

Paywalled Panopticon: Wealth, Speech, and the New American Border

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Recent transformations in immigration practice have quietly altered what the United States border is and what it does. On one axis, the rise of social media vetting has turned the border into an interpreter of speech: timelines, memes, prayers, and political posts produced in ordinary life are repurposed as evidence of risk when they belong to would-be entrants rather than citizens. On another axis, the emergence of explicitly priced, leader-branded residency schemes has turned the border into something like a paywall: a place where those with sufficient wealth can purchase a faster and smoother path to permanent residence and, ultimately, citizenship. Together, these developments create a triaged order of belonging in which citizens, ordinary noncitizens, and high-net-worth applicants inhabit structurally different relationships to both scrutiny and opportunity. This paper analyzes that new configuration as a “paywalled panopticon.” It first examines the logic of speech-based vetting, then maps the rise of wealth-based fast lanes, and finally shows how the two interact to produce a three-tier membership regime. The argument is at once descriptive and normative: it seeks to clarify how money and expression function as signals at the border and to assess the ethical, political, and symbolic costs of turning admission into a premium product while treating everyday speech as latent evidence of danger.

Keywords: border control, social media vetting, immigration law, citizenship by investment, golden visa, Trump Gold Card, political speech, surveillance, inequality, panopticon, hospitality, justice.

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1. Introduction: From Lines on Maps to Priced and Searched Gates

For much of modern political imagination, borders have been pictured as lines on maps and checkpoints on roads: clear demarcations between inside and outside, policed through passports, visas, and occasional inspections. In that older picture, the key questions were formal and territorial. Who is a citizen, who is a foreigner, and what documentation proves it at the physical gate? The legitimacy of border control was often framed as the right of a political community to regulate entry into its land and its labor markets, tempered by humanitarian obligations toward refugees and family reunification.

In a densely networked world, this picture is no longer adequate. Borders still involve land, air, and sea crossings, but the work of deciding who may approach the gate now begins long before the traveler presents a passport. It starts in databases, on social media platforms, in financial flows, and in the predictive models that stitch these traces together. And it is no longer only about who is allowed in at all; it is also about who is invited to pay for a fast lane, who is subjected to intensive scrutiny, and who is largely invisible to the systems that govern movement.

This paper argues that two intertwined developments capture this shift. The first is the rise of social media vetting, which turns the border into an interpreter of speech. The second is the emergence of highly priced, often leader-branded residency schemes that turn the border into something like a paywall. Together, these developments transform the border from a simple yes–no gate into what might be called a paywalled panopticon: a structure that watches some people closely, sells others premium access, and leaves the rest under a default regime whose terms they did not help design.

The introduction sets the stage for that argument by sketching the changing work of borders, identifying speech and wealth as two axes of transformation, and explaining how they combine to produce a triaged membership system. It also clarifies the scope, method, and limits of the analysis that follows.

1.1 The changing work of borders in a networked world

In a networked world, borders are no longer encountered only at the edge of territory. They appear as prompts in online visa applications, as background checks run on remote servers, and as invisible filters that sort travelers before they ever buy a ticket. The decision to admit or exclude is increasingly made upstream, long before a human officer looks someone in the eye at a booth.

Several factors drive this change. First, the proliferation of digital records means that applicants carry with them a history of interactions: posts, likes, comments, transaction records, and travel data. Governments treat these traces as potential indicators of identity, belief, and risk. Second, the global reach of large platforms and financial networks makes it technically feasible to run mass checks on these traces, cross-referencing names, handles, and accounts against watchlists and analytic models. Third, security and political pressures reward authorities for acting on any signal that can be framed as foresight rather than waiting for harm to occur.

Borders, in this environment, become distributed decision systems. Airlines are enrolled as co-enforcers when they must verify passengers' eligibility to travel. Platforms become indirect gatekeepers when their archives are mined for immigration risk. Credit and background-check providers become proto-consular agents when their scores influence whether an application is flagged for extra review. The traditional border post remains, but it is now the last step in a longer pipeline of algorithmic and bureaucratic sorting.

This reconfiguration also changes how people experience mobility. For many applicants, the border is no longer a visible gate one approaches once; it is a continuous condition under which one's online life, financial behavior, and associations may become material for judgments made far away, without notice, and without standard avenues of appeal. The border moves into the everyday.

1.2 Two axes of transformation: speech and wealth

Within this broader transformation, two axes stand out for their ethical and political importance: speech and wealth.

The speech axis is defined by the use of public expression as a screening tool. Social media vetting exemplifies this dynamic. Immigration authorities increasingly review applicants' online profiles, either manually or through automated tools, for indications of extremism, criminality, or instability. Posts that in one context might be understood as hyperbole, dark humor, or local political critique can be recoded in another as warning signs. The same words and images that serve as ordinary conversation among citizens become data points in a risk assessment when attached to a foreign passport number.

The wealth axis is defined by the use of financial capacity as a direct or indirect ticket to membership. Investor visas, residency-by-investment schemes, and more recently leader-branded "gold card" programs all treat large payments to the state as evidence of contribution and commitment. Instead of demonstrating integration through work history, family ties, or humanitarian claims, applicants in these programs demonstrate fitness to join the polity by wiring substantial sums of money. Residency, and eventually citizenship, are not formally sold as

products, but they are bundled with financial “gifts,” “contributions,” or “investments” that serve the same selective function.

These two axes operate differently but interact deeply. Speech-based vetting tends to fall hardest on applicants with fewer other resources to signal their value. For them, what they say may be the only readily available evidence of who they are. Wealth-based programs, by contrast, offer a distinct route where financial contribution can overshadow or reframe other aspects of an applicant’s profile. Money becomes its own kind of character reference.

When these axes are considered together, a new pattern emerges: a system in which some people are primarily evaluated through their timelines, others primarily through their balance sheets, and still others barely evaluated at all because their citizenship places them outside the logic of admission.

1.3 From double standards of speech to triaged membership

Focusing on speech alone reveals a striking double standard. Citizens and noncitizens who participate in the same online culture can face radically different consequences for identical posts. A citizen who shares a sharp critique of government policy, a meme about civil conflict, or an intense religious metaphor may face social pushback or platform moderation, but their legal right to remain in their country is rarely at stake. A noncitizen with the same digital footprint may find that those expressions are weighed against them in an immigration file, with little transparency about how they are interpreted.

This is the double standard of speech at the border: one set of protections and presumptions for insiders, another for outsiders. The former are presumed to belong unless they cross high thresholds of misconduct; the latter are presumed to be asking for a privilege that can be withdrawn or denied for broad reasons of “suitability” or “public interest.”

Introducing wealth-based pathways transforms this double standard into a triaged system of membership. Now there are at least three distinct categories:

- Citizens, whose membership is secure and whose speech is presumptively protected.
- Ordinary noncitizens, whose admission is discretionary and whose speech is scrutinized as a potential source of disqualifying information.
- High-net-worth noncitizens, who can convert financial resources into a separate lane where their “contributions” serve as primary evidence of benefit and where timelines are less central to their claim.

In such a system, belonging is not simply inside versus outside. It is stratified along both legal and material lines. The border becomes an apparatus for sorting people not just by nationality, but by how much information is extracted from their everyday lives and how much deference is extended to their capacity to pay. The very idea of equality before the law is strained when access to the community can be purchased in ways that are unavailable to nearly everyone else, while others are denied on the basis of speech that is tolerated or even celebrated among citizens.

It is this movement—from a double standard of speech to a triaged order of membership—that the paper seeks to name and analyze.

1.4 Scope, method, and limits of the argument

The argument that follows is primarily conceptual and normative. It does not attempt to provide a full statistical account of social media vetting practices, nor does it catalogue every investor visa program in operation around the world. Instead, it takes as given that both speech-based screening and wealth-based fast lanes exist and are expanding, and then asks what they mean when considered together at the level of political theory and institutional design.

The focus is on the United States as a particularly revealing case, in part because of the country's strong internal free-speech traditions and its self-image as a destination for migrants, and in part because of its emerging experiments with explicitly branded, high-priced residency schemes. Where helpful, the analysis draws on comparative examples, but it does not aim to offer a comprehensive global survey.

Methodologically, the paper weaves together insights from immigration law, political philosophy, sociology of surveillance, and the study of inequality. It treats legal instruments, policy announcements, and public discourse as texts that reveal how states justify different treatment of different kinds of movers. It also takes seriously the symbolic dimension of border practices: the images, metaphors, and narratives that accompany programs which turn residency into a premium, card-like product.

There are important limits to this approach. The paper does not claim that all wealth-based applicants evade meaningful scrutiny, nor that all speech-based vetting is necessarily abusive or unfounded. It does not resolve empirical questions about exactly how risk models weigh different signals, or how often speech actually determines visa outcomes relative to other factors. Rather, it highlights structural tendencies and tensions: the ways in which current trajectories encourage a system that watches the poor and sells fast lanes to the rich, and the ways in which that system challenges ideals of equal dignity and nonhumiliating control.

By clarifying these tendencies, the hope is to enable more precise debates about what borders are for, what values they express, and how they might be governed differently in a world where both words and money cross frontiers long before bodies do.

2. The Border as Interpreter of Speech

The contemporary border does not only inspect documents and biometric identifiers. Increasingly, it also inspects narratives: the stories people tell about themselves and the fragments of those stories scattered across social media. Immigration files that once centered on forms, certificates, and formal interviews now routinely include printouts or screenshots from online platforms. What someone has posted, liked, or shared can be treated as a window into their beliefs, loyalties, and temperament. In effect, the border has begun to act as a kind of interpreter of speech, recontextualizing expressions that were originally aimed at friends, followers, or local audiences and using them as evidence in a security and suitability assessment.

This interpretive function is not merely incidental. It is built into policy directives that instruct consular officers to review applicants' public online presence, into risk models trained on labeled examples of speech associated with violence or extremism, and into contracts with private vendors who offer screening services centered on social media analytics. Speech becomes data, data becomes a category, and categories become grounds for exclusion. To understand the ethical and political stakes of this shift, it is necessary to look more closely at how social media vetting operates, how timelines are treated as dossiers, and how the same pattern of expression can be read in profoundly different ways depending on who is speaking and where they are standing.

2.1 Social media vetting as an emerging security practice

Social media vetting emerged as a security practice in response to a mixture of fear and technological opportunity. High-profile incidents in which perpetrators maintained online presences, the availability of vast amounts of public content, and political pressure to be seen as proactive created an environment in which ignoring social media seemed, to many officials, like negligence. If someone had posted praise for a violent organization or fantasies of mass harm, the argument went, that information should be factored into decisions about visas, asylum, and entry.

In its early forms, social media vetting was often ad hoc and manual. Individual officers might search an applicant's name on major platforms, look for obvious red flags, and add notes to the

file. Over time, however, this practice has been formalized and scaled. Agencies have sought broad authority to collect handles and account names, to retain social media identifiers as part of standard records, and to purchase tools that can scrape and analyze public content at scale. What started as a supplementary check is on its way to becoming a routine layer of screening.

The stated rationale is straightforward: social media content is presented as a source of otherwise inaccessible information about an individual's mindset, associations, and potential future behavior. In practice, however, the interpretive leap from posts to predicted conduct is complex and contestable. People perform different personas online. They quote lyrics, repost memes, express anger in exaggerated terms, and experiment with identity. The border's security function tends to compress those ambiguities into simpler categories: supportive or hostile, radical or moderate, stable or volatile.

This compression is facilitated by technology. Keyword searches, network analyses, and automated sentiment assessments promise to sort massive volumes of content into manageable sets of concern. But each step in that process embeds assumptions about which words, images, and associations signal danger. Those assumptions may be outdated, context-blind, or biased toward certain cultures and political positions. Yet once encoded in a vetting system, they can be applied silently, affecting real lives without a corresponding duty to explain.

2.2 Timelines as dossiers: posts, likes, and inferred dispositions

Social media timelines are not designed as dossiers. They are emergent archives of everyday life, shaped by platform incentives, peer interactions, and personal whims. Yet from the perspective of an immigration officer or a screening algorithm, a timeline looks very much like a dossier: a chronological record of what someone has chosen, over time, to make visible about themselves.

In this context, three kinds of content tend to be especially salient. First, there are explicit statements: posts that advocate for or against particular causes, use certain slogans, or reference extremist organizations. Second, there are engagements: likes, shares, and comments that tie the user to other accounts and communities. Third, there are patterns: recurring themes, intensities, or preoccupations that suggest a persistent orientation rather than an isolated moment.

From these elements, officials and systems infer dispositions. A string of posts about guns, militia movements, or civil conflict may be interpreted as fascination with violence. Repeated expressions of sympathy for a foreign armed group may be read as evidence of allegiance. Conspiracy-laden content may be taken as a sign of poor judgment or susceptibility to radicalization. Even if the person has never acted violently, the timeline becomes a narrative in

which certain strands are pulled forward and others ignored, culminating in a labeled assessment of risk.

This interpretive process can be deeply misleading. A like can be a bookmark, a joke, or a gesture of ambivalent curiosity rather than endorsement. A dramatic post may reflect a moment of crisis or an attempt to gain attention rather than a settled commitment. Furthermore, many people use online spaces to vent precisely because they know those words will not directly alter material conditions. Turning those expressions into decontextualized evidence can invert their meaning.

What matters for this paper, however, is not only whether these inferences are accurate in individual cases, but how the border's systematic use of them affects different categories of people. The same pattern of posts can be responded to with indulgent eye-rolling when it belongs to a citizen and with denial or revocation when it belongs to someone at the threshold.

2.3 Kansas-normal versus border-abnormal: the same speech under two regimes

One of the most striking phenomena in this new environment is the way the same speech can be simultaneously normal in its home context and abnormal at the border. Consider a social media profile belonging to a long-time resident of a rural American community. Their timeline may include photos with firearms, slogans about defending the constitution, skeptical comments about federal authority, and heated posts about foreign conflicts. Among peers, this is unremarkable. It may be part of a local political subculture that blends patriotism, oppositional rhetoric, and a sense of embattled identity. It is, in that context, normal enough not to draw serious attention.

Transplant the same pattern of posts to a foreign applicant, however, and the meaning shifts. The guns may no longer be understood primarily as symbols of a long-standing domestic debate, but as evidence of a potential predilection for violence. Slogans about resisting government overreach may be interpreted not as culturally familiar hyperbole but as signs of instability or animosity toward authority. Expressions of anger about a distant war may be coded as possible indicators of foreign extremist sympathy rather than as ordinary moral outrage.

This is what might be called the Kansas-normal versus border-abnormal problem. The category of what counts as ordinary, tolerable, even if unpleasant, speech is broad when the speaker is safely inside the circle of citizenship. The same content can be narrowed into an index of suspicion when attached to someone asking for permission to join that circle or simply to visit. Two regimes of interpretation coexist: one grounded in the constitutional and cultural

protections enjoyed by those already in, and one grounded in the plenary power doctrines that allow broad discretion toward those still out.

The border, in effect, double-books the same expressions with different meanings based on legal status and location. This double-booking is not openly acknowledged in official rhetoric. The story usually told is that security screening looks for objectively risky content, wherever it is found. But in practice, it is foreigners' speech that is scanned for reasons to say no, not citizens' speech scanned for reasons to rescind their membership. That asymmetry is central to the triaged system later described.

2.4 Unequal epistemic positions: citizens, foreigners, and the presumption of suspicion

Behind this interpretive asymmetry lies a deeper difference in epistemic position. States stand in very different relations to citizens and foreigners when they examine speech. Citizens are seen as already belonging. Their rights are framed as inherent to their status. When the state encounters their speech, it does so under a framework that heavily constrains what can be done in response. There are limits on surveillance, on punishment for expression, and on the use of speech as grounds to strip core status.

Foreigners at the border, by contrast, are viewed as petitioners. Their entry is characterized as a privilege, not a right. In legal terms, they stand in a position where broad discretion is granted to officials to admit or exclude on the basis of perceived risk. This creates what might be called a presumption of suspicion: not that every applicant is treated as dangerous, but that the state feels entitled to demand reassurance, to dig through personal histories, and to act on relatively thin inferences without offering detailed explanations or appeals.

Social media vetting exacerbates the gulf between these positions. For citizens, large-scale monitoring of timelines for immigration purposes has no object; they are not asking for admission. For foreigners, the same timelines can become compulsory reading. They are pressed into service as sources of reassurance. Silence can itself be suspicious, interpreted as an attempt to hide something. Visibility is demanded, but visibility on terms the state is free to interpret unilaterally.

This unequal epistemic stance has consequences for how errors and uncertainties are handled. Where a citizen's ambiguous post is more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt, a foreigner's ambiguous post may be given the detriment of the doubt. Where a citizen can challenge state interpretations in domestic courts, a foreigner may find that visa denials rooted in judgments about their character are shielded from review. The same uncertainties exist in both cases, but the costs of resolving them fall more heavily on those who have least voice in the system that judges them.

2.5 Chilling effects, self-censorship, and the disciplining of online life

Once people understand that their speech can be interpreted at the border, many respond by changing how they speak. This may begin with obvious adjustments: scrubbing past posts, tightening privacy settings, avoiding certain keywords. Over time, however, it can grow into a broader discipline of online life. Prospective migrants edit not only what they have already said, but what they allow themselves to say going forward. They learn to anticipate how a distant official might view their words and preemptively silence parts of themselves.

These chilling effects are not limited to those actively in the immigration process. In networks where the possibility of future mobility is significant, stories circulate about people denied visas or subjected to extra questioning because of something they posted. Whether or not each story is accurate, the outcome is similar: a generalized sense that the safest course is to stay away from controversial topics, contentious humor, or intense expressions of anger and grief. The border's interpretive gaze begins to shape conversations far from the physical frontier.

Such self-censorship has several troubling implications. At the personal level, it can force individuals to fragment their identity, presenting a sanitized version of themselves to the world in the hope of avoiding future trouble. At the political level, it can suppress voices that are already marginalized, particularly when those voices come from communities whose primary routes to safety or opportunity involve crossing borders. People most in need of speaking forcefully about injustice may also be those least able to afford having such speech held against them by a foreign state.

The disciplining of online life also has a feedback effect on platforms and public discourse. If foreign users moderate themselves with an eye to immigration risk, their contributions to debates, movements, and cultural production will be skewed. Platforms in turn may respond to state pressures by amplifying or suppressing certain content, creating an environment where what appears as organic conversation is subtly shaped by legal regimes of mobility.

In this way, the border's role as interpreter of speech reaches back into everyday life. It is not only that timelines are treated as dossiers after the fact, but that the possibility of future dossier-ization changes how those timelines are written in the first place. The result is a quiet but pervasive transformation of online spaces, governed by a logic that combines security concerns with the asymmetries of citizenship and access.

3. The Border as Paywall: Wealth-Based Pathways to Residence

Alongside its role as interpreter of speech, the contemporary border increasingly functions as a paywall. Wealthy individuals can, in many jurisdictions, convert large payments to the state into

accelerated or preferential access to residence and eventual citizenship. These arrangements are usually framed as “investor visas,” “residency by investment,” or “contribution” programs rather than as literal sales of status, but the functional logic is clear: substantial financial capacity opens a lane that does not exist for those without it. When such programs are leader-branded and marketed with credit-card aesthetics, the paywall metaphor becomes difficult to ignore. The border begins to resemble a tiered subscription service, where different prices buy different speeds and privileges.

This section traces the movement from generic investor visas to explicitly branded “gold card” schemes, examines the underlying logic that treats wealth as proof of benefit, and explores the corporate variants that treat residency as a transferable slot rather than a personal right. It then considers the symbolic dimensions of luxury card imagery and leader branding, and concludes by noting how narrow the pool of potential users actually is in a deeply unequal global economy.

3.1 From generic investor visas to branded “gold card” programs

Investor visas are not new. For decades, a range of countries have offered residence, and sometimes paths to citizenship, in exchange for investments in local businesses, government bonds, or real estate. These early programs were often framed in technocratic terms: instruments for attracting capital, stimulating job creation, or stabilizing public finances. Their marketing, where it existed at all, tended to focus on lifestyle and tax advantages rather than on overt symbolism. The core message was that certain forms of economic contribution could compensate for the lack of other ties.

Over time, however, these schemes have evolved in both form and presentation. Instead of generic investor categories buried deep in immigration regulations, some governments have launched discrete, branded products with names like “Golden Visa” or “Gold Card.” The terminology is telling. It borrows heavily from consumer finance and loyalty programs, where gold, platinum, and black tiers denote escalating levels of privilege. Rather than appearing as ad hoc exceptions tucked into legal codes, these programs are packaged as recognizable objects with names, logos, and promotional materials.

Leader-branded initiatives mark another step in this trajectory. When the program is explicitly named after a sitting head of state, and the physical or digital card bears that person’s likeness, the distance between state policy and personal brand narrows. Admission to the country is no longer just an administrative act; it is framed as enrollment in a program that belongs, symbolically, to an individual leader. That framing can generate enthusiasm among would-be

applicants who admire the leader, but it also raises profound questions about the personalization of public power and the blurring of lines between office and persona.

3.2 Wealth as proof of benefit: the logic of gifts, fees, and contributions

At the heart of wealth-based residency pathways lies an argument about benefit. States justify these programs by claiming that large financial inflows improve national welfare. Funds are supposed to support infrastructure, debt reduction, social services, or targeted economic development. The wealthy applicant is thus cast not primarily as someone buying an advantage but as someone making a gift, paying a fee, or contributing to the common good in a way that justifies exceptional treatment.

The language used is carefully chosen. Authorities prefer terms like “gift,” “contribution,” or “investment” over “purchase price.” Visa fees are framed as administrative necessities; additional payments are cast as opportunities to “support” or “strengthen” the nation. This rhetorical architecture preserves a distinction between citizenship or residency as a dignified status and mere commodities. The law maintains that the state does not sell membership; it simply recognizes that some individuals have demonstrated extraordinary benefit through financial acts.

Yet in practice, the effect is that money becomes a proxy for broader forms of contribution. It is treated as a compressed token that stands in for job creation, tax revenue, or philanthropic support. The state is relieved of the need to scrutinize the applicant’s character, skills, or humanitarian circumstances with the same intensity applied to others. The payment itself is the evidence. Whether this is wise depends on how reliably wealth correlates with the kinds of goods the state ought to value in prospective members, and how well safeguards prevent the laundering of illicit gains through such programs.

Moreover, treating wealth as proof of benefit can obscure other questions. A millionaire who wires funds from a safe distance may be counted as a net positive, while a less wealthy applicant who has deep family ties, skills in undersupplied professions, or a history of civic engagement may find themselves stuck in slow queues or denied altogether. The logic of gifts and contributions thus reshapes the moral landscape of admission, privileging visible, fungible capital over more diffuse, less easily quantified forms of value.

3.3 Corporate mobility, transferable slots, and subscription-style residency

A newer variation on wealth-based pathways involves corporate schemes in which companies, rather than individuals, are the primary clients. In these models, firms pay substantial amounts

to secure a set of residency “slots” that can be allocated to employees. The legal framework may still treat each worker as an individual visa holder, but the economic and administrative locus of control shifts toward the corporation.

This produces a structure that resembles a subscription. The company pays an initial fee and perhaps recurring maintenance charges, in exchange for the ongoing right to designate which employees occupy the privileged positions. Employees can be swapped in and out, subject to renewed vetting and processing, much as users on an enterprise software license can be reassigned. The key asset is not the person but the slot: a proprietary channel into the immigration system that the firm can manage as part of its broader human-resources strategy.

From the firm’s perspective, this can be efficient. It reduces uncertainty in staffing, allows rapid deployment of talent across borders, and may help recruit employees by offering them accelerated residency in desirable destinations. From the employee’s perspective, the picture is more ambiguous. Their immigration status becomes tightly linked to their role within the company. The capacity to remain in the country can depend not only on compliance with general law but on continued usefulness to the employer that controls the slot.

At a systemic level, corporate schemes extend the paywall logic. Not only can wealthy individuals purchase favored access; so can institutions. The border becomes a place where organizations with sufficient resources can lease or own dedicated channels of movement, while others rely on general categories with longer waits and less predictability. Residency shifts from being a person-specific bond between individual and polity to being, in part, a feature of contracts between states and large economic actors.

3.4 Aesthetics of power: leader branding, luxury card imagery, and state symbolism

The design of wealth-based residency programs is not only legal and financial; it is also aesthetic. When a program is marketed through glossy visuals that mimic premium credit cards, the border is symbolically reimagined as a consumer interface. Gold and platinum hues, embossed names, metallic finishes, and sleek typography convey exclusivity and status. The message is that entry into the country is a luxury experience, reserved for those who can afford the higher tier.

Leader branding intensifies this aesthetic. A card bearing the face, signature, or personal mark of the head of state collapses the distance between the individual and the institution. The applicant is not just joining a nation; they are joining something publicly associated with a person. This can feed a narrative in which the leader is the gatekeeper, the patron whose blessing materializes in the form of a physical object. The state becomes, in part, a brand extension.

These choices have consequences for how the public understands the relationship between citizenship, money, and power. When government-issued documents deliberately resemble luxury goods, they signal that the state is comfortable aligning itself with consumer hierarchies. When the leader's image is central to the program's identity, it signals that the office is intertwined with personal promotion. For those standing outside, unable to pay, or subject to intense scrutiny of their speech rather than celebration of their wealth, the imagery can be experienced as taunting: a visual declaration that membership has a tiered price.

At the same time, the use of familiar consumer aesthetics can normalize what might otherwise seem shocking. If people are accustomed to cards that grant airport lounge access, elite hotel status, or priority lines in private life, the leap to a card that grants priority in national belonging may not feel as dramatic as it should. The grammar of loyalty programs and premium tiers seeps into the grammar of political membership.

3.5 Who can pay: global inequality and the narrow pool of eligible applicants

Wealth-based pathways are often defended by invoking aggregate benefits: the total funds raised, the projects financed, the jobs allegedly created. Lost in these aggregate narratives is the fact that the pool of individuals and corporations able to participate is extremely small. The thresholds for entry—often in the millions of dollars—are beyond the reach of all but a thin stratum of the global population.

Global wealth distribution is highly skewed. A large proportion of people have little or no net assets. Many more have modest savings tied up in homes or small businesses that cannot easily be liquidated without destroying their livelihood. For them, the idea of paying a seven-figure sum for a faster route to residence is not just unrealistic; it is conceptually irrelevant. The program may as well not exist. It is not an option they can consider, decline, or trade off against other plans. It is a different universe.

Even within the global upper middle class, the effective barrier remains high. Entrepreneurs and professionals may have significant income but not large accumulations of liquid wealth. The class for whom these pathways are genuinely available is the global rich: those whose assets and cash flows are sufficient to treat such payments as strategic allocations rather than irreversible sacrifices. For corporations, only larger firms can justify the fixed costs of securing and maintaining dedicated residency slots.

This narrow targeting has two implications. First, wealth-based schemes do not democratize mobility; they further stratify it. They carve out a premium track for those already advantaged, leaving existing obstacles intact for everyone else. Second, they contribute to the consolidation of a transnational elite with multi-country options, while many remain bound tightly to places

they did not choose. The border, in this picture, is a membrane that becomes selectively permeable for capital-rich individuals and institutions, even as it remains hardened for those whose only leverage is their labor, their family ties, or their need for safety.

Taken together, these dynamics underscore why the paywall metaphor matters. The introduction of explicit prices, leader branding, and premium aesthetics does not merely add another policy instrument to the toolkit of migration management. It reconfigures the symbolic and material landscape of membership, sharpening the division between those whose movement is adjudicated through the interpretation of speech and those whose movement is facilitated through the display of wealth.

4. Three Tiers of Membership in a Triaged Regime

When speech and wealth are both brought into the orbit of border control, the result is not simply a tightening or loosening of entry rules in general. Instead, it produces a differentiated order of membership in which people occupy structurally distinct positions. Some enjoy secure belonging and robust protections; others are subject to intense scrutiny and discretionary exclusion; a small subset can convert financial resources into preferential treatment. This is not just a matter of degree but of kind. The same institutions, laws, and technologies relate to these groups in different ways, creating a triaged regime.

This section maps three broad tiers: citizens, ordinary noncitizens, and high-net-worth applicants. It shows how each tier is positioned with respect to speech, wealth, and border risk, and how interactions among the tiers deepen inequality. It concludes by arguing that this triaged structure reshapes what equality before the law can realistically mean in a world where some routes to membership are priced and others are policed primarily through the interpretation of everyday expression.

4.1 Citizens: secure belonging, strong speech protections, low border risk

Citizens occupy the most secure tier. Their membership is not contingent on ongoing suitability assessments in the same way as that of noncitizens. With rare exceptions, they cannot be exiled or denied reentry on the basis of their speech or their failure to demonstrate ongoing economic contribution. The legal and cultural order of constitutional democracies is built around this fact: citizenship is treated as a stable status rather than a revocable favor.

In this tier, speech is surrounded by strong formal protections. Even when citizens express extreme views, support controversial causes, or criticize the state in harsh terms, the default response is to tolerate such expression unless it crosses narrow legal thresholds. Social media

posts may attract public backlash or platform sanctions, but they do not routinely trigger immigration consequences, because there are no immigration consequences to trigger. Borders are not designed for internal use.

This insulation from border risk does not mean citizens are entirely free from state scrutiny. Surveillance programs may gather their data; counterterrorism investigations may focus on their communications. But the sanctions available are different. The state may prosecute specific acts or conspiracies, yet it does not hold over citizens the simple threat of refusing them entry. That threat is structurally reserved for those who are not yet, or not anymore, members.

Citizens thus inhabit a position in which they can take for granted the right to be present. Their social media presence may be messy, politically charged, or even alarming, but when they cross borders, their own state's officers are there to validate their status, not to weigh their timelines as evidence in an admissibility calculus. Their wealth or lack of wealth can affect their lives in many ways, but it is not usually a formal condition for continuing membership. This baseline of secure belonging shapes their sense of what speech and movement mean.

4.2 Ordinary noncitizens: high scrutiny, weak rights, and speech as evidence

Ordinary noncitizens occupy a markedly different tier. They include visitors seeking short stays, students and workers holding temporary visas, refugees and asylum seekers, and relatives hoping to join family members. For them, admission is framed as a privilege, extensions are conditional, and the possibility of denial or removal is an ever-present horizon.

In this tier, speech does not enjoy the same insulation from border consequences. Posts, likes, and associations can be examined as part of a broader vetting process. What was, for citizens, a protected exercise of opinion becomes, for noncitizens at the border, a potential signal of disqualifying traits. Even if formal policies do not mandate exclusion on the basis of mere expression, broad discretionary powers allow officials to factor in their interpretive judgments.

Rights in this space are significantly weaker. Noncitizens often have limited access to appeal mechanisms; consular decisions may be insulated from judicial review; procedural safeguards familiar in domestic criminal contexts are absent. The epistemic asymmetry described earlier is most acute here: the state claims wide latitude to infer risk from limited information, while applicants must accept that some part of their online lives can be read without the opportunity to contextualize or rebut.

Economically, ordinary noncitizens are also in a precarious position. Their ability to work and reside lawfully is tied to specific visas, employers, or sponsors. They may contribute significantly to the host society, but their contributions are not converted into a simple, recognized token

that can offset other concerns. Their lack of large transferable wealth keeps them in general queues and ordinary categories.

For this tier, the border is not an occasional checkpoint but a condition. Their lives are lived under the knowledge that speech can have cross-border consequences. They may moderate their online presence, avoid controversial topics, or segment their identities across platforms. Unlike citizens, they cannot assume that their digital traces will be irrelevant to decisions about their ability to stay or return.

4.3 High-net-worth applicants: the donor lane and the presumption of benefit

High-net-worth applicants form a third tier. These are individuals and, in some schemes, corporations that are able to meet the high thresholds set by wealth-based pathways. Their defining characteristic is not their nationality or their political views, but their capacity to transfer substantial resources to the host state. That financial capacity opens a donor lane: a structured route to residency that is premised on the presumption of benefit.

In this lane, the logic of assessment is altered. Instead of being asked primarily to prove that they pose no threat, high-net-worth applicants are asked to prove that they will be a net positive through their contributions or gifts. The baseline shifts from suspicion to opportunity. Officials may still conduct background checks and seek assurance that the funds are legitimately sourced, but the dominant narrative is that these applicants are desirable partners in national projects.

Speech still matters for this tier, but it is backgrounded. Their timelines may be reviewed, yet the weight accorded to speech is reframed by the presence of overwhelming financial evidence. A controversial post can be balanced against millions in contributions; an ambiguous association can be seen as less salient when officials are focused on the immediate, quantifiable benefits. The scale of wealth does not automatically immunize them, but it changes how risk and reward are calculated.

This group's relationship to the border is therefore different. They do not enjoy the unconditional security of citizens, but they are not located in the fully precarious position of ordinary noncitizens. Their ability to move, reside, and eventually naturalize is prioritized in ways that reflect their financial leverage. They may bypass waiting lists, secure expedited processing, and receive tailored administrative support.

The donor lane thus constitutes a distinct mode of membership acquisition. It is neither the right-based claim of citizenship from birth or long-term integration, nor the discretionary plea of

the ordinary applicant. It is a negotiated transaction in which the applicant's wealth and the state's willingness to privilege that wealth meet in a formalized arrangement.

4.4 Interactions between speech and money across tiers

These three tiers do not exist in isolation; they interact in ways that further stratify experience. Speech and money cross-cut the tiers, producing patterns that reinforce or mitigate existing advantages.

For citizens, financial resources can certainly shape life chances, but border risk remains low regardless of wealth. A poor citizen with inflammatory posts is still entitled to reentry; a rich citizen with spotless timelines is also entitled. Wealth may affect how often they travel or where they live, but it does not typically condition their core right to belong. Speech is buffered by legal protections, and money does not buy more than marginal conveniences such as expedited airport lines.

For ordinary noncitizens, speech and money interact in the harshest ways. Lacking both strong rights and large resources, they face the highest risk from misinterpretation of their online presence, and the least capacity to offset that risk through other signals. Even modest savings are unlikely to qualify them for donor lanes. They live at the border of two evaluative systems without being favored by either: their speech is scrutinized, and their financial contributions are treated as ordinary, not exceptional.

High-net-worth applicants straddle both dimensions. Their money insulates them from some of the vulnerabilities associated with speech. They may still self-censor or take advice on how to present themselves online, but they can rely on the fact that their primary claim is financial. In some cases, they may be guided by consultants who manage both their investment package and their public profiles, aligning digital traces with the narrative of responsible, beneficial wealth.

The net effect of these interactions is a hierarchy of exposure. Those with strong rights or strong wealth are less exposed to the harshest consequences of speech-based vetting. Those with neither are most exposed. The distribution of risk mirrors the distribution of protection and privilege: the people most likely to be scrutinized and excluded are also those least able to influence the rules or to purchase exceptions.

4.5 How triage reshapes the meaning of equality before the law

The existence of formal legal categories is not new. States have long distinguished among citizens, permanent residents, temporary visitors, and undocumented persons. What is new in

the triaged regime described here is the combination of fine-grained surveillance of speech, explicit pricing of privileged pathways, and leader-branded products that sit uneasily with traditional notions of impersonal governance.

In such a regime, the idea of equality before the law requires re-examination. On paper, laws may still declare that similarly situated individuals are treated alike. In practice, the criteria used to determine who is similarly situated increasingly include factors—such as the ability to make seven-figure contributions—that are available to only a minute segment of the population. The law can maintain formal neutrality while embedding substantive inequality.

The triage model also shifts how fairness is intuitively understood. Instead of asking simply whether decisions are made according to clear, general rules, one must ask which rules apply to which tiers. Citizens are governed by rules that prioritize rights and limit scrutiny. Ordinary noncitizens are governed by rules that prioritize discretion and enable deep inspection of speech. High-net-worth applicants are governed by rules that prioritize their contributions and formalize preferential treatment. The question is no longer just whether procedures are followed, but whether the existence of such differentiated procedures is compatible with a defensible conception of justice.

Moreover, the symbolic dimension matters. When membership can be approached through a branded card that resembles a luxury good, while others are kept out for having shared ordinary political or religious content, the message conveyed about value and worth is hard to reconcile with egalitarian ideals. It suggests that some people's money counts for more than others' moral claims or expressive lives, and that the state is willing to treat access to its community as a layered commodity.

5. The Paywalled Panopticon: Surveillance, Stratification, and Legitimacy

When social media vetting and wealth-based fast lanes are considered together, the border begins to look less like a neutral checkpoint and more like a layered observation structure—a paywalled panopticon. Some groups are subject to intense, continuous scrutiny of their digital lives. Others move through specialized channels where their financial contributions overshadow other concerns and where the gaze is softer or differently directed. Still others, chiefly citizens, inhabit a space where the border's gaze is largely dormant, activated only in exceptional circumstances.

This configuration combines three features. First, surveillance is unevenly distributed, with poor and precarious applicants furnishing much of the data that trains and tests risk systems. Second, financial power often buys not only faster access but relative invisibility with respect to certain forms of scrutiny. Third, key judgments are increasingly automated, encoded in scores and

categories that are hard to contest or even see. The result is a regime in which trust can be priced, suspicion can be datafied, and the narratives that justify inclusion and exclusion drift away from ideals of equal dignity.

5.1 Who is watched most: poor applicants as data sources and test cases

In any system that relies on digitized records and predictive models, there must be data. For social media vetting, that data comes from people who have public timelines, whose names can be matched to accounts, and whose desire to move gives authorities leverage to demand identifiers. In practice, these are often ordinary or poor applicants: workers seeking visas, students applying to study abroad, family members hoping to reunite, or asylum seekers whose journeys leave long trails of communication.

These applicants are watched most closely in at least three senses. They are more likely to have their social media identifiers collected as a condition of processing. Their profiles are more likely to be run through emerging tools that flag “concerning” content. And their cases, by sheer volume, become training material for the models themselves. Each approved or denied application, tagged retrospectively with risk assessments, helps refine future decision rules.

This makes them not only subjects of surveillance but also data sources and test cases. New analytic techniques are often piloted on low-power populations: those unlikely to sue, unable to mobilize political pressure, and easily framed as acceptable targets for experimentation in the name of security. The harms of misclassification—wrongly interpreted jokes, misread metaphors, algorithmically elevated false positives—fall disproportionately on those who lack the resources to challenge or correct them.

The irony is that these same applicants often pose the least structural risk. They are not designing policy, financing large operations, or orchestrating complex schemes; they are seeking personal safety and opportunity. Yet they are precisely the ones whose words and networks are scrutinized as though every post might harbor a hidden signal of menace.

5.2 Who is watched least: financial deference and the partial invisibility of wealth

At the other end of the spectrum are high-net-worth individuals and corporations. Their interactions with the border are mediated through specialized channels: investor programs, corporate mobility schemes, and bespoke legal services. They are not immune to scrutiny—states still purport to conduct due diligence on the origins of large funds and the backgrounds of principal actors—but the nature of that scrutiny is different.

Where poor applicants are examined through the lens of their speech and personal history, wealthy applicants are examined through the lens of financial flows and documentation. The core questions are: Is the money real? Is it legal? Will it arrive on time? Once those boxes are ticked, the presumption shifts toward benefit. The payment itself is treated as a reason to look favorably on the application, and the applicant's broader profile is often read through that positive frame.

There is also a practical partial invisibility. Many forms of sophisticated wealth management leave few easily interpretable public traces. Assets are held through trusts, shell companies, or complex ownership chains. Decisions are communicated through private channels rather than public posts. The screening systems that parse timelines and open-source footprints are less effective when confronted with actors whose primary expressions of power are not discursive but financial and institutional.

In such a context, deference to wealth can function as a kind of informal shield. It does not mean that all problems vanish, but it does mean that the default posture is less suspicious. The border's gaze is present but differently calibrated. The threshold of concern is higher, the benefit of the doubt more readily extended, and the willingness to deny or revoke status in the face of ambiguity correspondingly lower.

5.3 Automating judgment: risk scores, credit-like profiles, and bureaucratic opacity

As both surveillance and paywall functions scale, human decision-makers increasingly rely on automated or semi-automated tools. Risk scores condense vast amounts of data—travel history, associations, past interactions with authorities, and social media signals—into single numbers or color codes. Credit-like profiles summarize an applicant's estimated reliability, often using proprietary formulas. These tools are attractive to institutions under pressure: they promise consistency, speed, and a defensible veneer of objectivity.

Automation, however, introduces new forms of opacity. Applicants rarely see the variables that went into their score, the thresholds that triggered concern, or the weight assigned to specific pieces of information. Front-line officials may themselves have limited understanding of how the models work, treating their outputs as quasi-authoritative recommendations. Errors become difficult to trace, biases difficult to correct, and accountability difficult to assign.

In a paywalled panopticon, this opacity interacts with stratification. The profiles of poor applicants are heavily populated: many data points, many calculations, many opportunities for a small anomaly to push a score below a critical cutoff. The profiles of wealthy applicants may be sparser in certain domains and richer in others: fewer social media flags, more financial credentials. When scores and categories are designed without careful attention to the different

ways in which power manifests, they can encode structural advantages and disadvantages under the guise of neutral analytics.

Moreover, automation can mask moral decisions as technical necessities. Choosing to treat certain expressions as high-risk keywords, choosing to set contribution thresholds at particular levels, or choosing to let large payments offset other concerns are normative judgments. When folded into software and scoring systems, those choices can come to seem natural, even inevitable. The human responsibility for triage recedes behind dashboards and metrics.

5.4 Fairness and discrimination in a world of priced trust and mined speech

Fairness becomes a complex, contested concept in a system where trust can be purchased and suspicion is mined from speech. On one reading, wealth-based programs are “fair” because they are open to anyone who can meet the criteria. On another, they are manifestly unfair because the criteria themselves—large sums of money—are unattainable for almost everyone and bear little relation to moral desert, need, or civic potential.

Similarly, social media vetting can be defended as fair in the sense that it applies to all applicants within certain categories. Yet the content it evaluates is not produced on an equal field. Some groups are more likely to discuss politics online, to use charged language, or to engage in dark humor. Some are more likely to express anger or grief publicly because their communities are under direct attack. If risk models treat such content as generic indicators of dangerousness, they will disproportionately burden those whose circumstances generate the most intense speech.

Discrimination can thus arise without explicit animus. Criteria that are formally neutral—certain words, images, or associations—may correlate with particular regions, religions, or political movements. Payment thresholds that are formally neutral may de facto favor individuals from specific economic and national backgrounds. When these patterns intersect, the result can be a layered discrimination in which some are screened out by their speech, others screened in by their wealth, and still others left in a precarious middle.

A deeper unfairness lies in how the system values forms of contribution. Trust that is grounded in financial transfers is rewarded with expedited entry and reduced scrutiny. Trust grounded in years of lawful presence, community involvement, or moral courage may not be recognized at all if it does not map onto the metrics the system uses. The message, whether intended or not, is that certain ways of being a “good” prospective member count more than others, and that those ways are closely tied to existing economic hierarchies.

5.5 Political legitimacy and the story a nation tells about who gets in and why

Ultimately, the legitimacy of any border regime depends not only on its functional effectiveness but on the story a nation tells about who gets in and why. Official narratives often lean on themes of security, sovereignty, opportunity, and fairness. The border is said to protect against threats, preserve the integrity of the polity, offer pathways to those who qualify, and treat like cases alike. For these narratives to hold, there must be some plausible alignment between the principles invoked and the actual patterns of admission and exclusion.

The paywalled panopticon strains that alignment. When ordinary applicants find their everyday speech probed and leveraged against them while the wealthy are courted as benefactors, the claim that the system primarily rewards merit and guards against danger rings hollow. When opaque algorithms sort people into categories based on data they did not know would be used in this way, the claim that decisions rest on transparent, contestable criteria becomes difficult to sustain.

Over time, such dissonance erodes trust—not only among those who are excluded, but among those within the polity who care about the integrity of its institutions. Citizens observing a system that sells fast lanes while interrogating the timelines of the desperate may begin to question whether the border reflects their values or merely entrenches privilege. Prospective migrants observing the same dynamics may learn that the path to safety or participation is less about who they are and more about what they can pay or hide.

A different narrative is possible. A nation could tell a story in which safety is pursued without humiliating the vulnerable, in which economic contribution matters but does not overshadow other forms of worth, and in which speech is not systematically repurposed as a weapon against those who most need to use it. Moving toward such a story would require rethinking both the surveillance and paywall functions of the border: narrowing the scope of social media vetting, raising standards of transparency and appeal, constraining the personalization and commercialization of residency programs, and explicitly centering dignity in the design of admission rules.

Absent such shifts, the paywalled panopticon will continue to send its own, stark message: that in the hierarchy of belonging, some are watched, some are welcomed, and some are sold a key, while the promise of equal respect at the threshold remains more a slogan than a lived reality.

6. Comparative and Historical Perspectives on Priced Membership

Wealth-based pathways to residence and citizenship are not unique to any one country. They sit within a broader global pattern in which states court mobile capital and talent, offer

differentiated forms of membership, and reinterpret what it means to “belong” in light of economic competition. Looking comparatively and historically helps to clarify which aspects of contemporary paywall programs are novel and which are extensions of older practices. It also shows how race, class, and power have long shaped who may move freely and who must overcome elaborate hurdles.

This section first situates modern “golden visa” and citizenship-by-investment schemes in a global competition for capital. It then contrasts those practices with historical American narratives about Ellis Island, merit, and equal doors, and with older forms of stratified openness grounded in race and class. It next turns to countries that have rolled back or reformed wealth-based programs, drawing lessons from their experience. Finally, it identifies what is distinctive about leader-branded, personality-driven paywalls compared with more generic investor frameworks.

6.1 Golden visas, citizenship-by-investment, and global competition for capital

Golden visas and citizenship-by-investment programs emerged as policy instruments in a world where capital, and to some extent people, can move more easily than in the past. Small states, particularly in the Caribbean and parts of Europe, saw an opportunity: offer residence rights, visa-free travel, or even passports in exchange for substantial investments or donations. Larger states followed with their own versions of investor visas that promised fast-tracked permanent residence to those who brought in money, financed specific projects, or purchased high-value property.

From one angle, this is global competition for capital by other means. States that cannot easily change their geography or size can nonetheless adjust the “price” and conditions of membership. They can market themselves as safe havens for wealth, gateways to wider regions, or tax-efficient bases for global elites. In such a competitive environment, generous investor schemes are framed as necessary tools to attract high-net-worth individuals who might otherwise choose different jurisdictions.

The logic is explicitly transactional. Applicants receive mobility, security, and access; states receive funds that can be used to refinance debt, upgrade infrastructure, or stimulate targeted sectors like real estate. Promotional materials emphasize lifestyle, stability, and the freedom to relocate if conditions deteriorate elsewhere. The underlying premise is that allegiance can be coaxed by opportunity rather than rooted only in history or shared struggle.

However, these arrangements also draw criticism. They can create perverse incentives to fuel speculative property bubbles, exacerbate local inequality, and invite money of questionable origin. They raise questions about whether citizenship, traditionally bound up with mutual

obligations and identity, should be bundled with investment products. Nonetheless, as long as wealthy individuals seek insurance against political or economic shocks and states seek new revenue streams, the global market for priced membership remains active.

6.2 Historical American narratives: Ellis Island, merit, and the myth of equal doors

In the United States, priced membership collides with powerful national stories about immigration. The Ellis Island narrative, with its images of crowded ships and hopeful arrivals, presents the country as a place where poor and ordinary people could, in principle, enter through the same physical door and build new lives through work and perseverance. Over time, this narrative was updated with a rhetoric of “merit,” emphasizing skills, education, and entrepreneurial spirit rather than wealth per se.

Neither story was ever fully accurate. Immigration law has long contained explicit and implicit hierarchies, including racial exclusions, national-origin quotas, and preferences for certain family connections and occupational categories. Yet the myth of relatively equal doors—of a system that, at its best, judged people by character and capacity rather than by inheritance of capital—has exerted real force in American self-understanding.

Wealth-based pathways sit uneasily within this framework. Officially, they can be folded into a merit narrative by equating major investments with job creation and economic dynamism. An investor who finances a factory or infrastructure project can be presented as someone whose “merit” is expressed through capital allocation. But at the level of symbolism, the tension persists. When a million-dollar payment buys an accelerated route to the same legal status that others wait years or decades to obtain, the notion of equal doors becomes harder to sustain.

In this light, the contrast between Ellis Island imagery and gold card branding is not just aesthetic. It marks a deeper shift in who the ideal migrant is imagined to be. Where the older narrative centered on the determined worker or refugee, the newer one spotlights the mobile investor. Both figures may coexist in law, but the latter increasingly occupies the premium tier of attention and service, while the former navigates a landscape of scrutiny and backlog.

6.3 Race, class, and earlier forms of stratified movement and selective openness

Priced membership is one way of stratifying access to movement and belonging. Historically, states—including the United States—have used other criteria to similar effect. Race, class, gender, and property ownership have all been leveraged to draw lines between those who may move or settle freely and those whose mobility is constrained.

Examples abound. Racial exclusion laws once explicitly barred certain groups from immigrating or becoming citizens, even as others were welcomed. National-origin quotas allocated visas in ways that favored some populations over others based on historical dominance rather than current need or merit. Within national borders, internal movement and residence have been shaped by practices such as redlining, vagrancy laws, and policing strategies that effectively restricted where certain racial and class groups could live or travel without harassment.

Class has also functioned as a gatekeeper. Property qualifications and literacy tests were used historically to limit political participation, tying full membership to economic status and schooling. At borders, the ability to show funds, secure sponsorship, or pay various fees has long influenced outcomes. Even before formal investor programs, wealthier travelers have experienced smoother crossings, more forgiving assessments, and greater access to legal remedies.

Seen against this backdrop, contemporary paywalls are not a total departure but an intensification and formalization of existing stratifications. Where race and class once operated through a mixture of explicit rules and informal practices, wealth-based visas codify economic advantage directly into admission criteria. At the same time, facially neutral social media vetting can reproduce older racial and political biases if the categories it uses align with patterns of speech and association more common in marginalized communities.

Understanding these continuities is important. It prevents the mistake of treating priced membership as an isolated anomaly in an otherwise egalitarian history. Instead, it highlights how mechanisms of selective openness have evolved, with explicit racial exclusions giving way to more technocratic and financial filters that nonetheless often track similar lines of power and vulnerability.

6.4 Lessons from countries that have rolled back or reformed wealth-based schemes

Not all states have embraced investor visas indefinitely. Some have significantly tightened, suspended, or terminated such programs in response to scandals, public backlash, or external pressure. Their experiences offer cautionary lessons for jurisdictions contemplating or expanding paywalled membership.

Common triggers for rollback include concerns about money laundering, corruption, and security risks. Investigations have revealed cases in which individuals with serious criminal or political backgrounds obtained residence or citizenship by channeling funds through intermediaries, exploiting weak due diligence. These episodes undermine claims that wealth is a reliable proxy for trustworthiness and can damage a country's reputation as a responsible member of the international community.

Another recurring issue is the impact on local housing markets and inequality. Where investor visas are tied to real estate purchases, concentrated demand from wealthy foreigners can drive up prices, making housing less affordable for residents without generating commensurate long-term economic benefits. Public resentment can grow when locals perceive that their neighborhoods are being hollowed out or commodified for absentee owners.

Policy responses to these problems have taken various forms: raising thresholds, tightening background checks, narrowing eligible investment categories, imposing residency requirements, or closing specific routes altogether. In some cases, supranational bodies or blocs have pressured member states to curtail the sale of citizenship on the grounds that one state's decisions affect the security and policy space of others.

Two broad lessons emerge. First, once a wealth-based pathway is created, it can be politically and administratively difficult to shut down, especially if powerful actors benefit from it. Second, the externalities of such programs—on justice systems, housing, social cohesion, and international relations—often take time to manifest. Short-term fiscal gains can be offset by longer-term costs that are harder to measure but no less real.

6.5 What is distinctive about leader-branded, personality-driven paywalls

Within the wider family of investor and golden visa programs, leader-branded, personality-driven schemes occupy a distinctive niche. They do not simply offer a route in exchange for money; they embed that route in the personal brand of a sitting head of state and present it using the visual language of loyalty cards and private clubs. This personalization carries several implications.

First, it tightens the link between public authority and private image. Where generic investor visas are at least formally attached to institutions—ministries, agencies, parliaments—leader-branded programs suggest that access to the polity flows through a given individual. The card becomes a token not just of membership in a state but of affiliation with a leader's project and persona. For supporters, this can be a selling point. For critics, it is a signal of creeping personalization of power.

Second, personality-driven paywalls blur boundaries between public revenue and political capital. When a program is explicitly associated with a leader, contributions to that program can be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as gestures of support. The risk is that decisions about design, marketing, and enforcement will be influenced by considerations of personal prestige, electoral advantage, or patronage, rather than by impartial assessments of national interest and fairness.

Third, the aesthetics of such schemes amplify their symbolic impact. A card with a leader's face or signature, styled like a premium financial product, does not simply facilitate movement; it broadcasts a message about what kind of relationship is on offer. It invites applicants to see themselves as insiders in a branded community, and citizens to see their country's membership as something that can be packaged and sold under a logo.

This distinctiveness matters for the paywalled panopticon. Generic investor visas already create stratified access based on wealth. Leader-branded versions add an extra layer of personalization and spectacle. They transform the paywall from a technocratic instrument into a stage on which a particular vision of sovereignty is performed—a vision in which borders, like other levers of state power, are part of a leader's portfolio of assets.

The combination of priced access, unequal surveillance, and personalized branding thus marks a qualitative shift. It suggests not only that membership can be tiered and sold, but that the authority to define and distribute that membership can be claimed as a personal signature. In a world where the stories nations tell about who gets in and why are already under strain, this is a development that demands careful scrutiny.

7. Ethics of Living and Governing Under a Triaged Border

A triaged border regime does not only raise structural questions about law and policy; it also confronts individuals and institutions with concrete ethical choices. Prospective migrants must decide how much of themselves to reveal in systems that may misread their speech and reward their wealth. Citizens must decide how to understand and respond to a system that protects them while pricing others' access to the same status. Policy designers must decide where to draw lines between legitimate security concerns and mercenary practices. Platforms and intermediaries must decide how to handle user data that can be repurposed as border evidence. And all of these actors, together, must decide what kinds of borders they are willing to imagine as acceptable in the first place.

This section explores these ethical dimensions. It does not assume that any one group holds full responsibility or control. Rather, it sketches the tensions and possibilities that arise when living and governing under a border that watches some closely, sells shortcuts to others, and mostly trusts those already inside.

7.1 Prospective migrants: honesty, self-protection, and the cost of being legible

For prospective migrants, ethics takes the form of difficult trade-offs. On one hand, honesty seems like a basic expectation: filling out forms truthfully, answering interview questions

without deception, and avoiding misrepresentation. On the other hand, the border's appetite for legibility means that being fully visible can carry serious risks. Posts made in anger, jokes that do not translate, or political positions that are uncontroversial at home can become liabilities in an immigration file.

Faced with this, many prospective migrants adopt strategies of self-protection. They delete posts, close accounts, avoid sharing opinions, or segment their online presence into multiple identities. These strategies are understandable. They reduce exposure to misinterpretation in systems that offer little transparency or recourse. Yet they can also feel like small acts of self-erasure. The person who arrives at the border is a curated version of the person who actually lives, thinks, and cares.

The ethical tension lies in distinguishing between legitimate privacy and coerced silence. It is ethically reasonable for someone to decide that not every thought belongs in a searchable archive. It is ethically troubling when people feel compelled to refrain from ordinary expression or from speaking about injustice because they fear future punishment from a foreign state. The cost of being legible, in that sense, includes a loss of authenticity and a narrowing of political voice.

Prospective migrants thus navigate a moral landscape in which honesty, prudence, and self-respect can pull in different directions. Their choices cannot bear the full weight of fixing an unjust system, but they reveal how that system shapes everyday judgments about what it means to live truthfully while under unequal scrutiny.

7.2 Citizens: benefiting from a system that prices others' access to the same status

Citizens in wealthy states occupy a privileged position in this landscape. Their membership is secure; their speech is broadly protected; their movements across their own border are not conditioned on social media vetting or million-dollar "contributions." Yet they benefit from a system that applies very different standards to noncitizens. The security measures, economic gains, and political narratives that justify triaged borders are invoked in their name.

Ethically, this raises questions of complicity and responsibility. It is easy to treat border practices as distant technical matters, the concern of specialists and agencies. But when the same legal order that protects one group sells fast lanes and mines timelines for others, citizens must decide whether that order still reflects the values they claim to hold. If equality, fairness, and human dignity are part of the national self-image, then a regime that ties trust to wealth and suspicion to speech warrants scrutiny.

Citizens also face choices about how to engage. They can ignore the stratification at the border, accepting cheaper labor, geopolitical leverage, or fiscal benefits without asking how they were produced. Or they can support reforms: reducing the role of money in admission, expanding safe and regular pathways, insisting on transparency and oversight for social media vetting, and resisting the personalization of state power through leader-branded programs.

The ethical demand is not that citizens dismantle borders entirely, but that they refuse to treat triage as morally neutral. Recognizing the asymmetries that favor them is a first step. The next is to decide whether their comfort is worth the cost imposed on those whose access to the same status is priced or policed in more intrusive ways.

7.3 Policy designers: criteria for proportionate, transparent, and non-mercenary screening

Policy designers and lawmakers sit closer to the levers of change. Their ethical responsibilities include not only avoiding overt abuses, but also shaping systems that embody proportion, transparency, and restraint. In the context of social media vetting, this suggests at least three criteria.

First, necessity: speech-based screening should be limited to contexts where there is clear evidence that it materially reduces serious risks, not deployed as a general fishing expedition or a symbolic gesture of toughness. Second, proportionality: even where some screening is justified, it should use narrowly tailored criteria that focus on specific, well-defined threats rather than sweeping categories that sweep up ordinary controversy. Third, due process: applicants should have meaningful ways to know when their speech has been held against them and to contest misinterpretations, especially when denial affects long-term life plans.

On the wealth side, a non-mercenary approach would restrict or eliminate programs whose primary function is to convert money directly into membership. Where economic contribution is relevant, it should be integrated into broader assessments that also consider skills, ties, and humanitarian factors, rather than standing alone as a ticket that overrides other concerns. Leader branding and luxury aesthetics should be treated as warning signs: indications that the line between public authority and private promotion is being blurred.

Policy designers are under pressure from multiple directions: demands for security, demands for economic growth, and demands for fairness. Ethical governance in this domain means refusing to let the first two goals erase the third. It also means being honest about trade-offs, rather than cloaking revenue-seeking measures in the language of merit or safety.

7.4 Platforms and intermediaries: responsibilities when timelines become border evidence

Platforms and intermediaries occupy a liminal role. They are not states, but their design choices shape what states can see and how easily they can see it. When immigration authorities use social media timelines as evidence, the platforms that host those timelines face ethical questions about their cooperation, their defaults, and their user communication.

One responsibility concerns clarity. Users rarely understand how their data may be repurposed beyond the platform. Terms of service and privacy policies are often opaque. If platforms know that governments routinely mine public content for immigration screening, they have an ethical reason to disclose this plainly and to offer tools that allow users to manage their visibility in informed ways.

Another responsibility concerns data governance. Platforms can choose to store less data, to limit the ease of bulk scraping, and to design interfaces that do not inadvertently expose sensitive information to automated harvesting. They cannot, and should not, shield genuine threats from legitimate law-enforcement inquiry, but they can resist architectures that treat all users as potential sources of border intelligence.

Intermediaries such as background-check companies and analytics providers also face obligations. When they sell risk-scoring tools to governments, they should be transparent about methodologies, error rates, and biases. They should resist marketing their products as infallible or neutral when they are built on value-laden assumptions. Ethical practice in this space includes an awareness that clients may be tempted to treat probabilistic scores as definitive judgments about who deserves entry and who does not.

Ultimately, platforms and intermediaries must decide whether they are content to be passive conduits in a triaged border regime, or whether they will exercise their own agency to protect users from the most harmful forms of misinterpretation and overreach.

7.5 Imagining different futures: hospitality, safety, and non-humiliating admission

Ethical analysis should not end with critique. It should also open space for imagining different futures. The current trajectory of triaged borders is not inevitable. Other configurations of safety, hospitality, and control are possible.

A non-humiliating approach to admission would begin with a commitment to dignity. Applicants would not be treated primarily as potential threats or wallets, but as persons whose claims to move, join, or seek refuge deserve serious consideration. This does not mean admitting everyone; it means structuring processes so that refusals are reasoned, contestable, and not

based on opaque readings of their private lives or on their inability to pay for privileged treatment.

In such a future, social media vetting would be sharply circumscribed, reserved for cases where specific, serious concerns justify targeted inquiry rather than mass fishing in timelines. Wealth would still matter in economic policy, but it would not be allowed to purchase exceptional membership packages that sit above and apart from general rules. Borders would remain sites of triage in the sense that decisions must be made under constraint, but the criteria for triage would be oriented toward need, contribution in a broad sense, and shared security rather than toward liquidity and digital legibility.

Citizens, migrants, policymakers, and platforms would all have roles in bringing such a future closer. Citizens could insist that their safety not be bought with the humiliation or commodification of others. Migrants could articulate their experiences in ways that inform reform. Policymakers could experiment with models of community sponsorship, regional mobility compacts, and expanded regular pathways that reduce the pressure to game systems. Platforms could design for privacy and context rather than for maximal exposure.

Imagining these alternatives does not require utopian optimism. It requires only the recognition that the paywalled panopticon is a choice among many. To live and govern ethically under present conditions is partly to mitigate harms within that structure, and partly to refuse to let it define the limits of what borders can be for.

8. Conclusion: What Selling the Fast Lane Reveals About American Values

The turn toward social media vetting and wealth-based fast lanes has not merely tweaked the mechanics of border control. It has altered what the border is *for* and what it *says* about the community behind it. When admission is shaped by the interpretation of everyday speech for some and by the capacity to pay for others, the border becomes a kind of paywalled panopticon: a structure that watches the poor closely, welcomes the rich on special terms, and treats citizens as largely exempt from the most intrusive forms of scrutiny.

This concluding section draws together the main threads of that picture. It recaps the architecture of the tri-tier regime, identifies open questions for law, technology, and democratic oversight, highlights long-term risks of entrenching plutocracy at the threshold of membership, and sketches directions for borders that do not confuse price with worth or silence with safety.

8.1 Recap of the paywalled panopticon and the tri-tier regime

The analysis has proceeded along two axes: speech and wealth. On the speech axis, the rise of social media vetting has turned timelines, likes, and casual posts into evidence. The border interprets these traces as windows into disposition and risk, often without giving applicants clear notice or meaningful recourse. The same expressions that are considered normal, if noisy, in domestic discourse can become grounds for suspicion when attached to a foreign passport. Citizens and noncitizens thus inhabit two regimes of interpretation: one buffered by constitutional protections and political familiarity, the other exposed to plenary discretion.

On the wealth axis, investor visas and leader-branded “gold card” programs have turned the border into a paywall. Large financial transfers are treated as compressed proof of benefit. Individuals and corporations who can pay seven-figure sums gain access to lanes that bypass long queues and, in practice, soften certain forms of scrutiny. Residency and eventual citizenship are not formally sold as products, but they are tightly bundled with payments that function as de facto prices for a premium path.

Together, these axes produce a tri-tier membership structure:

- Citizens enjoy secure belonging, strong speech protections, and relatively low border risk. Their online lives are not systematically mined as immigration evidence, and their status is not contingent on their contribution to government coffers.
- Ordinary noncitizens encounter high scrutiny and weak rights. Their timelines can be repurposed as dossiers; their jokes, grievances, and political statements can be reinterpreted as risk signals by distant authorities.
- High-net-worth applicants move through donor lanes where large payments are allowed to stand in for more granular assessments of character or contribution. Their wealth buys speed, predictability, and a presumption of benefit that others cannot access.

The paywalled panopticon is the structure formed by these three tiers. It is not an abstract diagram but a lived reality for those who find themselves watched, priced, or exempted in different ways by the same legal order.

8.2 Open questions for law, technology, and democratic oversight

This configuration raises open questions that cut across disciplines.

For law, the core questions concern legitimacy and constraint. To what extent can a democratic state condition admission on the payment of large sums without reducing citizenship or permanent residence to commerce? Where should courts draw lines between permissible

screening and unjustified intrusion into speech, especially when the affected individuals lack full constitutional standing? How far should doctrines of deference toward the political branches extend when the issues at stake involve structural discrimination between classes of would-be members?

For technology, the questions center on design and accountability. How can risk models be audited for bias, error, and overreach when they operate on opaque criteria and proprietary code? What obligations do developers have when they build tools that classify people's speech for high-stakes decisions in contexts where appeals are limited or nonexistent? Can there be meaningful consent to data use when individuals do not know that their posts today may influence their mobility years from now?

For democratic oversight, the fundamental questions are about visibility and choice. Do citizens understand the degree to which their state now uses social media as a filter at the border and sells privileged access to those who can pay? Are legislatures actively shaping these policies, or are they emerging through executive initiatives, administrative improvisations, and commercial partnerships? What mechanisms—hearings, independent review bodies, transparency requirements—should be in place to ensure that the evolution of border practices reflects considered public will rather than the path of least political resistance?

These questions do not admit quick answers, but they indicate how much is still unsettled about the moral and legal status of the paywalled panopticon.

8.3 Long-term risks: entrenching plutocracy at the border and beyond

The most immediate effects of a triaged border fall on those who are denied, delayed, or accelerated in their journeys. Over the long term, however, the risks are broader and more structural.

One risk is the entrenchment of plutocracy at the border. When wealth buys not only better hotels and seats but also better chances of admission to a polity, economic inequality is woven directly into the fabric of membership. A transnational elite gains multiple options for residence and citizenship, while those with fewer resources face ever more demanding scrutiny. The border becomes a mechanism for constructing an international upper class whose ties to any one community are optional and whose access to safety and opportunity is insured against local shocks.

Another risk is the normalization of misreading and self-censorship. When people come to expect that their online lives may be interpreted by distant officials, they may adjust what they say not only in relation to immigration but in relation to politics more generally. Over time, this

can dampen the vibrancy of public discourse, particularly among communities that already experience states as threats rather than protectors. A society that trains large numbers of people to preemptively sanitize their speech for fear of border consequences may find that its democratic debates are impoverished in ways that are hard to reverse.

A third risk is the erosion of solidarity. If citizens internalize the idea that their membership is naturally more secure and valuable, while others' access is appropriately priced or heavily policed, the sense of shared humanity across borders can diminish. The more people accept that safety and belonging are commodities to be rationed by wealth and digital legibility, the easier it becomes to justify harsh treatment of those who have neither.

Finally, there is the risk of institutional corrosion. Leader-branded programs and reliance on revenue from priced membership can tempt governments to prioritize fiscal gains and personal prestige over principle. This can bleed into other domains: if residence and citizenship are quietly monetized, why not other entitlements? The ethos of public service may gradually give way to a culture of transactional governance.

None of these trajectories is inevitable, but they are plausible if current trends continue unchecked.

8.4 Toward borders that do not confuse price with worth or silence with safety

The fact that a paywalled panopticon has taken shape does not mean it must be accepted as the final form of border governance. Alternatives exist, and they begin with a change in what is taken to be non-negotiable.

One such non-negotiable is the distinction between price and worth. A border regime committed to that distinction would refuse to let financial contributions stand alone as the basis for admission. It might still recognize economic factors as part of a larger picture, but it would not create exclusive tiers that allow the wealthy to bypass rules that others must obey. Any role for investment would be carefully constrained and subject to public justification that goes beyond revenue maximization.

Another non-negotiable is the distinction between silence and safety. A system that respects this distinction does not automatically equate the absence of controversial speech with low risk, nor the presence of strong speech with high risk. It recognizes that vibrant, sometimes heated expression is part of healthy political life, and that people who speak forcefully about injustice are not thereby disqualified from being trustworthy neighbors or coworkers. Social media vetting, if used at all, would focus narrowly on clearly defined, genuinely dangerous incitement rather than on broad categories of dissent, anger, or unorthodox belief.

Practically, moving toward such borders would involve concrete reforms. Transparency about how social media is used in immigration decisions, clear limits on the kinds of content that can be considered, and robust avenues for appeal when speech is misinterpreted are one set of measures. Strict separation of immigration policy from leader branding and luxury aesthetics, and the phasing out or tightening of programs that effectively sell residence in exchange for undirected funds, are another.

More deeply, it would involve reasserting that the purpose of borders in a democratic order is not to reward privilege and punish visibility, but to regulate movement in ways that balance safety with hospitality and sovereignty with solidarity. That balance will always be contested. But a system that treats what people can pay and how easily their words can be mined as the primary axes of admission does not merely reflect pragmatic compromises. It reveals, and reinforces, a hierarchy of value that sits uneasily with any serious commitment to equal human dignity.

Seeing the paywalled panopticon clearly is a first step. The next is to decide, collectively, whether it is an architecture to be accepted, adjusted, or transcended.

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