Spatial Proximity to the U.S.-Mexico Border and Newspaper Coverage of Immigration Issues
Regina P. Branton and Johanna Dunaway
Political Research Quarterly 2009; 62; 289 originally published online Sep 4, 2008;
DOI: 10.1177/1065912908319252

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://prq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/62/2/289
Spatial Proximity to the U.S.–Mexico Border and Newspaper Coverage of Immigration Issues

Regina P. Branton
Rice University

Johanna Dunaway
Louisiana State University

This article examines how geographic proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border influences newspaper coverage of immigration issues. The authors investigate two questions: Do media organizations spatially proximate to the border offer more frequent coverage of Latino immigration than media organizations farther removed from the border? Do media organizations spatially proximate to the border offer more frequent coverage of the negative aspects of immigration than media organizations farther removed from the border? We find that news organizations closer to the border generate a higher volume of articles about Latino immigration, articles featuring the negative aspects of immigration, and articles regarding illegal immigration.

Keywords: immigration; news; media coverage; institutional structure; spatial context

On August 12, 2005, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson declared a state of emergency in four counties along the U.S.–Mexico border, claiming that the region “has been devastated by the ravages of terror and human smuggling, drug smuggling, kidnapping, murder, the destruction of property, and the death of livestock.”¹ The following Monday, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano followed suit. Both governors described the declaration of a state of emergency as a desperate attempt to get the attention of the federal government, and to place immigration at the top of the national policy agenda. In June of 2006, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger publicly demanded Congressional action on the issue of illegal immigration. While immigration and other border-related issues have been of major concern to border communities for some time, until recently, they had yet to gain the amount of national attention needed to stimulate action on the part of the federal government (Dunaway, Abrajano, and Branton 2007).² We suggest that this is due, at least in part, to the fact that local media outlets close to the U.S.–Mexico border provide more regular coverage of immigration and other border issues than their geographically distant counterparts. Furthermore, we speculate that the increased salience of these matters close to the border creates a heightened sensitivity to border concerns among citizens, who in turn put pressure on local and state officials to take action. As a result, the geographic concentration in media coverage exacerbates the disconnection between local and national policy agendas with regard to these issues.

In this article, we attempt to address the lack of attention scholars have given to the relationship between geographic context and media coverage of political issues. We focus specifically on the policy area of immigration, and examine how geographic proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border influences media attention to these issues. Building on a spatial-economic explanation of news, we investigate two questions: (1) Do media organizations spatially proximate to the border offer more frequent coverage of the Latino immigration than media organizations farther removed from the border? (2) Do media organizations spatially proximate to the border offer more frequent coverage of the negative aspects of immigration than media organizations farther removed from the border? To address these questions, we examine the volume and nature of media coverage of immigration as a function of geographic spatial proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border.

Regina P. Branton, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Rice University; e-mail: branton@rice.edu.

Johanna Dunaway, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Louisiana State University; e-mail: j dunaway@lsu.edu.

Authors’ Note: We would like to thank Martin Johnson, Bob Stein, and the anonymous reviewers for comments on various versions of this article.
Agenda Setting and Issue Attributes

The literature regarding the impact of the media illustrates the effect media coverage can have on political attitudes (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982; Baumgartner and Jones 1995; Zaller 1992; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). Agenda-setting theory describes the process by which the news media, by giving more salience to certain events and issues over others, influences the public’s perception about which issues are most important. Because of increased media attention, the public believes the issues receiving the majority of the coverage to be most important (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Baumgartner and Jones 1995; Zaller 1992). Researchers have proposed the notion of attribute agenda setting and attribute priming as extensions of agenda-setting theory. Attribute agenda setting suggests that if the media choose to emphasize certain characteristics of an issue in news coverage, these aspects of the issue will become more salient in the public mind (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan 2002; Soroka 2002). Attribute priming suggests that due to attribute agenda setting, the issue attributes emphasized in the news will become a factor in how the issue as a whole is evaluated by the public (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan 2002). Attribute agenda setting and attribute priming suggest that by highlighting the negative aspects associated with immigration and Latino immigration, local media outlets increase the salience of these negative aspects in the minds of citizens and, by doing so, influence their evaluation of the issue of immigration as a whole.

In this study, we focus on the impact of geospatial contextual attributes on news coverage of Latino immigration issues. We argue that geographic proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border influences local news coverage of immigration. Specifically, we posit that the economic needs of local media outlets and perceptions of audience preferences prompt them to offer the most sensational and most local news possible. In a border-proximate environment, this leads to increased coverage of border issues and, in particular, a larger volume of negative and sensational border stories. Furthermore, we argue that this is important because of attribute agenda-setting and attribute priming effects.

A Spatial-Economic Explanation of Local Media Coverage of Immigration

The expectation that there is increased local media coverage of Latino immigration issues in areas of close proximity to the border is supported by work in communications and journalism. This work finds a positive relationship between proximity of events and the selection of stories covered by local news. According to this literature, events that occur “close to home” receive more coverage than events occurring farther away (Adams 1986; Bendix and Liebler 1999; Martin 1988; Molotch and Lester 1975).

A primary reason for this is that news making is a for-profit business (McManus 1994; Hamilton 2004), and local news itself is a product for which demand is geographically defined. Because local media outlets know that their profit depends on meeting the preferences of their audiences, perceptions of audience preferences influence the news product (Hamilton 2004). In any geographic market, there is an audience for local news. In short, people (or at least a significant subset of people) want to know what is going on in their surrounding community (Hamilton 2004).

The strong demand for local news gives a hint as to why local television stations and newspapers try to package their news by appealing to the interests of those in the immediate community. Local television stations and newspapers often market their news product as a vital source of community information. As Hamilton (2004) notes, evidence of this is seen in the marketing strategies of many local news programs, which offer phrases such as “Channel X, your source for local news,” and “Channel X, where local news comes first.” There is also a well-documented trend of newspapers’ efforts to retain local audiences. As citizens move away from the central city into suburbs, news about the central city becomes less relevant, and these suburbanites begin to turn away from the large urban metro daily and opt for smaller suburban newspapers. To combat this, many large urban newspapers have begun to change their coverage patterns to encompass community factors of interest to suburban populations (Kaniss 1991). In sum, for local television stations, stories about local issues mean more ratings, and for local newspapers, stories about local issues mean more readers. Taken together, these facts highlight why it is in the interest of local media outlets to “do what they do best,” by concentrating on issues and events most salient to the surrounding audiences, their geographic community.

This means that we can expect local media outlets to focus on the stories that are both sensational and of broad interest to consumers in the surrounding area, making an effort to appeal to the largest possible portion of their local community. Applying this reasoning...
to the research question addressed here, it seems logical to expect that news outlets closer to the U.S.–Mexico border offer a greater volume of immigration-related news than newspaper outlets farther removed from the border, as immigration related issues are “local” to border communities. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** The news provided by media organizations spatially proximate to the border is expected to contain more frequent coverage of Latino immigration issues than news provided by media organizations farther removed from the border.

Beyond a general increase in volume of coverage of border issues, we also expect that economic motivations will affect the volume of negative coverage provided by local media outlets. This expectation comes from a long line of research that demonstrates the tendency of local news outlets to rely on a “crime news script,” which is characterized by a disproportionate amount of reporting on violent crimes and a tendency to feature nonwhites as the perpetrator of the crimes (Entman 1990; Gilliam et al. 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). Furthermore, nonwhites are most often featured as violent perpetrators in the news (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982). The extant research tells us that minority group members (African Americans, in particular) are depicted in the news as “violent and threatening toward whites, self-interested and demanding of the body politic—continually causing or being victimized by a problem that seems endless” (Entman et al. 1998, 19).

These trends extend to media depictions of Latinos as well. A study of national network news by the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) demonstrates that aside from Latinos generally being underrepresented in the news, “immigration and crime have been the dominant topics for Latino stories over the past 10 years. Out of 1201 stories, these two topics have accounted for 36 percent of coverage.” Similarly, out of the 115 Latino-based stories aired on the networks in 2004, 31 featured immigrants, including illegal border crossings. The NAHJ report concludes that “too often Latinos are portrayed as a problem people living on the fringes of U.S. society. Rarely do we see stories about the positive contributions of Latinos.”

Gilliam, Valentino, and Beckmann (2002) note that local news reliance on the crime news script is economically motivated. The heavy reliance on crime news extends beyond television to newspaper coverage. As stated in a 1999 report by the American Society of Newspaper Editors,

> Crime coverage is tailor made for newspapers. It is an excellent example of the definition of news—something that just happened that the public doesn’t know about. It is still the exception: Most of us don’t rob banks, so when somebody does, we call that news. Crime coverage is relatively easy. There are lots of documents in a central location and public employees to use as sources. And many of the documents are privileged, allowing us to report on them without fear of lawsuit. The best crime stories have what every reporter looks for when he or she sits down to write—drama, conflict, good, and evil. (Denton 1999)

Thus, the economic motivation to focus on local issues coupled with the sensational nature and low cost of using crime news script coverage leads to two broad expectations. First, we will see a greater volume of local news coverage of border-related issues in communities closer to the border. Second, we will see a greater volume of news stories that focus on the negative aspects of immigration (e.g., arrests, violence, drugs, human trafficking) in communities closer to the border.

**Hypothesis 2a:** The news provided by media organizations spatially proximate to the border is expected to contain more frequent coverage of the negative aspects of immigration than news provided by media organizations farther removed from the border.

**Hypothesis 2b:** The news provided by media organizations spatially proximate to the border is expected to contain more frequent coverage of the negative aspects of Latino immigration more frequently than news provided by media organizations farther removed from the border.

When considering proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border, a specific aspect of immigration deserves special attention: illegal immigration. Although in recent years, national surveys indicate that illegal immigration was not ranked highly among the nation’s most important problems, it has for a long time been a central policy concern to citizens living in communities near the border (Dunaway, Abrajano, and Branton 2007). Many in these communities associate illegal immigration with drugs, crime, human smuggling,
and trespassing. Beyond that, some argue that illegal border crossing creates economic tension by introducing competition for jobs and is a burden on local services such as schools, hospitals, and police (e.g., Borjas 1999). Because it is such a sensational, largely negative, and salient local issue, we argue that the economic incentives of news organizations close to the border will prompt them to cover the illegal aspect of immigration more frequently. Furthermore, we suspect that they will offer more frequent coverage of illegal immigration featuring Latinos. We offer the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3a:** The news provided by media organizations spatially proximate to the border is expected to contain more frequent coverage of illegal immigration than the news provided by media organizations farther removed from the border.

**Hypothesis 3b:** The news provided by media organizations spatially proximate to the border is expected to contain more frequent coverage of Latino illegal immigration than the news provided by media organizations farther removed from the border.

We also offer expectations about coverage of immigration issues based on the different attributes of news organizations. To this point, we have made the argument that economic pressures and profit concerns are the driving forces behind local media outlets’ focus on local issues, the focus on the negative aspects of local issues, and the negative and sensational crime news script. Previous research suggests publicly traded corporate news organizations are more concerned with profit making than are privately controlled news organizations (Dunaway forthcoming; Hamilton 2004; Page 1996). In a privately controlled media organization, managers are subordinate to the preferences of a single owner, which might be driven by motivations other than profit maximization (i.e., ideological or journalistic goals). Furthermore, private owners have more opportunity and ability to exert control over the news content (Bovitz, Druckman, and Lupia 2002).

Alternatively, under the public corporate ownership structure, owners are a diverse set of multiple shareholders who are limited in their ability to direct and interfere with the management (Demsetz and Lehn 1985; Hansmann 1988; Agrawal and Knoeber 1996; Himmelberg, Hubbard, and Palia 1999). Assuming a lack of any unifying normative preference among an otherwise diverse set of shareholders, public corporate ownership should be less likely to be driven by anything other than a shared and easily monitored profit-making objective (Dunaway forthcoming). Furthermore, Hamilton (2004) explicitly argues that publicly traded media corporations are primarily motivated by profit maximization. Since corporately owned media organizations are more profit oriented, we expect all the effects that occur as a result of economic motivations to be more pronounced in the coverage offered by corporate media organizations when compared to privately owned media organizations. Explicitly stated,

**Hypothesis 4:** Corporately owned media organizations are expected to produce more stories focusing on Latino immigration, illegal immigration, and the negative aspects of immigration than privately owned media organizations.

**Data and Analysis**

In this project, we examine California newspaper coverage of immigration and immigration related issues. We chose to focus on news coverage in California for three reasons. First, California is a border state. Second, California has many news outlets that are archived online making it easily available for content analysis. Third, California newspapers are geographically distributed throughout the state (i.e., there are multiple newspapers located close to the border and farther removed from the border), making it possible to examine the impact of proximity to the Mexico border. Additionally, we chose to focus solely on English-language news coverage, omitting Spanish language news coverage, for both substantive and practical reasons. From a substantive standpoint, since we are interested in how media coverage of immigration issues might influence the attitudes of those citizens who could conceivably feel threatened by an influx of immigrants, and not immigrants and Latino immigrants themselves, English-language news outlets are the appropriate focus of our analysis.

From a practical standpoint, there is a limited number of Spanish-language newspapers in the state of California, and a large portion of these newspapers are geographically isolated to areas more proximal to the border, thus making it difficult to determine if geography matters in the Spanish-language news coverage of immigration.
The data used in this project are culled from content analysis of forty-seven California newspapers. Using America’s Newspapers online archive, we constructed a data set indicating the number of immigration-related newspaper articles printed on a monthly basis for each newspaper between March 1, 2004, and March 1, 2005. The completed data set includes comprehensive information on 1,538 news stories that focus on the issue of immigration.

As noted previously, this study examines three aspects of California news media coverage of immigration-related issues: the volume of coverage featuring Latinos, the volume of negative coverage, and the volume of coverage featuring illegal immigration. First, to examine the frequency of newspaper coverage of Latino immigration, we construct a count measure of the number of articles published per news organization per month that focus on Latino immigration. This variable ranges from zero to twenty-seven stories per month. Second, we examine the volume of negative coverage of immigration. Again, this is a count variable reflecting the number of negative news stories regarding immigration per month by news organization, which ranges from zero to twenty-nine stories. Next, we examine the number of negative news stories per month by news organization that focus on the negative aspects of Latino immigration specifically. This too is a count variable reflecting the number of negative news stories regarding Latino immigration, which ranges from zero to seventeen stories per month.

We also examine one particularly negative and salient focus of news coverage of immigration: illegal immigration. To account for volume of illegal immigration coverage, we use a measure of the number of articles on illegal immigration, which ranges from zero to twenty-six articles per month. To account for the volume of coverage of illegal immigration that deals specifically with Latinos, we rely on an estimate of the number of articles per paper per month that focus on illegal immigration with regard to Latinos, which ranges from zero to sixteen.

Additionally, we compiled spatially referenced data and demographic attributes for each county in California, which was generated using GIS software. The spatial data of particular interest is the county-level spatial proximity to the border of Mexico. The demographic data of interest include the partisan makeup, the socioeconomic makeup, and the Latino composition of every county in California. The content analysis data and the aggregate-level spatial and demographic data are merged to account for the contextual environment in which a news organization operates.

One of the principal independent variables of interest is spatial proximity to the Mexico border (distance to border), which is measured as the mileage from each county to the border of Mexico. As noted previously, given that local news outlets focus on local issues, newspapers closer to the Mexico border offer a larger volume of immigration-related coverage because immigration-related issues are “local” to border communities. To obtain estimates of this spatial distance, we used GIS to calculate the distance from the longitudinal and latitudinal center of each county to four prevalent crossing points from west to east along the Mexico-U.S. border: Tijuana, Tecate, Mexicali, and Vicente. The shortest distance to the border among these four calculations is used to create the measure of distance. The actual observed value of proximity to the border ranges from 38 miles to 734 miles. The average distance to the border is 427 miles, and the median distance to the border is 504 miles.

The model also includes several additional aggregate-level indicators: ethnic context, socioeconomic climate, and partisan context. Ethnic context (Latino) is measured as the percentage of the Latino population within each county. Ethnic context is incorporated into the model to account for the impact of the size of the Latino population on the coverage of immigration and immigration-related issues. The model also includes the quadratic of the Latino population (Latino squared) to control for a nonlinear relationship between ethnic context and newspaper coverage. The quadratic is included to account for newspaper organizations’ response to a growing consumer base.

Socioeconomic context is measured here as the percentage of the county’s population that is college educated. This measure is included to control for variability in the type of coverage in response to the affluence of the audience. County-level partisan context is measured by the percentage of the vote share within a county cast in support of the Republican candidate (president vote). The county-level partisan makeup is included to control for the impact of partisan leaning on newspaper coverage of immigration.

The model also includes two newspaper level attributes: ownership and circulation size. Our second primary variable of interest is an indicator of the ownership of each newspaper. This indicator, corporate, is coded 1 if the newspaper is owned by a publicly traded corporation and 0 if the newspaper is
privately owned. Finally, circulation size is included in the model to control for the size, variability in capability of producing a high volume of stories, and resources of newspaper organizations.\(^{18}\)

We use a negative binomial panel regression with random effects to estimate the Latino immigration model and both models regarding negative aspects of immigration. This technique addresses three distinct data issues: (1) count-dependent variables, (2) overdispersion of these variables, and (3) the longitudinal nature of the data. This results indicate that this approach fits the data extremely well for these models (Wald chi-square \(p < .000\)).\(^{19}\) This estimator is appropriate, as it accounts for the structure of the data and the fact that the dependent variable is truncated at zero (i.e., there are no negative values for the number of articles).\(^{20}\)

Likelihood ratio tests for both of the illegal immigration models indicate that the pooled estimate is preferred to the panel regression. As such, we use the standard pooled negative binomial regression to estimate both models regarding illegal immigration.

**Newspaper Coverage of Immigration**

Table 1 presents the negative binomial regression estimates regarding the volume, nature, and type of printed media coverage of immigration and immigration-related issues. First, we consider the impact of spatial proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border on the volume of coverage regarding Latino immigration, which is presented in the first column of estimates. The significant and negative parameter estimate indicates that media outlets located spatially closer to the border print more articles regarding Latino immigration than media outlets farther removed from the border, which supports Hypothesis 1. In fact, with every additional hundred miles removed from the border, the volume of coverage of Latino immigration decreases by 18 percent.\(^{21}\)

The parameter estimates presented in column 1 also indicate that type of news ownership is significantly and positively related to the coverage of Latino immigration, which lends support to Hypothesis 4. This suggests that corporately owned newspapers offer more frequent coverage of Latino immigration than privately owned media organizations. Substantively, the estimates indicate that corporately owned newspapers produce 68 percent more articles regarding Latino immigration per month when compared to privately owned newspaper outlets.

Table 1 California Print Media Coverage of Immigration and Immigration-Related Issues (Negative Binomial Regression Estimates)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Latino Immigration</th>
<th>Negative Aspects</th>
<th>Latino Negative Aspects</th>
<th>Illegal Immigration</th>
<th>Latino Illegal Immigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contextual factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>-.002** (.000)</td>
<td>-.002*** (.000)</td>
<td>-.003** (.001)</td>
<td>-.003*** (.000)</td>
<td>-.004*** (.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Latino</td>
<td>.152** (.070)</td>
<td>.159** (.077)</td>
<td>.145 (.095)</td>
<td>.164** (.086)</td>
<td>.111 (.113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino squared</td>
<td>-.003** (.001)</td>
<td>-.003*** (.001)</td>
<td>-.003** (.001)</td>
<td>-.003*** (.001)</td>
<td>-.003* (.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College educated</td>
<td>-.032* (.017)</td>
<td>-.037*** (.018)</td>
<td>-.046** (.023)</td>
<td>-.064*** (.019)</td>
<td>-.080*** (.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>-.025** (.010)</td>
<td>-.034** (.001)</td>
<td>-.039*** (.015)</td>
<td>.050*** (.010)</td>
<td>-.058*** (.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper attributes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>.520*** (.192)</td>
<td>.491** (.201)</td>
<td>.683** (.261)</td>
<td>.756*** (.187)</td>
<td>.948*** (.253)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>.002*** (.000)</td>
<td>.002*** (.000)</td>
<td>.002*** (.000)</td>
<td>.002*** (.000)</td>
<td>.001*** (.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.84 (1.55)</td>
<td>2.85* (1.65)</td>
<td>2.55 (2.06)</td>
<td>3.48** (1.74)</td>
<td>4.84** (2.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald</td>
<td>82.53***</td>
<td>98.11***</td>
<td>54.34***</td>
<td>361.22***</td>
<td>278.40***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N cases</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The data set is constructed from the number of articles newspapers published by month. As such, the cases are generated based on the month-by-month analysis of newspaper articles by newspaper.

\*\(p < .10\)  
\*\(p < .05\)  
\**p < .01\)  
\***p < .001\)

Downloaded from http://prq.sagepub.com at RICE UNIV on April 16, 2010
Latino immigration per month than news organizations farther removed from the border. Furthermore, the graph illustrates that corporately owned news organizations produce more articles dealing with Latino immigration per month than privately owned newspapers.

More specifically, the expected number of articles dealing with Latino immigration published by corporate news outlets at the mean distance to the border of Mexico (381 miles) is approximately six per month. At one standard deviation below the mean distance to the border (145 miles), corporate newspapers publish approximately nine articles per month; at one standard deviation above the mean (617 miles), corporate papers publish approximately four articles dealing with Latino immigration per month. The same trend emerges among privately owned news organizations. The expected number of Latino immigration articles printed by privately owned newspapers at the mean distance to the border is four per month; the expected number of articles per month at one standard deviation below the mean distance is six, and the expected number at one standard deviation above the mean is approximately two articles per month. These point estimates clearly demonstrate the impact of distance to the border and newspaper ownership on the volume of coverage of Latino immigration.

As argued previously, economic motivations prompt news outlets proximal to the border to focus on local issues such as Latino immigration and to rely on the crime news script when covering immigration. As such, economic motivations not only lead to increased coverage of Latino immigration but may also influence the nature of the coverage. In an effort to examine this proposal, we address the volume of coverage that focuses on negative aspects of immigration. Column 2 contains the estimates regarding the volume of coverage that focuses on negative aspects of general immigration; column 3 contains estimates for the volume of coverage that focuses on the negative aspects of Latino immigration specifically. Note that the distance measure is significantly and negatively related to both dependent variables. Substantively, this indicates that newspaper outlets closer to the border publish more articles focusing on negative aspects of immigration and more articles focusing on the negative aspects of Latino immigration per month than news outlets farther removed from the border, supporting Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b. For instance, with every additional hundred miles removed from the border, the volume of negative immigration coverage decreases by 18 percent, and the volume of coverage focusing on negative aspects of Latino immigration decreases by 26 percent.

The estimates in column 2 also indicate that media ownership is significantly and positively related to coverage focusing on negative aspects of immigration and coverage of the negative aspects of Latino immigration. Substantively, the findings indicate that...
corporately owned newspapers offer more frequent coverage of the negative aspects of immigration and more frequent coverage of negative aspects of Latino immigration than privately owned media organizations, again supporting Hypothesis 4. More specifically, corporately owned newspapers produce 63 percent more articles that focus on negative aspects of immigration per month when compared to privately owned newspaper outlets. Corporately owned newspapers produce 98 percent more articles that focus on negative aspects of Latino immigration than privately owned newspaper outlets.

To illustrate the impact of spatial proximity to the border and newspaper ownership on volume of coverage focusing on negative aspects of immigration and Latino immigration, we offer Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 plots the volume of articles on the negative aspects of immigration published per month as a function of distance to the border for privately owned news organizations and corporately owned news organizations. Figure 3 plots the volume of articles focusing on negative aspects of Latino immigration as a function of distance to the border. Both figures illustrate that print media outlets more proximal to the border publish more articles focusing on negative aspects of immigration and Latino immigration per month when compared to news organizations farther removed from the border. Furthermore, they demonstrate that corporately owned news organizations produce more articles regarding negative aspects of immigration and Latino immigration per month than privately owned newspapers.

To provide a more detailed discussion of the impact of proximity to the border and newspaper ownership, we again offer some specific point estimates. The expected number of articles dealing with negative aspects of immigration published by corporate news outlets at the mean distance to the border of Mexico (381 miles) is approximately seven per month. At one standard deviation below the mean distance, corporate newspapers publish approximately twelve articles per month; at one standard deviation above the mean, corporately owned papers publish approximately four per month. For privately owned papers located at the mean distance from the border, the expected number of articles focusing on negative aspects of immigration printed is approximately four per month. At one standard deviation below the mean, the expected number of articles is seven per month. At one standard deviation above the mean distance to the border, the expected number of articles per month is approximately two per month.

Similar trends exist with coverage focusing on negative aspects of Latino immigration. The volume of coverage among privately owned media outlets ranges from two articles per month at one standard deviation below the mean to less than one article per month at one standard deviation above the mean. Among corporately owned print media outlets, the volume of coverage featuring negative aspects of

Figure 2
Negative Articles on Immigration by Newspaper Ownership and Distance to the Border

![Graph showing the expected number of articles (per month) as a function of distance to the border for corporate and private newspapers.](http://prq.sagepub.com)
Latino immigration ranges from five articles per month at one standard deviation below the mean to one article per month for outlets located one standard deviation above the mean distance to the border. Together, these calculations again indicate the impact of spatial proximity and ownership on the volume of negative coverage of immigration-related issues.

Finally, the fourth and fifth columns in Table 1 offer the results regarding coverage of illegal immigration, specifically. Column 4 reflects the estimates regarding the volume of coverage of general illegal immigration, and column 5 reflects the estimates for the model of the volume of coverage of illegal immigration regarding Latinos. As noted in the hypothesis section, illegal immigration is a negative and salient issue for communities more proximal to the border. As such, news outlets proximal to the border may offer a greater volume of coverage of illegal immigration generally and more coverage of Latino illegal immigration specifically. Indeed, the results indicate that newspaper outlets closer to the border publish more illegal immigration articles and more Latino illegal immigration articles per month than news outlets farther removed from the border (supporting Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3b). In fact, the volume of coverage of illegal immigration decreases by 26 percent with every hundred-mile increase from the border, and the volume of coverage of Latino illegal immigration decreases by 33 percent with every hundred-mile increase from the border.

Likewise, we find consistent results regarding the impact of ownership on the volume of coverage of illegal immigration and the coverage of Latino illegal immigration. Corporately owned newspapers produce 114 percent more illegal immigration articles per month when compared to privately owned newspaper outlets, and corporately owned newspapers produce 156 percent more Latino-focused illegal immigration articles than privately owned newspaper outlets.

Figure 4 plots the volume of illegal immigration articles published per month as a function of distance to the border for privately owned news organizations and corporately owned news organizations; Figure 5 plots the volume of Latino illegal immigration articles by ownership type. These figures demonstrate that print media outlets more proximal to the border publish more articles than news organizations farther removed from the border. Furthermore, they demonstrate that corporately owned news organizations produce more articles per month than privately owned newspapers.

To provide a more complete picture, we computed expected values at various distances from the border of Mexico. The expected number of illegal immigration articles published by corporate news outlets at the mean distance to the border of Mexico is approximately two articles per month. At one standard deviation below the mean distance, corporate newspapers publish approximately four articles per month; at one standard deviation above the mean, corporately
owned papers publish approximately one illegal immigration article per month. For privately owned papers, the expected number of illegal immigration articles printed per month ranges from two, at one standard deviation below the mean distance, to zero articles per month, at one standard deviation above the mean. The volume of coverage of Latino illegal immigration exhibits a similar trend. The expected number of articles published per month by corporate news outlets at the mean distance to the border of Mexico is approximately one. The volume of coverage increases to three articles per month for media outlets located one standard deviation below the mean distance yet decreases to zero articles printed per month for media outlets one standard deviation above the mean distance to the border.
Before moving to the Conclusion section, we briefly discuss the results for other covariates in the models. First, socioeconomic context is consistently and positively associated with newspaper coverage of immigration. As county-level college education increases, newspaper coverage of immigration generally decreases. In accordance with the intergroup conflict literature, it is plausible that in more affluent contexts, the perceived threat or competition posed by immigration may be lower than in areas that are less affluent; thus, newspaper coverage of this issue is reduced. Second, the findings support the expectation that ethnic context is significantly related to newspaper coverage of immigration. Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship between ethnic context and the volume of immigration coverage is nonlinear in nature. Specifically, as the county-level percent Latino increases, the volume of coverage regarding immigration increases to some point at which coverage begins to decline. For example, the volume of coverage on Latino immigration increases as the Latino population increases to approximately 25 percent, yet as county-level percent Latino exceeds 25 percent, the volume of coverage on Latino immigration begins to decline. This nonlinear relationship is likely because as the Latino context increases, news organizations do not want to alienate a potential consumer group. Finally, the circulation of a newspaper is positively associated with each form of immigration coverage. As intuition would suggest, as the circulation numbers of a newspaper increase, so does their volume of immigration news stories.

Conclusion

In this study, we argue that variability in coverage of immigration issues is related to proximity to the border. We have also suggested a reason for this; the economic incentives of media organizations prompt them to cover immigration- and border-related issues in a particular way. Specifically, we have argued that the pressure for local coverage and sensationalism in the news provided by local news organizations close to the border results in a disproportionate amount of coverage of immigration issues and, perhaps more important, a disproportional amount of coverage of the negative attributes of these issues.

Our findings produce strong evidence that this is in fact the case. First, we do find that news organizations closer to the border generate a higher volume of stories about Latino immigration issues. Second, we find that outlets more proximal to the border produce a higher volume of articles featuring the negative aspects of immigration. Third, we find that news outlets proximal to the border offer more coverage featuring the illegal aspects of immigration than when compared to news outlets farther removed from the border. Finally, we find that corporate media organizations (expected to be more profit oriented) seem to be even more susceptible to the temptation to, in a sense, “exploit” their proximity to the border to generate the most local, negative, and sensational stories. This finding lends support to our theoretical argument that these coverage patterns by local news organizations near the border are economically motivated.

Since media messages have known effects on public opinion and political behavior, we think it is important to understand influences that go into making the news. Previous research has demonstrated that the integration of traditionally minority ethnic groups into communities can trigger perceptions of threat among traditionally majority ethnic groups (Branton and Jones 2005; Branton et al. 2007). The border states in particular have seen a large influx of immigrant populations, typically of Latino origin. If agenda-setting theory is correct, and if attribute agenda-setting and attribute priming effects occur as a result of news coverage, existing perceptions of threat held by citizens living near the border may be exacerbated by a heightened salience of these issues and a disproportionate focus on the negative aspects of these issues.

A large and growing body of research focuses on the agenda-setting and priming effects of the media (e.g., Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982; Baumgartner and Jones 1995). However, much less work focuses on agenda building or, rather, the contributing factors behind what gets covered in the news. This study adds to this literature by investigating whether geographic proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border influences local news coverage of immigration-related issues. Furthermore, it is a first attempt at linking geographic context and economic theories of news coverage to understand local media coverage of a specific policy area, immigration.

Page (1996) describes the ability the media have to present a selection of news stories that support their own purposes, whether ideologically or profit driven (p. 19). The findings presented here would suggest that the profit motives of local news outlets can result in insidious influences on political attitudes regarding immigration and, very likely, on racial attitudes.
toward Latinos in general. On the whole, the view of immigration presented to border-proximate news audiences is constructed in a very lopsided way, revealing only certain aspects (i.e., negative and sensational) of the issues associated with immigration. According to Page, such media coverage would not constitute a fruitful public debate about the issue, as a diversity of viewpoints is not offered. Given our findings, it seems that in this case, the economic incentives of local news organizations and close proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border may have real implications for the importance the public attaches to the issue of immigration and the basis by which they evaluate the issue.

Notes


2. For example, a Lake Research and Terrain Group poll (March 2006) asked national respondents about the ten most important issues facing the country. Illegal immigration ranked sixth, with 8 percent of respondents calling it the most worrisome. Iraq was first with 17 percent of respondents identifying it as most worrisome. However, in a December poll of Arizona residents, nearly half (48 percent) of voters said that immigration is a more important issue than Iraq (http://rasmussenreports.com/2005/Arizona%20Governor.htm).

3. The exact causal relationship between news coverage and public opinion is unclear (e.g., Bozitz, Druckman, and Lupia 2002; Graber 2002; Iyengar and McGrady 2007; Leighley 2004). For instance, one vein of literature attests to the fact that the news media establish an agenda that affects public opinion (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1995; Beck, Dalton, and Huckfeldt 1998; Dearing and Rodgers 1996; Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Patterson 1993). Another vein demonstrates that news organizations act in response to the concerns and preferences of their audiences (e.g., Arnold 2004; Baron 2006; Hamilton 1998; Hamilton 2004; McManus 1994; Zaller 1999). We argue that audience preferences for what is sensational and local influence coverage, and that the resulting coverage near the border has implications for public opinion on immigration.

4. The intent of this article is not to test or demonstrate the agenda-setting effect. Agenda setting has been demonstrated by countless studies in political science along with other media effects, such as priming and framing. We feel, as do others in the political communication field (e.g., Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Cook 1998; Sparrow 1999; Arnold 2004), that when compared to the study of media effects, influences on the news have been understudied. Our purpose is to make a contribution by providing insight into important factors that may influence news content. We outline the agenda-setting literature only to justify and explain the importance and implications of immigration news coverage.


6. Our discussion suggests that negative coverage of immigration might result in negative attitudes regarding immigration on the part of the audience. We also discuss audience demand as the cause of such coverage. To be clear, when we refer to audience demand, we refer to the universal audience demand for what is local, negative, and sensational. We do not intend to suggest that audience preferences about immigration (presumably based on some notion of threat brought on by an influx of immigrants) drive an audience demand for negative coverage about immigration. We clarify this point to dispel any notion of seeming endogeneity. The latter can occur, but additional analysis indicates that the size of the foreign-born population is only inconsistently related to negative news coverage of immigration, suggesting that something else is driving the disproportionate volume of negative coverage.

7. Here, we distinguish between the volume of coverage on the negative aspects of immigration more generally and the volume of coverage of the negative aspect of immigration featuring Latinos specifically.

8. Our definition of corporate distinguishes between media firms owned by publicly traded corporations and privately owned and controlled media companies. The term publicly traded corporate media organization refers to media firms owned by publicly held corporations, in which ownership is shared among numerous persons. Privately owned media organizations, while potentially large, are not on the public stock exchange and are subject to more controlled and concentrated ownership.

9. According to some journalists, private owners are more likely to have some interest in maintaining a level of journalistic quality. This issue was often discussed in the reporting of the sale of the Knight-Ridder Corporation (see http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/14/paper.html).

10. Spanish-language newspapers have a different audience than traditional English-language newspapers, and as such, they generally cover immigration issues more favorably, especially with regard to Latino immigration (Branton and Dunaway forthcoming; Rodriguez 1999).

11. Ideally, this analysis would include both local television and local newspaper coverage. However, we concentrate solely on newspaper coverage due to the fact that information regarding local television news coverage is very difficult to obtain (Arnold 2004).

12. To assess the reliability of the coding, a sample of 10 percent of the articles was drawn at random and coded independently by two trained undergraduate coders. Cohen’s kappa is computed: $K = \frac{P_A - P_C}{1 - P_C}$, $P_A$ is the proportion of units on which coders agree, and $P_C$ is the proportion of units for which agreement is expected by chance. Our coders’ range of agreement on story coding was between .67 (substantial agreement) and .88 (almost perfect agreement), depending on the coding unit in question. All scores above .60 are considered acceptable (Landis and Koch 1977; Stempler 2001).

13. GIS, or Geographic Information System, is designed for the purpose of integrating spatial data (or where things are) and attribute data (characteristics of a geographic area).

14. The observed values of the ethnic context measure range from 11 to 51 percent. The mean value of percentage Latino within a county is 27 percent, and the median value is 24 percent.

15. As the Latino population approaches a sizable proportion of the potential consumer market, news coverage may not reflect this pattern, because newspapers do not want to risk alienating this growing consumer base.
16. The measure represents the percentage of the population over the age of 25 that has a college degree. It has a mean of 33 percent and a median value of 31 percent.

17. The county-level partisan makeup ranges has a mean value of 45 and a median value of 49.

18. Circulation is included to account for the size of the newspaper. We included this measure to ensure that our findings are not driven by the presence of large newspapers closer to the border. We ran each model without the three largest newspapers: the Orange County Register, Los Angeles Times, and San Diego Tribune. The findings are significant and consistent.

19. Longitudinal data can complicate analysis if the independence assumption of the negative binomial models is violated (Long 1997). This can lead to autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity, resulting in deflated standard errors and inflated significance tests. Thus, we estimate the count models with Stata 9.0 using: xtnbreg (variables), i (newspaper).

20. We cluster our data by newspaper, which adjusts the variance–covariance matrix to correct for heteroscedasticity and serial dependency (Huber 1967).

21. The expression \(100\cdot\exp[(\hat{\beta}_1\cdot\bar{X}_i) - 1]\) offers the percentage change in the volume of coverage for each unit increase in miles to the U.S.–Mexico border. The percentage change in volume of coverage on Latino immigration as a function of a hundred-mile change in distance to the border is calculated by \(100\cdot\exp[(–.002)\cdot100] - 1 = –18.1\%\).

22. The specific estimates offered throughout this section were calculated by taking the exponent of the intercept, each parameter estimate times the mean value for the respective covariate, and the distance parameter estimate times at a specific value of distance. For example, to estimate the expected number of articles for a corporately owned newspaper at one standard deviation above the mean distance (617 miles), the equation is \(\exp(\alpha + \beta_1\bar{X}_i + [\beta_2]_{\text{county}}\cdot1) + [\beta_3]_{\text{distance}}\cdot617\). The “tipping point” on the quadratic is calculated as follows: \(-\beta/(2\cdot\beta_2)\), where \(\beta_2\) is the coefficient for percentage Latino and \(\beta_3\) is coefficient for percentage Latino squared. The point at which the volume of coverage shifts from increasing to decreasing—across the different types of immigration coverage—ranges from 18 to 27 percent on the percentage Latino variable.

References


