

Sexual Conservatism as Supreme Cultural Interest: Anti-LGBTQ Sentiment, Citizenship Insulation, and Support for Donald Trump among African Immigrants in the United States

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Abstract

Prevailing models of immigrant political behavior in the United States commonly predict alignment with progressive parties based on material self-interest, minority status, and vulnerability to exclusionary immigration policy. Yet during the Trump era, a visible subset of continental African immigrants expressed support for Donald Trump despite nativist rhetoric, restrictive immigration measures, and personal moral scandal. This article argues that the apparent paradox is best explained by two mutually reinforcing mechanisms: (1) the prioritization of sexual conservatism—particularly opposition to LGBTQ rights and “gender ideology”—as a supreme cultural interest that overrides other political considerations; and (2) “citizenship insulation,” the belief among many naturalized immigrants that having already secured U.S. citizenship largely shields them from anti-immigrant policy harms, enabling them to vote primarily on cultural issues. Drawing on a qualitative, interpretive methodology informed by critical realist sensibilities and symbolic boundary theory, the study shows how pre-migration socialization in African religious and political contexts frames sexual normativity as a non-negotiable civilizational boundary. In the diaspora, this worldview is reinforced through religious institutions and transnational digital media, generating a single-issue voting framework in which a candidate’s stance on sexuality and gender becomes the dominant litmus test. A comparative analysis with African American Christian conservatives highlights the distinctiveness of the immigrant case, shaped by imported moral frameworks, different experiences of racial linked fate, and a political psychology of exceptionalism. The article concludes that diaspora political analysis must take seriously how moral boundary-making—amplified by transnational networks—can reshape partisan alignment even against seemingly obvious policy interests.

Keywords: African Immigrants, Diaspora Politics, Religion and Politics, Sexual Conservatism, LGBTQ Rights, Single-Issue Voting, Donald Trump, Symbolic Boundaries, Citizenship Insulation

1. Introduction

Immigrant political behavior in the United States is often interpreted through frameworks that emphasize material self-interest, incorporation into party coalitions, and exposure to discrimination. On this view, immigrants from non-European backgrounds are frequently expected to lean Democratic because of the party’s comparatively inclusive stance on immigration, civil rights enforcement, and social welfare [1,2]. Such expectations are reinforced by the long-standing Democratic alignment of African

Americans and the historical centrality of civil rights struggles in U.S. racial politics [3,4].

Yet the Trump era revealed patterns that complicate these assumptions. Donald Trump’s political rise was accompanied by rhetoric and policy proposals widely interpreted as hostile to immigrants, including travel restrictions affecting African and Muslim-majority countries, sharp reductions in refugee admissions, and a style of nationalist messaging that blurred the

boundary between policy debate and civilizational identity conflict [5]. Nonetheless, support for Trump emerged within a subset of African immigrant communities, often mediated through diaspora churches, ethnic social networks, and transnational digital media.

This article argues that the paradox becomes intelligible when we foreground sexual politics and citizenship status as key drivers of partisan choice for a segment of African immigrants. First, opposition to LGBTQ rights and “gender ideology” is frequently framed as a supreme cultural interest—a moral boundary perceived as existential, overriding other political considerations. Second, many naturalized African immigrants reasoned that Trump’s restrictive immigration agenda would not directly threaten them because they were already U.S. citizens. This “citizenship insulation” narrative functions as political risk discounting: once legal membership is secured, cultural issues can dominate, while immigration enforcement is construed as primarily targeting others (e.g., undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, or people perceived as violating procedural legitimacy).

The article proceeds as follows. After presenting the theoretical framing and methodology, it reviews relevant scholarship on immigrant political incorporation, Black immigrant identity, religion and sexuality politics, and single-issue voting. It then develops the argument in four analytic steps: (1) pre-migration moral socialization and the construction of sexual normativity as a civilizational boundary; (2) diaspora reinforcement through religious institutions and transnational digital media; (3) strategic compartmentalization, including citizenship insulation and meritocratic exceptionalism; and (4) a comparative analysis with African American Christian conservatives. The discussion and policy recommendations section provides practical implications for political parties and for progressive African immigrant groups seeking to build durable coalitions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Critical Realist Sensibilities and Moral Ontology

This study adopts a critical-realist sensibility that treats moral convictions as socially formed yet experientially “real” for actors—capable of motivating behavior even when it conflicts with material incentives. In Weberian terms, this aligns with value-rational action, where people act out of commitment to an intrinsic value rather than a calculated expectation of outcomes [6].

2.2. Symbolic Boundary Theory

Symbolic boundary theory explains how groups create identity by drawing moral distinctions between “us” and “them” [7]. In this case, sexual politics becomes a high-stakes boundary because it is framed as a marker of civilizational order: family structure, religious authority, reproduction, and children’s formation. When LGBTQ rights are interpreted as an expansive cultural project rather than a narrow minority-rights claim, political behavior becomes boundary defense.

2.3. Single-Issue Voting and Culture-War Prioritization

Single-issue voting occurs when one issue is elevated to such

importance that it dominates partisan choice regardless of other considerations. In the U.S., sexuality-related issues have served as central mobilizing themes for religious conservatives [8]. Here the analytic emphasis is on how transnational moral formation imports a culture-war hierarchy into immigrant politics and intensifies it through diaspora institutions and digital networks.

3. Methodology

This article uses a qualitative, interpretive design oriented toward analytical generalization rather than statistical inference [9]. Because African immigrants are often under-sampled in national surveys and because major political datasets rarely capture the moral reasoning pathways connecting religiosity, sexuality politics, and party choice, this study synthesizes multiple sources: (a) secondary public opinion data on attitudes toward homosexuality and religion; (b) scholarship on African immigrant religiosity and diaspora identity; (c) discourse analysis of publicly available sermons, community commentary, and diaspora media narratives; and (d) comparative scholarship on African American religio-political behavior and linked fate.

Limitations include the inability to estimate prevalence or causal magnitude and reliance on public discourse that may over-represent organized or vocal segments. The aim is explanatory: to clarify mechanisms that plausibly account for a visible subset of African immigrant political behavior during the Trump era.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Immigrant Political Incorporation and Partisan Alignment

Incorporation models emphasize gradual alignment with party coalitions shaped by socioeconomic position, group mobilization, and perceived threat [2]. demonstrate how group identity and perceived vulnerability can structure immigrant political preferences [1]. However, contemporary work increasingly notes cross-pressures: immigrant groups may hold liberal attitudes on immigration and welfare but conservative attitudes on sexuality, gender roles, and religious authority, producing unstable partisan identities and vulnerability to targeted appeals.

4.2. Black Immigrants, Ethnicity, and Complex Racial Incorporation

African immigrants’ political identity does not simply mirror African American political identity. Scholarship on Black immigrant incorporation emphasizes differentiated experiences of race, ethnicity, and identity. Argues that some Black immigrants pursue “elevated minority status” through narratives of respectability and cultural distinction [10]. Likewise shows how Afro-Caribbean incorporation patterns can involve “exception or exit,” with ethnic identity and strategic positioning shaping political behavior [11]. These frameworks help interpret why racial linked fate—central in African American politics—may be weaker or more complex for immigrants who arrive with strong national and religious identities [3].

4.3. Religion, Sexuality Politics, and the Globalization of Culture Wars

Religion is a consistent predictor of attitudes toward sexuality and gender, especially when religious identity is tightly bound to public moral regulation. Cross-national surveys show substantial variation in acceptance of homosexuality, with many African societies reporting far lower acceptance than North America and Western Europe [12,13]. Scholarship on African sexuality politics documents how contestations over homosexuality can be fused with postcolonial politics and public religion, framing LGBTQ rights as neo-colonial imposition and resistance as cultural sovereignty [14,15].

4.4. Instrumental Politics and Moral Boundary Defense

Describe how Christian nationalist identity can motivate instrumental political choices: support for political figures perceived as defenders of a threatened moral order even when those figures are personally scandalous [8]. While African immigrant conservatism is not identical to Christian nationalism, similar mechanisms appear when sexuality politics is constructed as a civilizational boundary and political participation becomes a form of moral defense.

4.5. Pre-Migration Socialization: Sexual Normativity as Civilizational Boundary

Opposition to homosexuality in many sub-Saharan African contexts is not merely a private sentiment but often an institutionalized moral stance embedded in law, religious authority, and public culture. Pew's global data illustrates wide cross-national variation, with numerous African countries reporting very low societal acceptance of homosexuality [12,13].

Two interlocking frames are especially influential. First, religious framing treats homosexuality as grave moral disorder and, in some contexts, as spiritual corruption. Second, civilizational framing casts LGBTQ rights as Western cultural imperialism and links resistance to sovereignty and authenticity [14,15]. When these frames converge, sexual conservatism becomes identity-constitutive, forming a sacralized boundary between the faithful community and the perceived moral threat of modern liberal culture.

4.6. Diaspora Dynamics: Reinforcement, Hardening, and Digital Boundary-Work

Migration does not necessarily liberalize moral worldviews. In some contexts, it intensifies boundary-making, especially when immigrants perceive host-society norms as threatening to family formation, religious authority, and children's socialization. African-led churches function as more than worship spaces; they often operate as cultural institutions that preserve moral narratives and supervise diaspora identity.

Transnational digital media amplifies these dynamics. Diaspora WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, and social media pages can

circulate hybrid narratives that blend homeland religious discourse with U.S. conservative media frames. In such settings, sexual politics can become the dominant lens through which U.S. politics is interpreted, often displacing concerns about immigration, racial rhetoric, or economic policy.

4.7. Strategic Compartmentalization: Citizenship Insulation, Immigration, Race, and Character

Once sexual conservatism is elevated as a supreme cultural interest, other considerations are demoted through strategic compartmentalization.

4.8. Citizenship insulation: "It won't affect me."

A critical mechanism is the belief among many naturalized immigrants that citizenship reduces vulnerability to immigration restriction. Once legal membership is secured, immigration enforcement is construed as targeting others (e.g., undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, or rule-breakers), not "law-abiding" citizens. This does not eliminate indirect harms, but it can reduce perceived personal risk and open space for values-first voting. The logic overlaps with narratives of respectability and exception described in scholarship on Black immigrant incorporation [10,11].

4.9. Meritocratic Exceptionalism

Citizenship insulation often combines with a meritocratic self-understanding: educational attainment, professional employment, and lawful entry become perceived shields against exclusionary policies. This can produce moralized distinctions between "deserving" immigrants and "undeserving" others, facilitating support for restriction without interpreting it as self-harm.

4.10. Racial Identity and Linked Fate

Many African immigrants arrive with strong national, ethnic, and religious identities that predate U.S. racial categories. As a result, racial linked fate may be weaker or differently configured than among African Americans, for whom it has historically anchored political cohesion [3]. If racial threat is perceived as indirect or distant, while sexuality politics is perceived as immediate and existential, the latter may dominate political choice.

4.11. Character Compartmentalization and Instrumental Politics

Trump's personal scandals can be discounted through instrumental logic: voting becomes a tool for defending moral boundaries rather than endorsing personal virtue. The moral calculus frequently treats public cultural change as more threatening than private personal failure, enabling support for a perceived cultural defender.

4.12. Comparative Analysis: African Immigrants vs. African American Christian Fundamentalists

While a minority of socially conservative African Americans also supported Trump, the political meaning and social cost of that support differ significantly, highlighting the uniqueness of the immigrant case.

Factor	African American Christian Fundamentalists	African Immigrant Conservatives
Source of Conservatism	Reactive: Forged in dialogue with and in opposition to perceived secular liberalism and sexual revolution within the U.S. context. Often a defensive posture within the Black church tradition.	Imported: Rooted in pre-migration, transnationally sustained religious and cultural formations. Less a reaction to U.S. secularism than a transplantation of a home-grown moral framework.
Relationship to Racial Solidarity	High Conflict: Supporting Trump conflicts directly with a deep, historically forged sense of racial group solidarity and loyalty to the Democratic Party as the legacy of the civil rights movement. This creates significant intra-community stigma and accusations of betrayal.	Lower Salience: Racial identity in the U.S. is newer and more ambiguous. Many African immigrants initially identify more by nationality or ethnicity than as “Black” in the American sense. They feel less bound by African American political norms and coalitional loyalties.
Perception of Trump’s Racial Rhetoric	Directly Threatening: Experience Trump’s rhetoric and associated white nationalism as a direct continuation of historical anti-Black racism. The threat is visceral and personal.	Ambiguous or Distant: May perceive Trump’s racism as primarily targeting other groups (e.g., Latinx immigrants, Muslims). May see themselves as culturally distinct from the historic targets of American racism, leading to miscalculation or a sense of temporary insulation.
Political Instrumentality	Symbolic Witness: Voting Republican is often an act of pure moral witness, accepting high social cost for principle.	Instrumental Alignment: Voting Republican is a strategic choice to ally with the most effective defenders of their moral order, with fewer historical or coalitional constraints.

This comparison clarifies that while moral absolutism is the common engine, the political vehicle it powers travels on very different historical and social terrain.

5. Discussion

This analysis suggests several broader implications for diaspora politics and contemporary culture-war polarization.

First, immigrant politics cannot be reduced to material interest. Moral boundary-making can act as an independent causal force that reshapes partisan alignment. Second, citizenship matters not only as a legal category but as a political psychology. Citizenship insulation can reduce perceived vulnerability and enable values-first voting, even when restrictive climates generate indirect harms. Third, culture wars are increasingly transnational: diaspora digital ecologies distribute and intensify U.S. culture-war narratives while interpreting them through homeland moral frameworks.

Finally, the African immigrant case illustrates the limits of collapsing “Black” political behavior into a single coalition. Differences in migration history, identity formation, and institutional mediation can generate divergent political logics among groups racialized similarly in the United States.

6. Policy Recommendations

This section offers actionable recommendations for political parties, civic institutions, and especially progressive African immigrant organizations. The goal is not to moralize voters but to address the mechanisms that produce values-first alignment and to strengthen democratic participation grounded in accurate policy understanding and inclusive community wellbeing.

6.1. Recommendations for Policymakers and Civic Stakeholders

i. Invest in Disaggregated Data and Community-Based Research: National surveys often under-sample African immigrants and collapse diverse national-origin groups into a single “Black immigrant” category. Federal, state, and philanthropic stakeholders should support oversampling and targeted studies to better understand value conflicts, institutional mediation, and generational change.

ii. Support Civic Education on the Indirect Effects of Immigration Policy: Citizenship insulation is partly a knowledge gap: many citizens underestimate how immigration restriction affects family reunification, mixed-status households, refugees, and the broader climate of racialization. Civic organizations should develop culturally competent education efforts that explain these mechanisms without stigmatizing conservative moral beliefs.

iii. Strengthen Bridges between Immigrant and African American Civic Institutions: Coalition-building that focuses only on electoral cycles is fragile. Durable relationships require shared projects on education, workplace equity, policing, housing, and healthcare—areas where many African immigrants and African Americans share structural vulnerability.

6.2. Recommendations for Democratic and Progressive Political Actors

i. Address Moral Anxiety without Abandoning Equality Commitments: Progressive coalitions can affirm LGBTQ dignity while engaging faith-based communities through language of human dignity, family stability, and anti-violence principles. Messaging that appears mocking or dismissive of religious communities can intensify boundary defense.

ii. Reduce “values vs. interests” Framing by Emphasizing

Overlapping Goods: Progressive messaging is more effective when it links civil rights to immigrant security, family unity, religious freedom, and economic opportunity. The aim is to expand the moral imagination beyond a single-issue hierarchy.

iii. Engage Trusted Intermediaries. In many African immigrant communities, pastors, elders, and community association leaders shape political interpretation. Progressive engagement must prioritize relationships with these intermediaries, including training, listening sessions, and co-designed civic programming.

6.3. What Progressive African Immigrant Groups need to do

Progressive African immigrant organizations face a specific challenge: they must speak credibly to co-ethnics who are religiously conservative without ceding core commitments to pluralism and human rights.

The following strategies are practical and immediately implementable:

i. Build an Internal “Values Translation” Capacity:

Create culturally fluent messaging that frames pluralism not as moral collapse but as democratic coexistence. This includes the ability to say, in a principled way: “You may maintain your religious convictions, but public policy must protect all citizens from harm and discrimination.” Translation requires respectful language and deep familiarity with religious vocabularies.

ii. Counter Misinformation within Diaspora Digital Ecosystems:

Because WhatsApp and YouTube often function as key political educators, progressive groups should develop rapid-response communications: short videos, infographics, and myth-busting briefs tailored to community concerns (school curricula, religious liberty claims, censorship anxieties). The goal is not to win arguments but to reduce the monopolization of information by culture-war narratives.

iii. Reframe Immigration Policy as a Community-Wide Issue (not a non-citizen issue):

Challenge citizenship insulation by demonstrating how restriction affects citizens through family reunification, humanitarian pathways, remittances, and the social climate of suspicion. Use concrete narratives: mixed-status families, siblings awaiting visas, relatives affected by travel bans, and community members impacted by rising xenophobia.

iv. Center Intra-Community Pluralism and Protect Vulnerable Subgroups:

Progressive African immigrant groups should articulate a clear internal stance: African immigrant communities are diverse, including women, youth, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ Africans. A credible community platform must oppose violence and stigma, even when moral disagreement persists. This is essential for internal legitimacy and for preventing exclusion from becoming normalized.

v. Invest in youth Leadership and Intergenerational Dialogue:

Second-generation Africans often navigate U.S. racial politics and diversity norms differently than first-generation parents. Progressive organizations should create structured intergenerational forums—moderated, respectful, and policy-grounded—to prevent

polarization from fragmenting families and congregations.

vi. Form Pragmatic Coalitions Beyond Sexuality Politics:

Build coalitions around issues where broad agreement is easier: small business support, educational access, professional licensing, healthcare affordability, anti-discrimination in employment, and public safety policies that protect immigrants. Over time, these coalitions can soften single-issue dominance by demonstrating the breadth of political stakes.

vii. Develop “faith-and-civic” Partnerships Rather Than Assuming Secular Models:

Many progressive organizations avoid churches, but churches are central community infrastructures. Progressive African immigrant groups should cultivate partnerships with willing clergy on civic participation, anti-hate initiatives, immigration legal clinics, and community support services. This approach builds trust and reduces the sense that progressive politics is anti-religious.

6.4. Recommendations for Republican Actors (normative caution)

Republican outreach to socially conservative immigrants can succeed electorally, but it risks intensifying a politics of moral sorting that increases polarization and marginalizes vulnerable minorities. Responsible outreach would avoid demonization narratives, reduce misinformation, and protect immigrants from racialized harm even while debating cultural issues.

7. Conclusion

Support for Donald Trump among a subset of African immigrants challenges interest-based models of immigrant political behavior. This article has argued that sexual conservatism can operate as a supreme cultural interest that overrides immigration vulnerability, economic considerations, and leader character. The mechanism is strengthened by citizenship insulation—where naturalized immigrants perceive themselves as protected from restrictive immigration policies and thus free to vote primarily on moral-cultural priorities. Rooted in pre-migration moral formation and reinforced through diaspora religious institutions and transnational digital media, this framework produces value-rational political action centered on boundary defense [16-22].

Understanding diaspora politics in the twenty-first century therefore requires attention to how transnational moral ontologies, perceived legal security, and culture-war amplification interact to reshape partisan landscapes. Future research should use targeted surveys and interviews across national-origin communities to measure citizenship insulation, map digital media effects, and track generational change.

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