Agenda Setting, Public Opinion, and the Issue of Immigration Reform*

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Objective. Agenda-setting theory is used to motivate hypotheses about how media coverage of immigration influences public perceptions of its importance. The authors seek to offer a more complete explanation of public opinion on immigration by exploring differences in the effects of immigration news in border and nonborder states. Method. This article employs content analyses of newspaper coverage of immigration and Gallup public opinion data over a 12-month period (January–December 2006). Respondents’ identification of immigration as a “Most Important Problem” is modeled as a conditional relationship between border state/nonborder state residence and media coverage, ethnic context, and individual-level demographics. Results. Media attention to immigration is greater in border states than in nonborder states; as a result, residents of border states are more likely to identify immigration as a most important problem than are residents of nonborder states. Conclusions. The analyses point to the importance of geography and news coverage in explanations of public opinion on immigration.

The public’s attitude toward immigration has traditionally been different for those residing in states that share a border with Mexico and those living in nonborder states. Extant survey research, which focuses primarily on Anglo attitudes (Alvarez and Buttereld, 2000; Johnson, Stein, and Wrinkle, 2003), reveals that individuals residing in border states consistently rate immigration as one of the “most important problems facing the nation,” relative to individuals residing in nonborder states. However, immediately following the 2006 spike in national media attention toward immigration reform and the wave of immigration protests nationwide, public opinion polls revealed that national public opinion regarding immigration surged to

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the level of concern typically expressed by individuals residing in border states.¹

These events surrounding the immigration debate raise several research questions of interest to students of news media, public opinion, and public policy. This article examines the following research questions: Is immigration a more immediate concern to those residing in the border states and, if so, what explains the geographic difference in policy preferences? Previous efforts at contextual and geographic explanations offer mixed results (see Branton et al., 2007; Citrin et al., 1990; Tolbert and Hero, 2001), leaving much unexplained about public opinion on immigration. Are immigration news patterns in border states different than elsewhere in the United States? Are the effects of immigration news different for border state and nonborder state residents? More broadly, how does agenda setting operate for issues with subnational variation in salience? Media coverage could be an important but neglected explanatory variable in research on public opinion toward immigration. The major contribution here is to highlight the significant impact of media coverage and place of residence on public perception of immigration.

We rely on the agenda-setting literature to outline expectations regarding news coverage and public opinion toward immigration in 2006. As the theory of agenda setting asserts, the news media influences public perceptions about what is most important by covering certain events and issues more than others (Baumgartner and Jones, 1995; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). First, we expect that greater attention by the media will result in the U.S. public perceiving immigration as a “most important problem” (MIP) facing the country. Second, we argue that local media in border states consistently offer more coverage of immigration issues than the mainstream media. Third, we expect public opinion to fluctuate for both nonborder and border state populations, but the level of concern over immigration should be consistently higher among individuals residing in border states when compared to individuals residing in nonborder states. Finally, we expect to find a conditional relationship between individuals’ place of residence (i.e., border vs. nonborder states) and media coverage of immigration. This final expectation is based on two contentions: (1) that the salience of immigration in border states is partly due to the steady stream of local news stories on the issue, especially since they tend to be framed negatively (Branton and Dunaway, 2009a, 2009b; Coutin and Chock, 1995; Santa Ana, 1999); and (2) that agenda setting is likely to operate differently for issues like immigration, where there is subnational variation in citizens’ direct experience with the issue.

These expectations are tested by examining media coverage of immigration as well as public opinion toward immigration over a 12-month period.

(January–December 2006). We examine newspaper coverage of immigration from states along the U.S.-Mexico border (e.g., San Diego Union Tribune) and nonborder states (e.g., Atlanta Journal-Constitution). Gallup public opinion data for this same time period are then analyzed to determine which issues the public perceived as being of greatest concern at different points in time. Indeed, public opinion polls and the news coverage trend data, as well as our cross-sectional time-series analysis, lend considerable support for our hypotheses. Media attention to immigration is greater in border states than in nonborder states; as a result, residents of border states are more likely to identify immigration as a MIP than residents of nonborder states. Perhaps most interestingly, we find that news coverage of immigration has differential agenda-setting effects on border state versus nonborder state residents. These findings highlight the importance of news coverage and place of residence as determinants of immigration attitudes.

Next, we review the literature on agenda setting, news coverage, and opinion on immigration, and offer a discussion of our hypotheses. We then describe the data and methods used to test these hypotheses, and present the findings. The final section places these findings in the context of the existing literature on agenda setting, public opinion, and the media.

The Media and Public Opinion

The agenda setting literature demonstrates the effect of prominent media attention on the weight the public gives to certain issues (Baumgartner and Jones, 1995; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Agenda setting describes the process by which the news media shows the public what is important by giving more salience to certain events and issues over others. According to agenda-setting theory, the public perceives issues that receive the most media coverage to be those of greatest importance (Baumgartner and Jones, 1995; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). This implies that heightened coverage of immigration will increase public perception of its importance as well.

Information-processing research also suggests that media cues about certain issues or events play a large part in what we consider to be important. Accessibility in the mind significantly influences the way we evaluate issues (Druckman, 2004; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Because we are cognitively limited, we organize concepts thematically, and can retain only a finite number of considerations in the forefront of our minds. When queried about issues or opinions, it is from this immediate set of considerations that a response is generated. This process, which is known as priming, does not overtly alter individuals opinions and beliefs, but it has the potential to influence the issues voters consider to be most important (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Therefore, even when an issue is not a daily or immediate concern, constant media attention primes issue awareness by making it more accessible in the mind or by increasing the issue’s perceived importance (Lau
and Redlawsk, 2001; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997). With immigration, the high volume of media attention may prime public awareness or concern about the issue. Finally, the manner in which immigration is framed may influence public opinion on this policy issue (see Lee, McLeod, and Shah, 2008; Abrajano and Singh, 2009; Domke, McCoy, and Torres, 1999).

News coverage of immigration may also influence public concern about the issue because there is a tendency in the news media to portray nonwhites in a less than favorable manner. For example, news outlets routinely cover violent crimes at a volume disproportionate to their actual occurrence in society, and the media tends to feature stories about crimes in which nonwhites are the perpetrators (Gilliam et al., 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000). More generally, depictions of nonwhites in the news media suggest they are prone to violence and are overly demanding on the government (Entman et al., 1998:19; Gilens, 1999). With regard to the media’s portrayal of Latinos in particular, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) reports that crime and immigration are the prevailing frames for Latino-related news stories and that over the last decade, these two topics have accounted for 36 percent of all network news stories covering Latinos. NAHJ also reports that Latinos are often portrayed negatively and as a problem people.

In accordance with the existing work on agenda setting, priming, and framing, we argue that heightened levels of coverage may cause immigration to be more salient and thus a more important issue to the public. Specifically, due to differences in the volume of immigration-related news, we expect those residing in border states to be more frequently exposed to news coverage regarding immigration—which tends to be negative coverage—and therefore more likely to rate immigration as a “most important problem facing the country.”

Several studies have also demonstrated the way the national public policy agenda fluctuates with the volume of media attention to particular issues. Public opinion and congressional action on issues such as nuclear energy, tobacco use, and pesticides track closely with media attention to these issues (Baumgartner and Jones, 1995). As such, there is every reason to expect that with increased media attention, the immigration issue will emerge as an MIP in the U.S. public’s mind. Additionally, the agenda-setting effect of the media should operate for residents of border states as well as for those living in nonborder states.

H1: As media coverage of immigration increases, the public will be more likely to rank immigration as an MIP.

Previous Explanations of Public Opinion Toward Immigration

A rich literature provides several explanations of public opinion on immigration and offers several reasons to expect attitudes toward immigration to vary between individuals residing in border states and those living in
nonborder states. Two perspectives, offered by literatures on intergroup conflict and intergroup contact, point to an explanation based on ethnic context. Border communities typically have higher concentration of immigration populations, which could influence border residents’ perceptions of immigrants and immigration. However, the extant literature on the subject provides mixed evidence about the effect of context on attitudes toward minority groups. Tolbert and Hero (2001) find that the presence of a large Latino population is associated with support for nativist ballot initiatives; Citrin et al. (1990) find no relationship between ethnic context and immigration attitudes. Others suggest that geographic proximity to the border may have an independent effect on immigration attitudes and argue that environmental cues such as border checkpoints, fences, and warning signs increase perceptions of threat from immigrants, while nonborder residents may not be continually exposed to such first-hand images (Branton et al., 2007; Cornelius, 1982).

The literature on public opinion toward immigration also points to several explanations based on individual-level characteristics such as economic outlook, age, gender, education, partisanship, and ideology. Personal evaluations about the economy are thought to influence one’s perceived importance of immigration (Burns and Gimpel, 2000; Hood and Morris, 1997). Extant research also reveals that individual-level age is associated with attitudes toward immigration (Espenshade and Calhoun, 1993). Additionally, gender differences exist in attitudes toward immigration (Espenshade and Calhoun, 1993); attitudinal differences also emerge between those with high and low levels of education (Hood and Morris, 1998). Finally, both individual-level partisanship and ideology are associated with attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy (Citrin, Reingold, and Green, 1990; Citrin et al., 1997; Hood and Morris, 1997, 1998). However, extant research (including both contextual and individual-level explanations) does not provide a complete understanding of attitudes toward immigration and more investigation is needed on the determinants of these attitudes. Thus, we contend that news coverage is a potentially important and currently neglected explanatory variable in determining Americans’ attitudes toward immigration.

Moving Toward a More Complete Explanation of Public Opinion on Immigration

We also expect geographic differences in local news coverage of immigration to explain variations in the importance people attach to the issue. First, local news in border states will cover the issue of immigration more than in nonborder states because a well-known relationship exists between proximity of events and the selection of local news stories. Events close to home receive more coverage than those occurring farther away (Martin,
Furthermore, previous research suggests that the volume and substance of media coverage of immigration varies according to the language in which it is offered (Johnson, Stein, and Wrinkle, 2003; Branton and Dunaway, 2008) and according to spatial distance from the border. Specifically, this work demonstrates that there is significantly more news coverage of immigration in areas proximate to the border than in areas further removed from the border (Branton and Dunaway, 2009a, 2009b). Other work indicates that (irrespective of ethnic context) policy attitudes regarding immigration are affected by one’s proximity to the border (e.g., Alvarez and Butterfield, 2000; Branton et al., 2007). Based on this research, we expect media cues regarding immigration to be more prevalent in border states than in nonborder states.

\[ H_2: \text{Local media in border states consistently offer more news coverage of immigration than local media in nonborder states.} \]

Although respondents residing in border states are usually more likely to rate immigration as a most important problem facing the nation than individuals in nonborder states, there are times that respondents from nonborder states do consider it an MIP (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay, 2008). We know this because, historically, immigration has intermittently moved in and out of the national policy spotlight and has ebbed and flowed in terms of its salience to the U.S. people as an important policy issue (Tichenor, 2002).

What might explain the dramatic shifts in national salience about this policy issue? Existing research that distinguishes between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues suggests a tentative answer and provides the basis for our third and final hypothesis. Issues are considered to be obtrusive when individuals have dealt with them directly. Issues are unobtrusive if individuals have not had direct experience with the issue and must rely on information from the mass media in lieu of their own experiences (Demers et al., 1989). Extant research suggests that because unobtrusive issues are understood only through the lens of the media, agenda-setting effects are most powerful for unobtrusive issues (Winter and Eyal, 1981; Lee, 2004). In short, agenda-setting cues are more powerful for unobtrusive issues because individuals lack their own direct personal experience with the issue. Alternatively, when issues are obtrusive (i.e., individuals have a great deal of personal experience with the issue), individuals do not need to rely solely on the media for salience cues about the issue. Thus, individuals’ concern about the obtrusive issues is not driven entirely by media coverage (Hester and Gibson, 2007).

Since border issues are unobtrusive to those residing further from the border, media attention may be particularly important to the salience of immigration in these geographic areas. As stated, when the volume of coverage of immigration-related issues is at normal or average levels, we expect individuals residing in nonborder states to be less likely to rank immigration
as an MIP when compared to individuals residing in border states. However, we expect media coverage of immigration to have a differential effect on border and nonborder residents. When the volume of media coverage of immigration increases, it should have a strong effect on the salience of the issue for individuals residing in nonborder states. Because immigration is unobtrusive for nonborder residents, they should become much more likely to perceive it as a pressing issue as a result of the increased media attention, whereas the impact of the increased media attention on individuals residing in border states should be more muted. Indeed, when the news media is devoting significant attention to immigration, individuals residing in nonborder states may exhibit opinions regarding immigration that are similar to those of individuals residing in border states. In essence, we propose that the “effect” of one’s place of residence (i.e., border vs. nonborder states) on ranking immigration as an MIP is conditioned on the volume of media coverage dedicated to immigration.

$H_3$: Nonborder respondents will be less likely than border respondents to rank immigration as an MIP, unless the media is giving the matter heightened attention nationwide.

Research Design, Data, and Analysis

To determine the relationship between media coverage and public opinion toward immigration, we rely on two key sources of data: content analysis of newspapers and 2006 Gallup Public Opinion surveys. These data allow us to assess trends in media coverage of immigration from January–December 2006 and enable us to examine whether public perception of immigration varies in relation to media coverage of immigration.


We utilized America’s Newspapers database provided by Newsbank, Inc. and LEXIS/NEXIS. These resources provide the most extensive full-text archives of newspapers currently available.
During the observed time period, the sample of newspapers printed 7,023 articles dealing with immigration. These newspaper data provide national trends in coverage on immigration by month during the observed time period, which is the focus of $H_1$. Additionally, this sample of newspapers provides the opportunity to assess whether differences exist in the coverage between media outlets located in border states and nonborder states, the primary contention of $H_2$.

The second set of analyses uses monthly Gallup opinion polls from 2006 to examine public opinion on immigration. We selected these public opinion data for two reasons important to the execution of our analysis. First, each monthly survey conducted queries respondents on what they perceive to be the most important problem facing the country. The Gallup Poll’s “Most Important Problem” (MIP) question makes it possible to examine monthly shifts in public opinion regarding the importance of immigration relative to other major policy issues. Second, Gallup polls include a geographic identifier that indicates the state in which each respondent resides. We use the Gallup data to evaluate differences in immigration attitudes and differences among individuals residing in border versus nonborder states, the bases of $H_1$ and $H_3$.

The dependent variable for the multivariate analysis is the MIP question. In each of the monthly polls, respondents are asked: “What is the most important problem facing this country today?” This is phrased as an open-ended question and we create a dichotomous variable, MIP, which is coded 1 if a respondent identifies immigration as one of the most important problems facing the nation and 0 if otherwise. The analysis presented in this study is limited to white, non-Latinos for a practical reason. The Gallup data include far fewer nonwhite respondents, making it difficult to assess the questions of interest for these racial and ethnic groups.

The first independent variable of interest is media coverage of immigration. Generally speaking, we argue that as media coverage of immigration increases, the public’s perception of the importance of immigration likewise increases. To evaluate this proposition, we construct a measure, AVG. ARTICLES, which indicates the average number of articles regarding immigration published per month across all the newspaper content analyzed in this study. This measure ranges from 11 to 59, with a mean value of 25. The second primary independent variable of interest is BORDER STATE, which takes the value of 1 if a respondent resides in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas, or Florida and 0 otherwise. We include this variable to discern whether geographic differences exist in individual-level attitudes toward immigration (e.g., Burns and Gimpel, 2000). As outlined in $H_3$, we expect

\footnote{We also estimate the models using an alternative measure of media coverage in the form of percent change in monthly media coverage in 2006 compared to the average media coverage in 2005. The results using this alternative measure are consistent with the results presented herein.}
the “effect” of residing in a border state or nonborder state on ranking immigration as a MIP to be “conditioned” on media coverage of immigration. To empirically evaluate this hypothesis, we include an interaction between BORDER STATE and AVG. ARTICLES, represented by ARTN*BORDER.

In accordance with H3, we expect that respondents who reside in a border state may be more likely to perceive immigration as an MIP than those residing in nonborder states, unless media coverage of the issue is heightened. When immigration is receiving significant media attention, we expect those residing in nonborder states to exhibit opinions regarding immigration that are similar to those of border state residents.

In addition to the variables of primary interest, the model also includes a measure of individuals’ perceptions of the U.S. economic status. ECONOMY is a categorical variable that rates the economic conditions in the United States as follows: 1—poor, 2—only fair, 3—good, and 4—excellent. We control for economic evaluations based on the argument that one’s perceptions of the economy may be associated with the perceived importance of the issue of immigration (Burns and Gimpel, 2000; Hood and Morris, 1997).

The 2006 Gallup polls also include information on each respondent’s county of residence. This geographic identifier offers the opportunity to account for characteristics associated with where each respondent resides. Extant literature suggests that the percentage of foreign-born individuals residing in an area negatively influences attitudes toward immigration (Hood and Morris, 1998). As such, we include a county-level contextual indicator of the percent foreign born % FOR. BORN. Individuals residing in areas with a sizable foreign-born population may be more likely to perceive immigration as one of the nation’s most important problems.

The models also include a series of individual-level control variables: age, sex, education, partisan affiliation, and political ideology. AGE is a continuous variable, ranging from 18 to 99. This variable is included based on previous findings suggesting that individual-level age is associated with attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy (e.g., Espenshade and Calhoun, 1993). Additionally, Espenshade and Calhoun (1993) find gender differences in individual-level immigration attitudes; thus, the models account for the gender of respondents. A respondent’s sex is represented by FEMALE, which is coded 1 if a respondent is female and 0 if a respondent is male. Extant research also indicates that as education increases, the likelihood of supporting restrictive immigration policies decreases (Citrin et al., 1997; Hood and Morris, 1998). Thus, the models include controls for

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4 The observed value of the foreign-born measure ranges from 0.42 to 50.9 percent; its mean value is 8.2. We estimated the models including several measures of ethnic context: percent Latino, change in the Latino population (1990–2000), and the change in the foreign-born population (1990–2000). For each, the results are consistent.

5 Optimally, our models would include indicators on individual-level political knowledge and/or media consumption; Gallup does not include measures of these concepts across the 12-month surveys utilized.
education status, measured by a categorical variable ranging from 1 to 4, where higher values reflect a greater level of educational attainment. Moreover, public opinion research suggests that individual-level partisanship and ideology are associated with attitudes toward immigration-related policy issues (Citrin, Reingold, and Green, 1990; Citrin et al., 1997; Hood and Morris, 1997, 1998). Thus, the models include a series of binary indicators to account for a respondent’s partisan affiliation and ideology. Ideology is measured by two binary indicators: CONSERVATIVE and MODERATE, with the baseline category being those identifying as liberal. Partisan affiliation is measured by two binary indicators, REPUBLICAN and INDEPENDENT, where Democrat serves as the baseline category. Finally, each model includes a series of month dummy variables, with December serving as the baseline category. We include month dummy variables to control for variability in factors unaccounted for in the model that may influence the perceived importance of immigration (Beck, Katz, and Tucker, 1998).

Public Opinion and Media Coverage of Immigration

As outlined in H1, we argue that individuals are most likely to identify immigration as an MIP as the media’s attention to the issue increases. To evaluate this hypothesis, we begin by considering basic descriptive statistics on media coverage of immigration and public attitudes toward immigration, presented in Figure 1. The top panel of Figure 1 plots the average number of articles published by month from January–December 2006 among all the newspapers included in our analysis. The bottom panel of Figure 1 plots the proportion of Gallup respondents—in border and nonborder states—that identify immigration as one of the most important problems by month. The most striking feature of Figure 1 is the degree to which public attention—in both border and nonborder states—to immigration and media coverage of immigration move together over time. Most notably, as media coverage of immigration spikes in April 2006, public perception of immigration as one of the most important problems also surges to the highest level of this 12-month period of time. Indeed, the proportion of respondents in border and nonborder states that perceive immigration as an MIP increases from approximately 6 percent in March 2006 to over 20 percent in April 2006. Additionally, as media attention devoted to immigration begins to recede after June 2006, the proportion of respondents identifying immigration as an MIP likewise begins to decline. Finally, the bottom figure demonstrates that in most instances, respondents residing in border states are more likely to identify immigration as an MIP than are respondents residing in nonborder states.

Next, we empirically evaluate the relationship between media coverage of immigration and individual-level attitudes regarding the importance of immigration. Table 1 presents the logistic regression results for the
model—Model 1—predicting individual-level perception of immigration as one of the most important problems facing the nation.\textsuperscript{6}

The coefficients on the \textit{AVG. ARTICLES} measure is positively and significantly related to individual-level ratings of immigration as the most important problem. Substantively, this indicates that as media attention given to immigration increases, the probability of individuals identifying immigration as one of the nation’s most important problems likewise increases; this supports our expectations presented in H\textsubscript{1}. More specifically, as media cov-

\textsuperscript{6}We use the Huber/White/sandwich estimation (Huber, 1967), which adjusts the variance-covariance matrix to correct for heteroscedasticity and serial dependency. We also estimated each model as a random intercept model allowing the intercept to vary across an aggregate unit (i.e., counties). The results are consistent.
Average of immigration increases from its minimum to maximum value, the probability of identifying immigration as one of the MIPs increases by 0.35 [0.26, 0.44] from 0.08 to 0.43. The 95 percent confidence interval

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**TABLE 1**

Immigration as MIP and Media Coverage of Immigration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Model 1</th>
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<td>Avg. articles</td>
<td>0.044**</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.211**</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.047**</td>
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<td>Art*Border</td>
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<td><strong>Contextual Attributes</strong></td>
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<td>Border state</td>
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<td>% For. born</td>
<td>0.022**</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.108**</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.016**</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.073**</td>
<td>0.031</td>
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<td><strong>Personal Attributes</strong></td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>—0.296**</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td>—0.021**</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>—0.299**</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td>—0.021**</td>
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<td>0.088**</td>
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<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.086**</td>
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<td>—0.030**</td>
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<td>—0.145**</td>
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<td>0.107</td>
<td>0.055**</td>
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<td>0.107</td>
<td>0.055**</td>
<td>0.009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
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<td>0.096</td>
<td>0.049**</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.637**</td>
<td>0.096</td>
<td>0.050**</td>
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<td>Conservative</td>
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<td>0.136</td>
<td>0.077**</td>
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<td>0.987**</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>0.076**</td>
<td>0.012</td>
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<td>0.136</td>
<td>0.032**</td>
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<td>0.438**</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>0.032**</td>
<td>0.011</td>
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<td>Economy</td>
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<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.072**</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.317**</td>
<td>0.046</td>
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<td>February</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>0.259</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.258</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.021</td>
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<td>March</td>
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<td>0.184</td>
<td>—0.009</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>—0.150</td>
<td>0.185</td>
<td>—0.008</td>
<td>0.012</td>
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<td>May</td>
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<td>0.126</td>
<td>—0.005</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>—0.004</td>
<td>0.008</td>
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<td>June</td>
<td>1.251**</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>0.138**</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>1.256**</td>
<td>0.172</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>1.090**</td>
<td>0.167</td>
<td>0.114**</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>1.091**</td>
<td>0.167</td>
<td>0.116**</td>
<td>0.024</td>
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<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>0.649**</td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td>0.059**</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.650**</td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td>0.060**</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>0.974**</td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>0.098**</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.977**</td>
<td>0.187</td>
<td>0.100**</td>
<td>0.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>0.585**</td>
<td>0.210</td>
<td>0.053**</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.592**</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.054**</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>0.670**</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>0.064**</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.699**</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>0.066**</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>0.841**</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>0.081**</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.840**</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>0.082**</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>—6.324**</td>
<td>0.326</td>
<td>—6.384**</td>
<td>0.330</td>
<td>731.58**</td>
<td>729.67**</td>
<td>9,877</td>
<td>9,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald χ²</td>
<td>731.58**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>729.67**</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>N cases</td>
<td>9,877</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9,877</td>
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</table>

*=p<0.05; **=p<0.01.

The coefficients are logit estimates with Huber-White standard errors clustered at the county level. % Δ Pr gives the change in predicted probability of indicating immigration as the most important issue facing the United States as each variable changes from its minimum to maximum value. The standard errors (S.E.) on the % Δ Pr are also presented. The change in predicted probability estimates for “Border State,” “Avg. Articles,” and “Art*Border” are not displayed given that with interactions the impact of one variable is dependent on the value of another variable. The temporal dummy variable for April is dropped from the analysis due to collinearity.

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We calculate predicted probabilities based on this scenario: moderate-independent, male, with some college experience, rates the U.S. economy as “only fair,” with age and county-level percent foreign born set to the mean.
presented in brackets indicates the difference is statistically significant.\(^8\) To place this into context, with every one standard deviation increase in the average number of articles published per month (14 articles), the probability of identifying immigration as one of the MIPs facing the nation increases by 0.10. These estimates demonstrate that media attention given to immigration influences public perception of the importance of this issue. Therefore, at the peak of immigration coverage in 2006, public concern over immigration was also likely at its pinnacle.

Next, we consider differences in coverage of immigration between media outlets located in border versus nonborder states. As stated in \(H_2\), we contend that media outlets in border states offer a higher volume of coverage of immigration than media outlets in nonborder states. Figure 2 presents a graph of media coverage of immigration in border and nonborder states. This graph plots the average number of articles published by month between January and December 2006 for the sample of newspapers in this study, differentiated by border location.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, media outlets in border states offer a higher volume of average coverage of immigration than do nonborder state media. Moreover, we see a dramatic increase in the amount of media coverage on immigration during the time period of the mass immigration rallies in April 2006; this holds for media outlets located in both border and nonborder states. However, media outlets in border states offered more coverage during the apex of media coverage of immigration in April and May 2006 than did nonborder media outlets. They also published a greater number of stories on

\(^8\)When the 95 percent confidence interval does not include the value of 0, the change in probability is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
immigration in the months before and after this surge. To empirically test H_2, we calculate a t test comparing the average number of articles published by border and nonborder states in 2006.\textsuperscript{9} This test indicates a statistically significant difference between nonborder and border state newspapers (t = −2.73, p = 0.007). Substantively, nonborder state media outlets publish significantly fewer articles on immigration than do border state media.

Thus far, we have shown that when the media devotes greater attention to immigration, the public is more likely to identify immigration as one of the nation’s most important problems. Additionally, we have demonstrated how media outlets in border states publish a higher volume of immigration stories than do outlets in nonborder states. This leads us to our last hypothesis. In H_3, we propose that the impact of where one resides on rating immigration as an MIP is conditioned on the volume of media coverage devoted to immigration. We test H_3 by reestimating Model 1 in Table 1, and this time we include a variable denoting whether a respondent resides in a border or a nonborder state and an interaction between border state residency and media coverage of immigration. The results are presented in Model 2 of Table 1.\textsuperscript{10}

As outlined, we hypothesize that the “effect” of residing in a border versus a nonborder state on ranking immigration as an MIP is “conditioned” on the volume of media coverage given to immigration-related issues. To assess whether the “effect” of residing in a border versus a nonborder state on ranking immigration as an MIP is “conditioned” on the volume of media coverage given to immigration-related issues, we turn to the interaction between border state and media coverage of immigration ART* BORDER. As Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006) and Kam and Franzese (2007) note, the standard errors on interaction terms are conditional, meaning there are as many standard errors as there are unique values of BORDER STATE and AVG. ARTICLES. As such, we calculated the marginal effect (and conditional standard errors) of BORDER STATE on ranking immigration as an MIP conditioned on media coverage of immigration (Brambor, Clark, and Golder, 2006; Kam and Franzese, 2007). The results indicate the relationship between border state residence and attitudes toward immigration is statistically significant across most of the range of the AVG. ARTICLES measure.\textsuperscript{11} Sub-

\textsuperscript{9}In addition to the t test, we estimated a statistical model of coverage; the Poisson regression results are consistent with Figure 2 and the t test. Media outlets in border states published significantly more articles on immigration per month than did media outlets in nonborder states. The results are available from the authors.

\textsuperscript{10}Nagler (1994) argues logit may be too inflexible in that it assumes that the Pr(Y = 1) is 0.05. A potential alternative is Scobit, especially when a model includes an interaction. We estimated the model using Scobit—a likelihood ratio test determines that the \(\hat{a}\) is not significantly different from 1; thus, Scobit offers no improvement over logit. The Scobit estimates are available on request.

\textsuperscript{11}Specifically, the relationship is statistically significant from the minimum value on AVG. ARTICLES to one standard deviation about the mean value of AVG. ARTICLES. This indicates that when the volume of coverage is at its highest, there is nonsignificant difference as a function of border residency.
stantively, this suggests the “effect” of residing in a border state or a non-border state on ranking immigration as an MIP varies as a function of media coverage on immigration, which supports H3.

To demonstrate the conditional relationship between border state residency and attitudes toward immigration, we rely on a series of predicted probability estimates. When media coverage of immigration is at its lowest value, the probability of an individual residing in a nonborder state identifying immigration as the MIP facing the country is 0.08. When media coverage increases to its maximum value, the probability of an individual residing in a nonborder state ranking immigration as the MIP facing the nation is 0.45. Thus, the change in the probability of identifying immigration as an important problem increases by 0.37 [0.28, 0.46] as the media’s focus on immigration shifts. Additionally, the 95 percent confidence interval presented in brackets indicates the difference is statistically significant. Among individuals residing in border states, when the average number of immigration articles is at its lowest value, the likelihood of rating immigration as the MIP is 0.13. Yet when media coverage increases to its maximum value, the probability goes to 0.46. For border state residents, varying the amount of media coverage on immigration (from low to high) increases the probability of ranking immigration as an MIP by 0.33 [0.21, 0.45]. These probability estimates suggest that greater media coverage of immigration has a larger impact on the immigration opinions for nonborder as opposed to border residents.

These results highlight two features of the public’s perception of immigration. First, public opinion on immigration varies according to the amount of news coverage on immigration. Regardless of whether one resides in a border or a nonborder state, when the media’s coverage of immigration rises, the probability of perceiving immigration as an MIP likewise increases. As our findings demonstrate, in the time period surrounding the immigration rallies and protests, immigration became a major focus of the media. This resulted in the U.S. public perceiving immigration as an MIP. Second, the significant interaction between border state residency and media coverage of immigration suggests that when media coverage of immigration increases, the gap in the perception of the importance of immigration among individuals residing in nonborder versus border states decreases. When media coverage of immigration is low, the difference in probability of ranking immigration as an MIP among individuals residing in border versus nonborder states is 0.05 [0.03, 0.08]; however, when the average number of articles on immigration is at its highest value, the difference in probability for a border and a nonborder resident is merely 0.02 [−0.08, 0.11]. The 95 percent confidence intervals presented in brackets indicate there is a significant difference in immigration attitudes between respondents residing border versus nonborder states when media coverage is low; however, when media coverage is high, the difference in attitudes is no longer statistically significant. This finding is line with the research distinguishing between
obtrusive and nonobtrusive issues. Since those living in nonborder states are not exposed to as much immigration coverage and because immigration is not a daily immediate concern to them, an increase in media exposure has a greater impact on their attitudes than it does on those living in border states.

As noted, research on the effects of media messages implicitly suggests that media coverage of immigration influences attitudes on immigration (e.g., Gilens 1999). Still, some may find it difficult to believe that media coverage has such a strong effect. Another way to make our case is to consider alternative explanations. Skeptics might argue that real-world context and events related to immigration (e.g., increased foreign-born populations, the legislative debate on immigration, or the rallies in April 2006) are the only factors that influence public opinion on immigration as opposed to media coverage. We now consider these explanations.

If the growth of the foreign-born population is the source of immigration attitudes, then an individual’s perception about the issue must either come from exposure to this group or from conversations with others (Gilens, 1999). To account for exposure, we controlled for county-level ethnic context. If exposure to this population explains variability in attitudes toward immigration and not media messages, then accounting for ethnic context should negate the influence of media coverage (Gilens, 1999). However, the results presented in Table 1 indicate that even after controlling for ethnic context, media coverage of immigration is significantly associated with attitudes toward immigration. Standardized logit coefficients indicate that with a one standard deviation increase in media coverage of immigration there is a 0.30 standard deviation increase in the log odds of a respondent identifying immigration as an MIP, while a one standard deviation increase in the foreign-born population results in only a 0.09 standard deviation increase in the log odds of indicating immigration as an MIP. With regard to receiving information via conversations with others, Gilens (1999) notes that the media still has an indirect effect, given that conversation partners likely arrived at their own conclusions based on media messages.

One could argue that events relating to the immigration issue (i.e., protests and legislative debate) have driven public perceptions of immigration and that media coverage is merely a reflection of events. However, it is important to note that the professional routines of journalists result in selection biases in favor of sensational stories (Dunaway, 2008; Hamilton, 2004; Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn, 2002; Kerbel, 2000). Though important issues regarding immigration happen on a regular basis, only the most sensational events garner coverage. Thus, if public opinion about immigration was purely event driven, we would likely see a very different (perhaps more consistent) pattern of opinion on the issue. Simply put, the degree to which people are concerned about the issue varies with media coverage of the issue, not with real-world patterns relevant to opinion formation about immigration (i.e., changes in immigrant populations, terrorist threat level, or immigrant crime statistics). See Groeling and Baum
(2008) for a discussion of the discrepancy between events and news media reporting.

Finally, we discuss results of other independent variables in the models. First, the probability of identifying immigration as an MIP is 0.29 for a conservative and 0.13 for a moderate; the likelihood of a Republican identifying immigration as an MIP is 0.24 and 0.13 for an independent. Age also increases the likelihood of identifying immigration as an MIP. With a one standard deviation increase in age, there is a 0.03 higher probability of an individual citing immigration as an MIP. Third, the probability of those with a graduate degree citing immigration as an MIP is 0.05 lower than those with a high school degree or less. Finally, as the foreign-born population increases, the likelihood of identifying immigration as an MIP increases.

Conclusion

This research provides an opportunity to contribute to the literature on immigration attitudes by examining what we believe to be an important, yet neglected explanatory variable—media coverage. The manner in which immigration surged into the national headlines in 2006 provides the chance to empirically evaluate the connection between shifts in media coverage and public opinion toward a highly controversial issue. We find that, consistent with agenda-setting theory, amplified media coverage of immigration leads to a heightened perception among the public that immigration is an MIP. Moreover, we find regional variation in the amount of media coverage devoted to immigration. The volume of immigration coverage in border states is significantly greater than the amount of immigration coverage in nonborder states.

Finally, although immigration is inherently a local issue in the sense that some communities (e.g., border states) are more affected by it than others (e.g., nonborder states), we find that the way the media devoted attention to this issue affected public perception of the issue in both border and nonborder states, though the effect was different. Higher volumes of news coverage of immigration lead to a more dramatic shift of opinion among nonborder state residents when compared to border state residents. Importantly, this reveals that agenda setting operates differently for issues with varying levels of salience, providing us with a more refined understanding of agenda setting and its effect.

REFERENCES


