian ports. This block to Canada turned these migrants towards Mexico. By 1901, Chinese migration across the Mexican American border became commonplace, creating the first demands for policing the Southern border (Burnett 8). Over time, border security efforts became more sophisticated as migration continued to incite contention among Americans.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 officially established the border between the United States and Mexico at the end of the Mexican American War. Until the restrictive immigration legislation of 1882, monitoring the Southern border received rather insignificant efforts. However, by 1924, border regulation efforts called for the creation of the initial Border Patrol agency to limit crossings. As the decline of the 1930s loomed over the nation, public opinion towards migrants once again took a sharp turn regarding those of Mexican descent entering the nation. Accordingly, the United States responded with another wave of restrictive

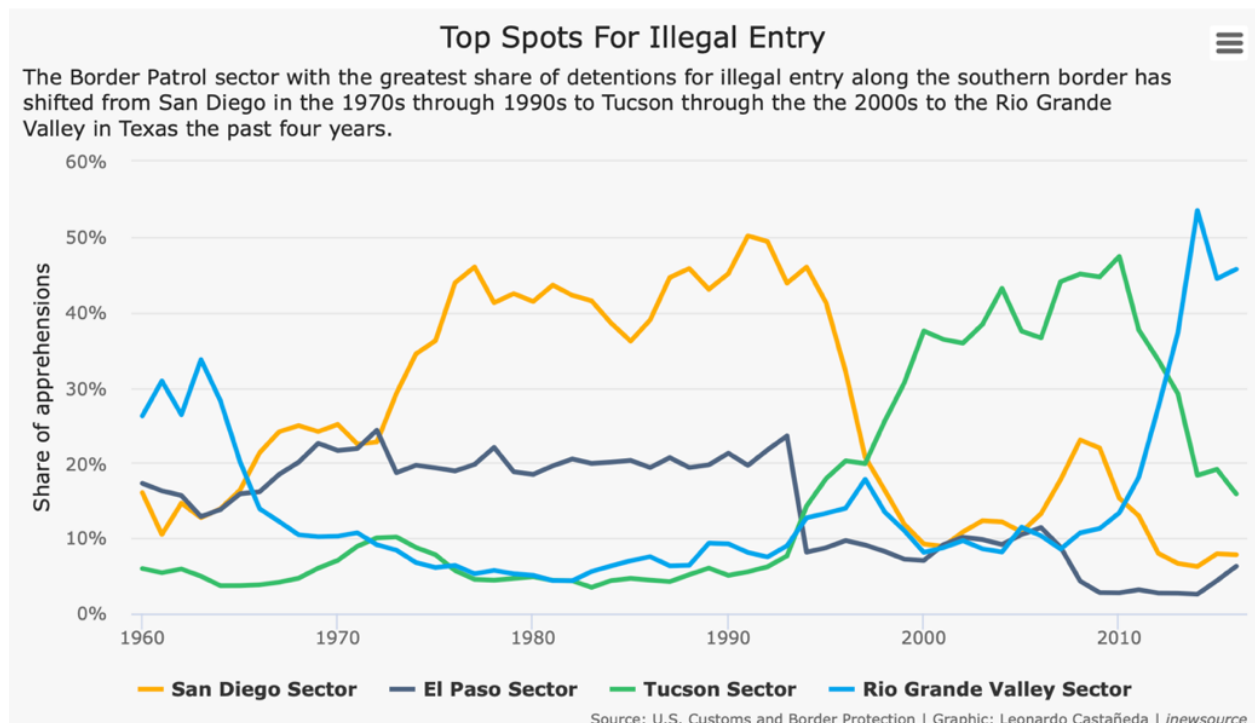
policies related to immigration. By the end of the decade, over one million people had been forced out of the United States into Mexico in accordance with these new pieces of legislation, including restrictions on hiring foreign labor.

Despite a transformation in national sentiment surrounding immigration, the need for labor had not shifted – if anything, the labor demand in the nation continuously increased over time. To meet this need, Mexican Farmer Labor Agreement of 1942 created the Bracero Program, allowing millions of Mexican men to cross the border in the name of short-term labor. Lasting 22 years, this program resulted in 4.6 million labor contracts for Mexican men (“U.S. and Mexico” 2019). However, by 1965, Congress overturned the program and, for the first time, placed quotas on the number of people allowed to migrate from Mexico and Central America with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

As border patrol and legislators continued efforts to increase border security and limit immigration, the 1990s witnessed a series of initiatives related to securing the border, beginning with the 1993 “Operation Blockade” or “Operation Hold-the-Line” policy founded by El Paso Border Sector Chief Silvestre Reyes. In response to complaints from local El Paso residents of racial profiling by border patrol agents and law enforcement in their pursuit of undocumented immigrants, Chief Reyes created the policy to increase the presence of border patrol agents at the entrances to urban centers to deter migrants from those areas. Within the decade, the San Diego sector and Arizona announced similar programs with “Operation Gatekeeper” and “Operation Safeguard,” respectively. In increasing the number of agents at these urban entrances, Border Patrol effectively pushed migrants into more remote, and therefore hostile, areas of the borderlands (De Leon 2015).

Having considered the policy a success, the federal government adopted the model in its “Prevention through Deterrence” program, spreading it across all nine sectors of the border. In observing the consequences of these policies, U.C. Davis professor, Bradford Jones, assessed the number of apprehensions recorded in the El Paso, San Diego, and Tucson sectors from 1989-2019. Throughout this period, El Paso and San Diego maintained local deterrence policies, whereas, Tucson did not. Prior to this, El Paso and San Diego saw a drastic influx of migrant crossings. However, as these initiatives were being implemented, migrant crossings consequently decreased. This decline in illegal migrant crossings in areas with deterrence policies, compared to the increase in illegal migrant crossings in areas without such policies, can be seen in **Figure 1** (Jones 2017).

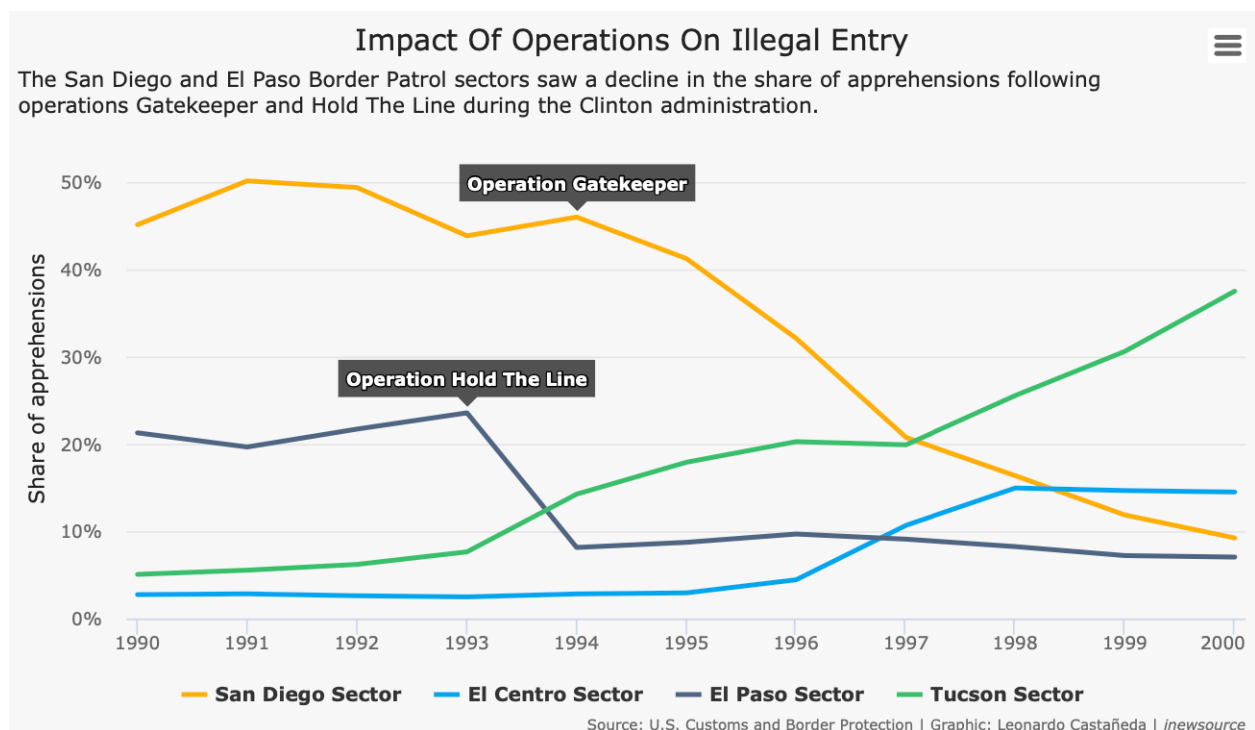
Figure 1.



(Source: Castañeda 2017)

Even more, as seen in **Figure 2**, the areas without deterrence policies saw a substantial increase in migrant apprehensions following Operation Hold the Line in the El Paso sector and Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego to effect. This migratory funnel effect was particularly strong in the Tucson sector, where a deterrence policy was not implemented by the local border sector chief. Further, as apprehensions increased in sectors without deterrence models, the number of migrant deaths in those areas saw a simultaneous increase.

Figure 2



(Source: Castañeda 2017)

Although manpower deterrence efforts primarily dominated the decade of the 1990s, the construction of a physical infrastructure between Mexico and America still garnered support. The first initiative to install a physical barrier between the two nations dates back to 1911, when the Bureau of Animal Industry determined a need to construct a fence to prevent cattle from crossing the border amid a cattle tick disease spreading through Mexico. Following this, support

for border fencing became rather stagnant for the decades leading up to 1990. However, in 1992 the US Navy decided to build the first section of a border wall along fourteen miles between Tijuana and San Diego after the sector witnessed a 33-year lead in migrant apprehensions.

However, the effort to shift from agent focused deterrence to a more substantive physical barrier essentially began with the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA). Under this legislation, the Attorney General and the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization were directed to provide “two layers of reinforced fencing [and] installation of additional physical barriers” (U.S. G.P.O. 1996:8). Additionally, the IIRIRA granted permission for the Attorney General to “contract for or buy any interest in land... adjacent to or in the vicinity of international land border when [they] deem the land essential to control” (U.S. G.P.O. 1996:8). This legislation granted the first appropriation for constructing any portion of the border wall with \$12 million authorized for border fencing in the San Diego sector. Although this bill passed in 1996, efforts to construct such a barrier remained rather stagnant in action.

Following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as the plane hijacking in Pennsylvania, fear swept across the nation and security efforts spread through every corner of federal policy. As the nation convoluted the concepts of terrorism and immigration, the fear that terrorists might enter through the Southern Border increased, leading many politicians to lean on legislation regarding improved border security. Accordingly, government actors responded by founding the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, encompassing U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. With this, the federal government implicitly contended that terrorism and immigration were related issues of concern.

Within five years, Congress passed the Real ID Act of 2005, including an amendment to the IIRIRA to grant sole discretionary authority to the Secretary of Homeland Security “to waive all laws as necessary to ensure expeditious construction of certain barriers and roads at the U.S. border” and prohibiting courts of agencies “from reviewing the Secretary’s decision” (“H.R. 418” 2005). By November of 2005, the Department of Homeland Security released the Secure Border Initiatives (SBI) program, “a multi-year, multi-billion-dollar program aimed at securing the U.S. border and reducing illegal immigration” (Stana 2010:1). From Fiscal Year 2006, the initiative received \$2.6 billion dedicated specifically to tactical infrastructure (Stana 2010:1). In support of SBI, the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act passed in December of 2005, once again amending the IIRIRA to expand construction of the two-layered reinforced fencing.

Secure Fence Act of 2006

Upon taking office in 2001, and especially after the September 11th attacks, President George W. Bush increased funding for border security initiatives from \$4.6 billion to \$10.4 billion and the number of border patrol agents from 9,000 to 12,000 (Bush 2006). Coupled with the legislation enacted prior to 2006, the Bush administration made patrolling the Southern border a key priority. However, the hallmark of legislation on border wall construction did not surface until October of 2006 with the Secure Fence Act, which further amended the IIRIRA and provided the first concrete instructions for border wall construction. Upon signing this act, President Bush claimed that “this bill [would] help protect the American people... and... make our borders more secure” (Bush 2006).

Under this legislation, the Secretary of Homeland Security was ordered to complete construction of the two-layer reinforced fencing within eighteen months of enactment (“H.R. 6061” 2006). Of the total, 1,954 miles along the Mexican-American border, the Secure Fence Act directed Homeland Security to construct a barrier along approximately 700 miles. These areas included:

“(1) from ten miles west of the Tecate, California, port of entry to ten miles east of the Tecate, California, port of entry; (2) from ten miles west of the Calexico, California, port of entry to five miles east of the Douglas, Arizona, port of entry (requiring installation of an interlocking surveillance camera system by May 30, 2007, and fence completion by May 30, 2008); (3) from five miles west of the Columbus, New Mexico, port of entry to ten miles east of El Paso, Texas; (4) from five miles northwest of the Del Rio, Texas, port of entry to five miles southeast of the Eagle Pass, Texas, port of entry; and (5) 15 miles northwest of the Laredo, Texas, port of entry to the Brownsville, Texas, port of entry” (“H.R. 6061” 2006).

Prior to enacting the Secure Fence Act of 2006, the Bush administration had constructed 135 miles of border barrier (Nicol). By the end of the Bush administration, far less than the intended 700 miles of wall had been constructed. A total of 278 miles of pedestrian fencing and 248 miles of vehicular fencing had been constructed by December of 2008 (“Border Fence Project” 2009). However, the Obama administration picked up construction where the Bush administration fell short. Despite President Obama’s assurances along the campaign trail at the University of Texas at Brownsville that he opposed further construction of the wall, the Obama administration contributed an additional 128 miles of border wall construction (Garrett 2010:129).

Between the Obama and Bush administrations, a total of 654 miles of 15-to-18-foot barrier wall had been constructed by the end of Fiscal Year 2015 (“Southwest Border Security 2017). Over the course of that time, 46 of the 60 miles in the San Diego sector had a barrier, 59 of the 70 miles in the El Centro sector, 107 of 126 miles in the Yuma sector, 211 of 262 miles in the Tucson sector, 166 of the 268 miles in the El Paso sector, five of the 510 miles in the Big Bend sector, four of the 210 miles of the Del Rio sector, one of the 171 miles of the Laredo sector, and 55 of the 273 miles of the Rio Grande Valley sector (“Southwest Border Security” 2017: 48-56). The areas covered by the barrier are indicated by **Figure 3**.

Figure 3



(Source: Castañeda 2017)

With his campaign hinging on the slogan “Build the Wall,” President Trump vowed to complete the remaining miles along the border without wall construction. Indicating that his campaign promises were genuine, Trump signed Executive Order 13767 within five days of his inauguration, stating that the administration would “secure the Southern border, monitored and supported by adequate personnel, so as to prevent illegal immigration, drug and human

trafficking, and acts of terrorism” (“Executive Order 13767” 2017). Despite this, the Trump administration primarily focused its efforts on reconstruction of the pre-existing barrier fencing, increasing the height from the original 15-to-18-foot wall to an 18-to-30-foot model. In total, the Trump administration constructed 452 miles of barrier, with only 52 of those miles being original barrier where previous construction had not occurred (Giles 2021).

Although current politics contribute much of the wall construction to the Trump administration, the reality is that a majority of acquisition, planning, and construction for the currently existing wall occurred under the previous two administrations following the Secure Fence Act of 2006. Nevertheless, the Trump administration did enter the White House with lofty goals of potential for the border wall that contributed to exorbitant contracts and expenses.

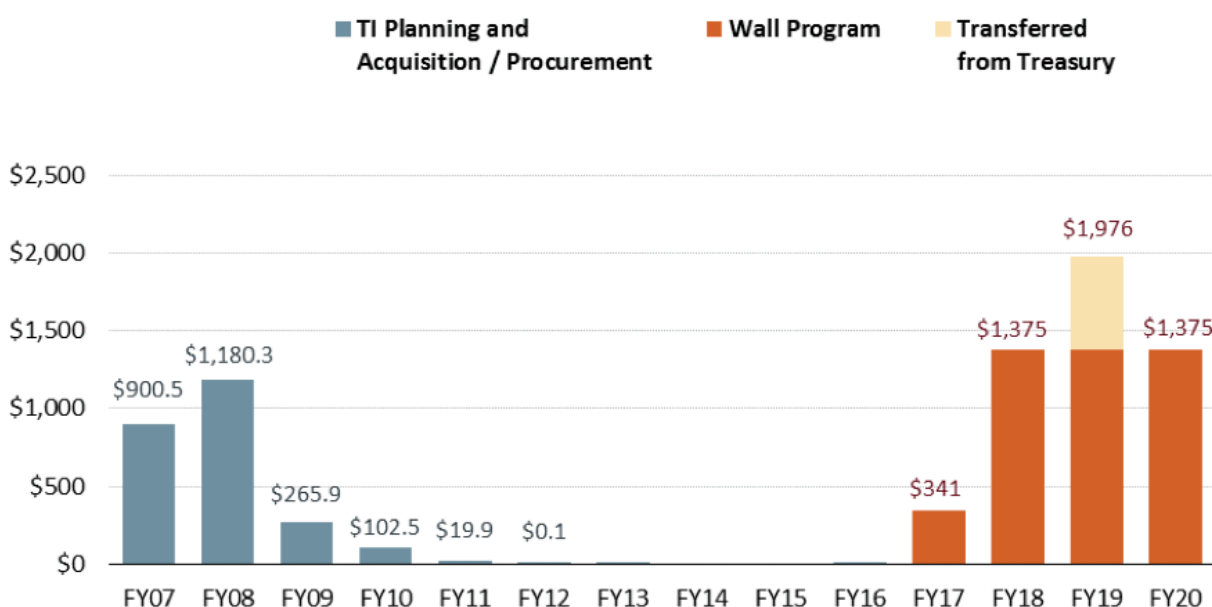
Funding for Border Barrier Construction

Although the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 granted \$12 million to the San Diego sector for construction, Fiscal Year 2006 saw the first substantial allocation for wall construction of \$35 million to the San Diego Sector under the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act (Painter and Singer 2020:4). Under the Bush administration, \$2.08 billion were granted to construction of the border wall. Following with the Obama administration, an additional \$388.4 million were allocated to construction. In whole, border wall construction received \$2.46 billion between Fiscal Year 2006 and Fiscal Year 2016 (Painter and Singer 2020:14).

Despite unwavering claims by the Trump campaign that “Mexico [would] pay for that wall” (Keck and Clua-Losada 2021), the Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto denied the notion that Mexico would exert any expenses for this effort (Bier 2017). As such, the United

States allocated \$5.067 billion between the Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and the Treasury fund under his administration (Painter and Singer 2020). As shown in **Figure 4**, border barrier construction has accumulated over \$7.52 billion since Fiscal Year 2006.

Figure 4



Source: CRS analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “Summary of Historical Spending for TI and Wall Programs,” email attachment sent to CRS November 26, 2018; CBP Budget Justifications and appropriations committee reports and conference reports for FY2019-FY2020.

Public Opinion on the Border Wall

In 2013 following the construction of much of the border wall during the Bush and Obama administrations, a majority of Americans (65%) supported construction of the originally intended 700 miles. Even more, 52% of Americans still supported the construction even after associated costs increased to \$46 billion. Recently, the support for the wall has seen the complete opposite opinion with 60% of Americans opposing continued construction of the wall (Ekins 2019). Emily Ekins of the Cato Institute has indicated that the recent revelations of human rights

violations and corruption of in Central American nations might have been motivators for voters to begin opposing the idea of a border wall.

Although the border wall has become a divisive issue between the Democratic and Republican parties, with Democrats tending to adamantly oppose the idea, the concept was not as divisive an issue during the Secure Fence Act of 2006. While the bill was proposed by Republicans in Congress, support for the legislation saw approval votes from 64 Democrats in the House and 26 in the Senate (“H.R. 6061 (109th)” 2006). Even more, the 2013 Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, which allocated additional funding to border security and border wall repairs, saw overwhelming support from the Democratic party (“S. 744 (113th)” 2013).

Prominent Democratic United States Senator Chuck Schumer stated in 2009 that, “the American people need to know that, because of our efforts in Congress, our border is far more secure today than it was... in 2005” and that the border wall “create[s] a significant barrier to illegal immigration on our southern land border” (Hakim 2019). Today, Schumer has been noted to oppose the wall adamantly. On the other side of the political aisle, Representative Duncan Hunter of California stated in a hearing on the border construction in 2008 that “every family in America who has been touched by the tragedy of illegal drugs has a stake in getting this border fence built and built very quickly.” (“Walls and Waivers” 2008:11).

Of course, there was not unanimous support for the wall at the time. In fact, Representative Silvestre Reyes, who pioneered the operation inspiring Prevention through Deterrence, stated in the same hearing that he did not believe fencing the border was the best solution. Instead, he claimed that he and the other chiefs along the nine sectors believed that the priority should be focused on working with the Mexican government. In fact, Representative

Reyes claimed that the Secure Fence Act of 2006 was “a perfect example of political forces masquerading as security measures during Republican control of Congress” (“Walls and Waivers” 2008:13). Even more, Representative Raul Grijalva stated that “the wall is not a solution – it is a surrender... this wall is an admission of defeat by this Administration and Congress” (“Walls and Waivers” 2008:7).

Beyond politicians’ opinions, other groups across the nation incited strong reaction to the construction of the border wall. Perhaps one of the most impacted groups from this construction was the Tohono O’odham Nation in the Western part of Arizona. Despite the Nation’s willingness to adhere to Department of Homeland Security, Department of Interior, and Border Patrol’s requests for border security efforts, the Nation continuously faced disrespect by the government. Repeatedly, DHS, DI, and CBP ignored the will of the Nation, destroying the environment and archaeological sites on the reserve.

While opposition rose among the Tohono O’odham Nation, nonprofit organizations and coalitions formed across the Southern Border to oppose the construction of the wall for environmental, humanitarian, and economic reasons. That stated, the time period also saw a rise in minutemen and vigilante groups that continue to take it upon themselves to patrol the Southern Border in the name of stopping illegal immigration. However, while both sides witnessed large shows of support in their opinion on the border wall, the reality of the situation was that only 43% of Americans stated opposition to the border wall from 2007 to 2014, according to polling (Ekins, 2019).

III. Literature Review

“La poesía es gente con sueños.”

“Poetry is people with dreams.”

History of Border Walls

At the end of World War II, only five border walls stood across the world, contrasted with today's seventy border walls (Jones 2016). Historically, the purpose of a wall stood for protection from military invasion. The Great Wall of China was constructed under multiple dynasties across a series of 1,500 years to protect against invasions from the north. Today, the wall stands as a symbol of China for tourism efforts, but the practicality of the wall has diminished. Similarly, Hadrian's Wall between modern England and Scotland stood as a protection to “separate the barbarians from the Romans” (“History of Hadrian's”). Today, the wall stands as a tourist attraction and UNESCO World Heritage Site. While historical practicality of border walls might have protected nations against invasions, military advancement today has rendered the purpose of a wall for protection against foreign attacks rather useless. That being said, the presence of walls across the world have seen a rise.

The United States was not alone in its redirected attention to the border wall around 2015, Nations like the United Kingdom, Austria, and Estonia began announcing projects to secure their borders at the same time through the same method (Jones 2016). In each of these instances, the claimed intention has been to limit the flow of migration and secure the nation's borders. However, research on the efficiency of walls has indicated that a physical barrier is not a guaranteed method for stopping migrant crossings. In a study on border walls, four impacts were outlined with the wall serving a detour effect, diversion effect, deterrence effect, or general equilibrium effect. Over the course of that study, they concluded that the wall did not have a

significant impact on the flow of migrants, but rather that it changed the route and location through which migrants chose to travel (Allen, et al. 2019:3). This impact can be seen both in the way that crossings at the US Southern Border have not significantly decreased and the way that migration into Europe did not diminish following the closing of land routes during the Migration Crisis of 2016.

Economics of Immigration

As of 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau recorded an all-time high of 44.8 million foreign-born individuals across the nation, over 13% of the entire national population (Budiman 2020). Pew Research Center has estimated that as of 2017, there were over 10 million unauthorized immigrants living in America (Budiman 2020). Despite common misconceptions, the influx of unauthorized migrants in the United States primarily enter through some legal port of entry, whether that be an airport or a Border Patrol station. Pew has estimated that as many as 45% of those unauthorized immigrants in the nation entered under the pretense of a temporary visa (“Modes of Entry” 2006). As of Fiscal Year 2017, the Department of Homeland Security had estimated that over 700,000 individuals in the States for a temporary visa had overstayed (“DHS Releases Fiscal” 2018). With that noted, when discussing unauthorized immigration into the nation, many immediately jump to those crossing borders illegally.

Unauthorized immigration tends to invoke rage in many of the citizens across the nation. The concept of immigration in general has become confounded with ideas of job stealing, welfare expenses, cultural erasure, and institutional destruction. Proponents for increasing restrictions on immigration often focus their attentions on the impacts on labor markets, political institutions, cultural shifts, crime rates, environmental concerns, and welfare benefits. While

many of these associations have stemmed from an ethnocentric “us vs. them” mindset of those in the pull country, the reasons have spread far enough to warrant the development of intricate policies, construction of grand walls, and expenditure of billions of dollars that have shaped the associated connotation of immigration in the nation.

Many economists and political scientists have taken efforts to dispel these misconceptions associated with increased migration. That being said, it is important to note that many of the impacts people discuss are not those felt by the influx of unauthorized migrants, as they cannot influence areas like political institutions or welfare benefits in a substantial manner. Ultimately, while some of these areas have gathered miniscule support in academia, scholars maintain that most of these areas for concern are unsubstantiated.

Starting from the point of labor markets, Alex Nowrasteh and Benjamin Powell address these concerns, indicating that there is little support for the idea that wage or employment is significantly impacted by migration, unless discussing the income of native workers who never acquired a high school degree (Nowrasteh and Powell 2020:27). Allen, Dobbin, and Morten take this a step farther in their study on the border walls impact on migration flow and in turn annual wage. Estimating that the current border wall has decreased annual migration by a total of 46,000 individuals, they calculate that the wage of low-skilled native workers increased by \$2.89 per year, whereas that of high-skilled native workers decreased by \$3.60 per year (Allen, et al. 2019:5). As low-skilled workers become increasingly scarce by expansion of a border wall, the wages benefit domestic low skill workers, while hurting domestic high-skilled workers. In the same study from Allen, Dobbin, and Morten, they determined that completion of the wall would reduce migration by 129,438 people (only 13% of the decline in migration from 2005 to 2015), increasing the wage of low-skill native workers by \$7.99 per year and decreasing the wage of

high-skill native workers by \$10.03 per year (Allen, et al. 2019:31). While the impact on wages by the inflow of migration is contingent on the skill-level, immigration allows native workers to specialize in labor and focus on the areas in which they are most productive. Ultimately, increasing restrictions on migration via the Southern Border would harm high-skilled native workers more than low-skilled native workers. However, while the impact of this migration on annual wages might be seen as statistically significant, the reality of a \$2 to \$10 difference in income per year would not be considered economically significant.

Within the labor market, George Borjas has suggested that empirically, the overall impact of migrant contributions on the host-nation is “optimistic” (Borjas 1994:1713). Between both legal and illegal migrants in the labor market, they contribute approximately eleven percent to gross domestic product each year (Borjas 2013:1). Of this, a relatively small percentage goes towards a surplus benefit to natives. However, as indicated previously, while the influx of illegal immigrants can have differing impacts on wages depending on migrant skill-level, businesses and employers of immigrants tend to see a gain from illegal immigration (Borjas 2013:2).

Across the nation, welfare programs and expenses have expanded drastically over the last couple of decades. Concerns over who is receiving those benefits are frequently raised in the debate on immigration, with arguments that migrants are not paying their way in the welfare state. For temporary or unauthorized migrants, the eligibility for welfare benefits is virtually nonexistent, as part of the qualifying criteria accounts for the immigration status of each applicant. For those migrants who do qualify, a study from Alex Nowrasteh and Robert Orr indicates that the only areas in which immigrants receive higher average per capita welfare costs than natives are Cash Assistance (\$6), SNAP Benefits (\$7), and Medicaid (\$98) (Nowrasteh and Orr 2018). Overall, their study found that “immigrants consume 27% fewer benefits relative to

natives with similar incomes and ages” (Nowrasteh and Orr 2018). Even more so, considering many unauthorized migrants still work under the pretense of a false social security number, there is the consideration that many of those migrants that are ineligible to receive welfare benefits are still contributing to those programs.

Where political institutions are concerned, there is some evidence indicating that the migration of high-skilled migrants “decreases the share of the Republican party’s vote, while an inflow of [low-income immigrants] increases it” (Mayda and Peri 2018:8). This is primarily related to the skill-level of voters in the area that witnesses an influx of these migrants and the way in which those natives interpret political agendas across the parties. In a study of election trends from 1990 to 2010, the Republican party saw a negative outcome from the increase of immigration (Mayda and Peri 2018). Again, those migrants crossing at the border have virtually no effect on the outcomes of elections, as they are incapable of participating in elections due to their citizenship statuses.

Similarly with cultural shifts, the idea that immigration can influence a noticeable change in the culture of a nation is largely misconceived. According to Nowrasteh and Powell, when an individual migrates from their home country, it is likely that they are also leaving an ideology that does not fit them. In fact, in research on the migration of Soviet Union immigrants to Israel after the collapse of the USSR, it was found that over the “70-year history... they did not influence Israel’s institutional evolution in the direction of their origin country’s institution” (Clark, et al. 2017:28).

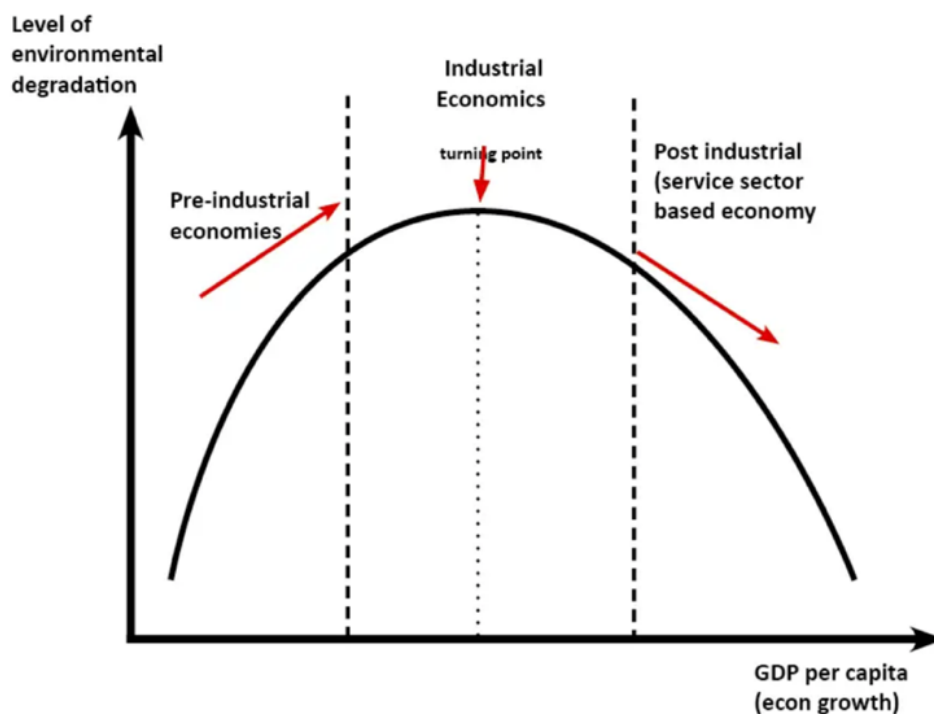
As crime rates are concerned with increased migration, the Kellogg Institute at Northwestern University has suggested that this is a common misconception largely perpetrated by politicians. Through their studies, they found that the only correlation between immigration

and increased crime fell in the category of property crimes. However, the impact of the increase was estimated to be so minute that the estimated benefits to the labor market by migrants far exceeds the costs of those property crimes (Spenkuch 2014).

Lastly, to address the environmental concerns, there are common concerns that migration increases the population thereby increasing the pollution. Some arguments point to the idea that because immigration largely increases wealth creation, there is in turn a negative impact on the environment due to that wealth creation. Bryan Caplan indicates that should someone stand by the argument that wealth creation increases environmental harm, then that is more of a statement regarding economic development than it is to immigration. Caplan also points to the environmental Kuznets curve to explain that, by liberalizing immigration, individuals move from low income to high income as quickly as possible, which should indicate that environmental harm would decrease with the movement of peoples (Caplan 2021). This model is shown in **Figure 5** below. This movement from low to high income works across multiple channels including consumer demand because richer people consume more environmentally friendly items, cultural norms because richer people care (perhaps inadvertently) more about the planet, and regulation as richer countries can better afford economic burden (Caplan 2021). According to Sarkodie and Strezov, the income elasticity of environmental quality demand indicates that as income levels increase, “people opt for a higher standard of living and willingness to pay for a cleaner environment” (Sarkodie and Strezov 2019:130). According to several studies, higher-income individuals consume more energy efficient products and services and tend to donate to more environmental organizations (Sarkodie and Strezov 2019:130).

Overwhelmingly, the impacts of immigration on the host country are positive across most areas of concern. Even in the areas in which immigration does not have positive outcomes, literature indicates that at the very least they do not have net negative outcomes.

Figure 5



(Source: Caplan 2021)

Counterterrorism

Following the September 11th attacks on the nation, the terms “immigration” and “terrorism” became highly conflated. Within eleven days of the attacks, the White House appointed the first director of the Office of Homeland Security. By the next year, Congress passed the Homeland Security Act to formally create a cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security (DHS). As part of its creation, the Department was tasked with “preventing, detecting, identifying, or deterring acts of terrorism” (“An Act to Create” 2002:2242). A year following,

the Department had encompassed what had previously been known as the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the U.S. Customs Service. Under DHS, three branches of immigration control emerged: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). CBP was tasked with inspecting the border and ports of entry through the label of U.S. Border Patrol. ICE became the source of legal enforcement for immigration. USCIS controls the benefits programs for immigrants and paths to citizenship.

Prior to September 11th, the nation had a long-stretching history of opposition to border walls across the world. Looking back to the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy spoke in West Berlin on the Berlin Wall, stating:

“While the wall is the most obvious and vivid demonstration of the failures of the Communist system, for all the world to see, we take no satisfaction in it, for it is... an offense not only against history but an offense against humanity.” (Kennedy 1963)

Twenty years later, President Ronald Reagan proposed the same anti-wall rhetoric before the people of Berlin at the Brandenburg Gate, delivering the infamous speech:

“As long as this gate is closed, as long as this scare of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind... General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” (Robinson 2007)

However, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks at New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, the national sentiment towards the existence of a physical barrier between the United States and Mexico became apparent. Although correlation has been shown between an

influx of refugees and an increase in terrorism, there is cause to believe that, at least in the United States, that data might be misinterpreted as the government has included “citizenship fraud, passport fraud, or false statements to an immigration officer by immigrants who never actually posed an actual terrorism threat to the homeland” (Nowrasteh 2016:2-3). In data presented from government reports, the Global Terrorism Database, the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents, and John Mueller’s research, Alex Nowrasteh determined that from 1975 to 2015 the United States faced 154 foreign-born terrorists. Of those, only ten were illegal immigrants, representing 0.000038% of all illegal immigrants entering the United States during the same period. From that total 154 foreign-born terrorists, a cumulative 3,024 people were murdered – 98.6% of whom were killed on September 11th (Nowrasteh 2016:4&10). In fact, the chance of being killed by an illegal immigrant in the United States between 1975 and 2015 was 1 in 10,915,761,281 (Nowrasteh 2016:5).

In a speech from President Bush in 2002, he claimed that “we fight against poverty because hope is the answer to terror” (Kreuger and Malečková 2003:119). Seemingly, this statement implied that areas facing issues with wealth would see heightened rates of terrorist actors. With statements like this and other anti-immigrant rhetoric, it should not be surprising that a correlation would exist in the public’s mind between the countries south of the United States border and fear of terrorists.

However, while there is some research that indicates a relationship between the rise of terrorism and the wealth, conflict level, or oppressive state of a home-country, the idea that a border wall is limiting the entrance of those terrorists from countries in Central and South America is highly unsubstantiated. In fact, as of March 2021, no one had been killed or injured in terrorist attacks committed by anyone illegally crossing the Southern border. There have been

illegal immigrants convicted for terrorist attacks, but they entered through ships, planes, and the Canadian border. Of the individuals arrested in the 2007 attack on Fort Dix in New Jersey, three of the individuals had crossed the Southern Border when they were all under the age of five (Nowrasteh 2021). In 2017, the government claimed to have “stopped about 3,700 people on the terrorist watchlist from entering the United States – most of them trying to enter via air” (Nowrasteh 2021). In 2021, Border Patrol claimed to have arrested four individuals on the FBI terror watchlist from Yemen (Garger 2021). That being mentioned, a majority of terrorists entering the nation are not entering illegally by crossing the southern border between Mexico and the United States. Countless research has indicated that while there is still benefit to screening immigrants entering the nation, policies absorbing time and money to limit immigration in the name of terrorism prevention would cost the nation more than it would benefit.

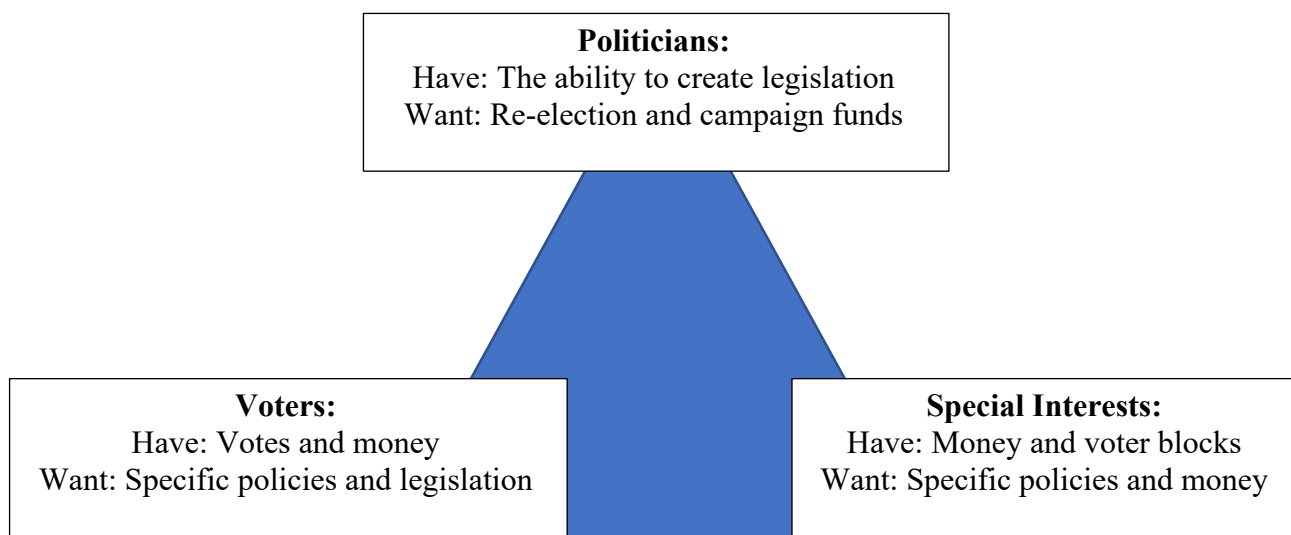
IV. The Wall as Political Favor

“Del otro lado también matan a nuestros hijos.”

“On the other side, they also kill our children.”

Public choice economists have pointed to the concept of the “iron triangle” to explain the relationship between Congress, bureaucracies, and interest groups. Similarly, politicians, special interests, and voters exist in a triangular relationship with one another. Because politicians want to be re-elected, they will exchange the creation of laws for votes from voters and money or voting blocks from special interest groups. Likewise, because special interest groups want certain policies from politicians, they will exchange money and voter blocks for those policies to be enacted by politicians. Additionally, special interest groups can “mobilize public opinion in favor of larger appropriations and expanded programs” (Johnson). Finally, because voters want certain laws and benefits, they will exchange votes with politicians and money with special interest groups to achieve those goals. This relationship can be seen in **Figure 6**.

Figure 6



Through lobbying, campaign contributions, and party donations, special interests that benefit select groups have significant influence on the decision making of politicians. Most states refer to lobbyists as individuals who are “attempting to influence government action through either written or oral communication” (“50 State Chart” 2018). Lobbyists can have the intentions of influencing appropriations for themselves or for specific policies, gaining contracts, or changing legislation. Aside from lobbying, special interest groups can also make contributions to political campaigns and political parties through political action committees. While there has been debate on the influence of such campaign contributions, there has been substantial research pointing to the correlation between campaign contributions and legislative voting behavior. In fact, a meta-analysis from Douglas Roscoe and Shannon Jenkins found that one-third of roll call votes in Congress show influence of campaign contributions (Roscoe and Jenkins 2005).

Unsurprisingly, money in politics tends to talk more than anything else. Between campaign expenditures, campaign and party donations, and appropriations and contracts, money plays a significant role in decision making across the political sphere. Therefore, contributions of money in the form of campaigning or lobbying can lead to the shaping of policy in a direction that favors those groups, regardless of the practicality of such policies. According to John Craig and David Madland, “federal contracts were more likely to be awarded to firms that have given federal campaigns higher contributions” (Craig and Madland 2014:2). Another study from Clayton Peoples suggests that “once access is obtained and lobbying begins, lawmakers may ultimately feel compelled to ‘return the favor’ of contributions because of... reciprocity” (Peoples 2014). He also noted that lobbyists for large corporations are known to ask for government contracts in return for lobbying efforts, especially in issues concerning the Department of Defense or Homeland Security.

In a 2016 study by Lee Drutman, corporations were spending upwards of \$2.6 billion on lobbying each year. At the time, that reflected a \$34 to \$1 ratio in business lobbyists to public interest group lobbyists. Drutman suggested that practices like this fundamentally change the relationship between corporate America and the government, as “companies are now increasingly bringing government in as a partner” (Drutman 2015). Nicole Birdsong of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) stated that “businesses and industries may be able to... convince public officials to take positions that benefit private interests, including some that may run contrary to the public good” (Birdsong 2020).

As private companies’ involvement in legislative affairs have grown, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has reflected that trust in government is dwindling in correlation with the idea that business is influencing public policy in a way that does not reflect public interest (2014). In a 2019 study from the Pew Research Center, 75% of Americans thought that “trust in the federal government had been shrinking” (Keeter et al. 2019). Additionally, 68% believed that it was vital for federal government to improve confidence among the public (Keeter et al. 2019).

In the effort for those special interest groups to gain such benefit from government actors, they tend to engage in the practice of rent seeking, which Gordon Tullock defined as “the use of resources for the purpose of obtaining rents for people where the rents themselves come from some activity that has negative social value” (Tullock 2002:43). In other words, rent seeking is “a process of seeking income through special government favors rather than productive economic activity” (Craig and Madland 2014:1). This act of rent seeking can take on many forms, whether it be through lobbying, campaign contributions, or other means of divesting

resources to gain favor. However, the act of such rent seeking tends to result in policies that are “wasteful, inefficient, or [sic] harmful” (Craig and Madland 2014:1).

This act of rent seeking contributes to the notion of what Mancur Olson labeled “crony capitalism,” in which the state of a nation’s economy is defined by the interactions between special interest groups and political actors. Distinction between the private interest of those groups and that of the public points to the capture theory of regulation as put forth by George Stigler and Sam Petlzman, in that regulators or government actors are effectively captured by the private interests as opposed to the public (Calabria 2016). Those engaging in the act of rent seeking with the end goal of gaining some form of political favor can be seen as capturing government actors to focus on the interests of these groups more than the interests of their constituency. In the instance of corporate interests, where significant amounts of money are put towards lobbying efforts and campaign contributions, capturing regulators becomes more plausible than normally, allowing corporate interests to sway elected legislators further from constituent interests.

When the government began construction following the Secure Fence Act of 2006, nineteen companies contributed to the construction of the wall. At the time that contracts were being awarded, major military contractors for the nation were facing the consequences of “federal budget cuts and the [nation’s] withdrawal from two wars” (Lipton 2013), incentivizing them to shift focus towards other areas that of national interest. Of the nineteen companies receiving contracts for border construction initiatives, six of the companies received the largest portions of these contracts for border construction overall. Boeing Construction received a multitude of contracts for all Secure Border Initiative projects; however, they received a contract specifically for fence construction of \$311.1 million in support of the vehicle fence 300 and

pedestrian fence 225 projects (“Boeing Company, The”). Weston Solutions Incorporated received a contract for over \$30 million (“Weston Solutions, Inc”). Kiewit Infrastructure West Company received several contracts exceeding a total of \$80 million for construction in the San Diego sector (“Kiewit Western Co.”). Kiewit Texas Construction Limited Partnership also received multiple contracts exceeding \$130 million for construction in Texas’ Rio Grande Sector (“Kiewit Texas Construction”). Granite Construction Company received contracts exceeding \$170 million (“Granite Construction Co.”). Lastly, Twin Mountain Construction II Company received contracts for more than \$150 million (“Kiewit New Mexico”). These numbers can be seen in **Figure 7** below.

Figure 7

Contract Company	Contract Amount
Boeing Co.	\$311.1 million
Weston Solutions Incorporated	\$30 million
Kiewit Infrastructure West Company	\$80 million
Kiewit Texas Construction Limited Partnership	\$130 million
Granite Construction Company	\$170 million
Twin Mountain Construction II Company (Kiewit New Mexico)	\$150 million

Perhaps the clearest example of the role of campaign contributions and lobbying among the previously mentioned companies comes from the Boeing Construction Company. Boeing has consistently been recognized as one of the government’s top defense contractors, dating back to the Cold War when William Boeing, the founder of the company, rose as one of the top figures for defense spending in Washington at the time (“Lesson Twenty-Three”). In Fiscal Year 2006,

Boeing spent more \$9,120,000 on lobbying efforts, including on the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigrant Control Act of 2005 and the Secure Fence Act of 2006 (“Client Profile: Boeing”). From 2006 to 2009, the time frame under which most of the wall was constructed, Boeing contributed over \$54 million to lobbying efforts on the hill. According to a Politico article in 2008, the company had paid \$120,000 to lobbyists at Wexler and Walker Public Policy Associates for work on the border contracts (Loewenberg 2008). Simultaneously, Boeing contributed \$1,735,580 towards Republican campaigns during the 2004, 2006, and 2008 election cycles surrounding the passage of the Secure Fence Act (“PAC Profile: Boeing”). More specifically, Boeing contributed \$10,000 in 2006 to Republican Duncan Hunter, who championed the Secure Fence Act (Bosque 2008). To indicate even further that Boeing was vying for these contracts, the head of the company provided an oral presentation to the Department of Homeland Security, competing against major defense contractors Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Ericsson, and Raytheon for the project.

Likewise, the other construction companies contributed hefty amounts to lobbying and campaign contributions during the height of the border wall construction. Weston Solutions Incorporated saw their largest lobbying years from Fiscal Year 2005 through Fiscal Year 2008, lobbying efforts totaled \$1,456,608 (“Client Profile: Weston”). One of the bills they lobbied significantly for was the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008, which contributed to funding for border fencing. Similarly, Granite Construction Company contributed over \$50,000 in political contributions to Republican candidates, who put forth the Secure Fence Act, between the 2004 election cycle and the 2008 election cycle (“PAC Profile: Granite”). Additionally, they allocated over \$150,000 in lobbying efforts between Fiscal Year 2008 and Fiscal Year 2009 (“Granite Construction”).

In corporate efforts to push this money towards political actors and government policies, money and time resources diverted from the direct purpose of the corporation to competing for these efforts at the hill. While the lobbying and campaign contributions resulted in the allotment of contracts for large sums of money, the company's resources spent reasonable amounts of time idle while the benefits of their rent-seeking were being determined. Through the millions of dollars spent on lobbying efforts by corporations that were already major influencers in the defense and homeland security departments, government actors had substantial opportunity to allow those private interests to influence them more than the public opinion of their constituents might. As explained in the capture theory of regulation, these corporate lobbyists had ample ability to capture these actors so that they act in line with what they support and grant political favors to them.

Beyond the question of how these practices have influenced contracts for the border wall, the practice of rent-seeking by these companies, as noted by economists, contributed to a policy that can be deemed an insufficient use of government funding considering the evaluation that the border wall is not an effective option for border security efforts. Not only were the benefits of building the wall extremely miniscule in all reality, but it has also been shown to hardly limit migration, all while increasing deaths of migrants. With migrants rarely being deterred by policies like "Prevention through Deterrence," they were also hardly deterred by the construction of the wall. As has been shown time and time again, if a migrant is determined enough to leave their entire world behind and cross the Sonoran Desert, the introduction of a wall would not be capable of discouraging them.

V. The Wall as Political Theater

“¿cuántos corazones deben sangrar?”

“How many hearts should bleed?”

This is not to say that government actors are so blinded by private interests that they completely ignore the impact that their votes make on their constituency. After all, the primary goal of any politician is to be elected, which cannot be accomplished if the politician disregards the entirety of its voter base. In an effort for politicians to meet the demands of its constituency, there is a tendency for the government to engage in performative governance rather than accomplishing an actual solution to the problems at hand. In doing so, government actors engage in theatrical performances, symbols, and language to convey a sense of assurance that action is being taken. During the height of the Trump administration’s push for the border wall, California Governor Gavin Newsom indicated that the wall was a “sideshow... political theater... [or] political grandstanding” that “consume[d] the nightly news” to defer from necessary conversations and initiatives revolving around border security (Kiggins 2019). Regardless of the actual efficiency of the actions being taken, the political theater serves as a distraction from the reality that a solution still might be lacking.

Performative governance, as explained by William Sun, has the ability to “divert the public’s attention from the secretive side” or the reality of the issue (Sun 1997:6). Following discriminatory profiling methods in El Paso on local residents, the community responded with demands for changing practices among local immigration and law enforcement. In response, the local Border Patrol Chief created Operation Blockade to decrease these instances and manage the influx of migrants. Likewise, following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the nation took to demands for increased security efforts to protect them from outside threats. In response, the

government created the Department of Homeland Security and crafted the Secure Fence Act of 2006. However, as Representative Grijalva indicated, the construction of the border wall was not a solution but rather an admission of incompetent policy making by the government (“Walls and Waiver” 2008:7). In the government’s failure to create a policy to adequately respond to matters of terrorism and illegal immigration, the wall served as a distraction for the public.

As stated by Peter Andreas, the Southern Border has been victim to what he calls “the art of impression management,” referring to the fact that domestic perception of border security serves more importance than the realistic impacts of the border wall (Andreas 2000). During the hearing on the Secure Fence Act, Mayor Chad Foster of Eagle Pass, Texas stated that the wall would not be a solution to the fact that “the 9/11 terrorists entered the United States through ports of entry... most undocumented aliens enter the United States through ports of entry... most illegal drugs enter the United States through ports of entry” (“Walls and Waivers” 2008:32). However, government actors both in current discourse on the wall and during the Secure Fence Act era indicated that the wall would solve these issues.

In an estimation from the Department for Homeland Security, over 700,000 individuals in the nation for a temporary visa had overstayed (“DHS Releases Fiscal” 2018). In general, a majority of undocumented migrants in the nation arrive via plane on an approved visa. Additionally, most illegal immigrants in the nation do not commit heinous acts of terror, as indicated by the lack of terrorist attacks in the United States by illegal immigrants and even further lack of terrorist attacks by those who have crossed the Southern Border. Finally, although drugs do cross the southern border, they are primarily being transported through legal ports of entry, not remote areas of the desert. With these considerations, the reality of the border wall is that it serves as nothing more than a pawn of political theater.

However, the border wall exists in what Jason De Leon has labeled the “space of exception,” an area specific to the border zone and named after Giorgio Agamben’s “state of exception” (de Leon 2015). These spaces of exception refer to physical locations along the border that are invisible to the rest of the country, allowing authorities to do whatever they want without consequence from breaking laws or risks of repercussions. Because of the invisibility of this area, government actors can post pictures of a wall and claim efficiency without the rest of the nation asking any questions. In doing so, the function of the border wall diminishes into nothing more than a political symbol to gain support from constituents for those who run on the platform of continuing to “secure our borders” and “build that wall.” Certainly, the wall does not serve as a symbol or valid purpose to migrants beyond the nation, evidenced by the continued crossing along the Southwest border.

VI. Conclusion

“Lo que Dios ha unido no permita que el hombre no se separe.”

“What God has united, do not allow man to separate.”

Between political favors and performative governance, government actors have effectively engaged in practices that are counter-productive to matters of immigration reform and counterterrorism practices. By allowing private interests and the drive for reelection to override practicality of policies, politicians have allowed inefficient and harmful policies to be brought into action, increased the costs of construction to taxpayers, and led to an external cost of increased deaths at the border for which the government has no one to blame but themselves.

As construction of the border wall has gathered a new focus in public discourse, government actors must continue to be aware of the impacts that these influences can have on their decision making. Looking into the re-construction of the pre-existing wall under the Trump administration, one can easily see that these influences have continued to prosper in the enforcement of contracts by government officials. Where Boeing Construction Company, Kiewit, and Twin Mountain Construction were the 2006 recipients of these government favors, companies like Fisher, Sand, and Gravel, Barnard Construction, and Raytheon have become the 2016 version of the same story. Likewise, as government officials continue their fight for reelection, invocative words like those used by recent politicians like Representative Jim Jordan and Representative John Katko convey this sense of performative governance to their constituents. In fact, even in the pause of construction by current President Joe Biden, Texas Governor Greg Abbott has announced state plans to finish the construction begun with the Secure Fence Act and continued by the Trump administration.

Over the five-year period following the passage of the Secure Fence Act from 2007 to 2012, Humane Borders recorded 1,155 migrant deaths on their migrant death map (“Migrant Death Mapping”). Presumably, they all died in their efforts to cross the Southern border, not because they were rapists or drug dealers attempting to ruin America or steal the labor market, but because of the significant pull factors of safety, economic freedom, and opportunity to the United States. Policies stemming from Prevention through Deterrence and initiative to build the wall have continuously led to individuals traversing more remote and hostile terrains that would be unfamiliar and dangerous for anyone in the nation, let alone migrants who have already traveled thousands of miles to make it to the border areas. Government actors allowing themselves to be captured by corporate money and interests and engaging in capital cronyism, on top of the practice of political theater to appease voters, has led to tragic and unnecessary accountability on behalf of the United States in these migrant deaths.

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