Mass Media and American Attitudes Toward Immigration

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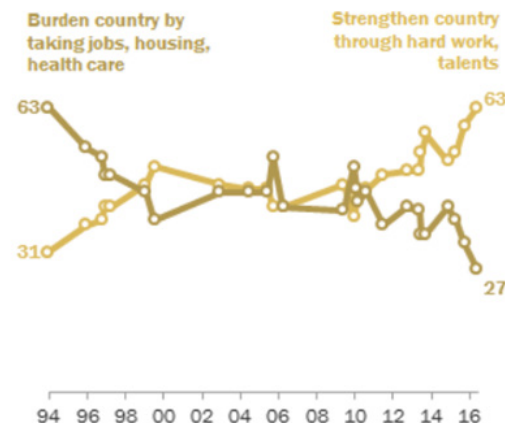# Mass Media and American Attitudes Toward Immigration

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American attitudes toward immigration have become increasingly positive over the last 20 years. For example, as shown in Figure 1, the percentage of Americans who say they strengthen the country has increased from 31 percent in 1994 to 63 percent in 2016. Likewise, during that same period of time, the percentage who view immigrants as a burden has decreased from 63 percent to 27 percent. Although the overall trend is toward more supportive views, the gap between Republicans and Democrats has increased substantially. Even Republicans have slightly more supportive responses in 2016 than in 1994, but as suggested by Figure 2, the striking upward trend has been driven almost entirely by Democrats and Independents.

Figure 1. Increasingly Positive Attitudes Toward Immigration

Americans view immigrants more positively today than 20 years ago

Which comes closer to your view? Immigrants today... (%)

Burden country by taking jobs, housing, health care

Strengthen country through hard work, talents

63

63

31

27

94 96 98 00 02 04 06 08 10 12 14 16

Note: Sept. 2010 survey asked only of registered voters.
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 30-Dec. 5, 2016.

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Figure 2. Views of Immigration Increasingly Polarized by Party Identification

% who say immigrants today strengthen the country because of their hard work and talents ...

—○— Dem/Lean Dem —○— Rep/Lean Rep

78

49

32

30

34

35

1994   2000   2006   2012   2016
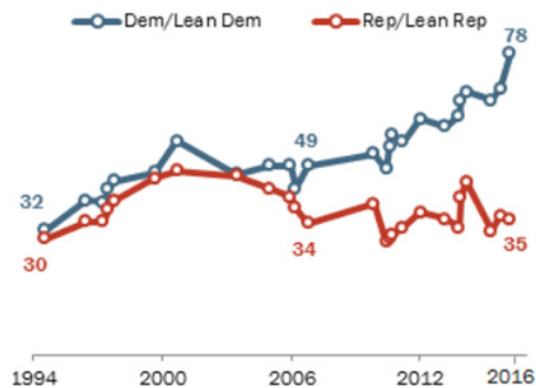
Source: Survey conducted March 17-27, 2016.
September 2010 survey asked only of registered voters.

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Trend data from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs confirms this same general pattern. As shown in Figure 3, responses are heavily polarized by political party. The overall trend shown by the segmented line is toward perceiving immigrants and refugees as less threatening, from 55% in 1998 to only 37 percent in 2016. But again, this trend is driven almost entirely by Independents and Democrats.

What Affects Public Opinion on Controversial Issues?

Although we know a great deal about the cross-sectional correlates of immigration support, there have been few opportunities

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Figure 3. Immigrants Perceived as Less Threatening Now Relative to Past

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: **Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States (% critical threat)**
n = 2,020
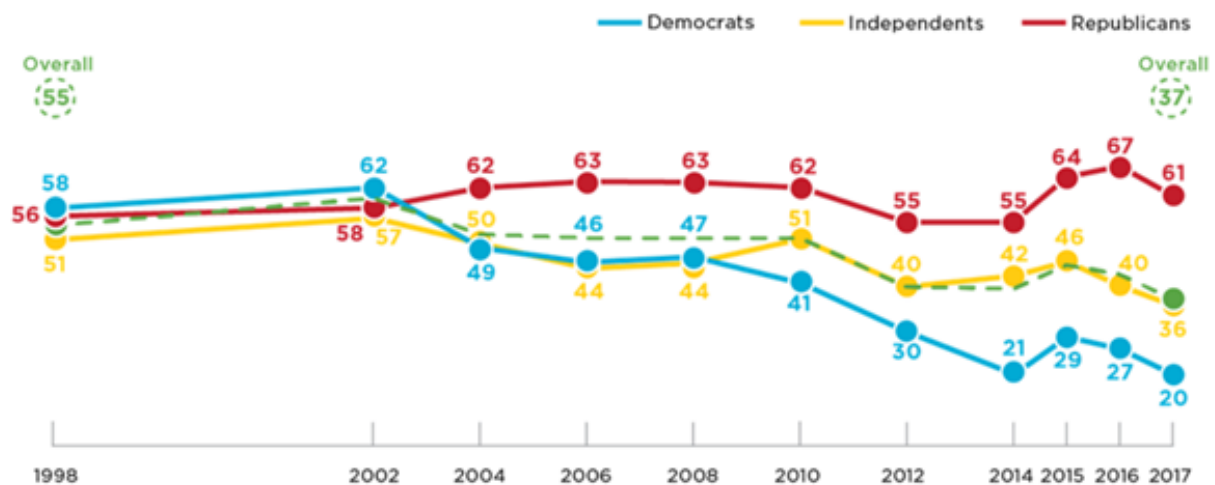
Source: Smeltz, Dina, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff and Craig Kafura. 2018. What Americans Think about America First: Results of the 2017 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy.

to study what changes people's views over time. Nonetheless, from decades of social science research scholars have a fairly good idea of the most common processes through which public opinion changes. The two main players in prompting mass opinion change are political elites and the mass media. Because so much of media content comes directly from political elites, some would call this a single source of influence, with media simply relaying the statements of elites to the general public. It today's more heavily partisan media climate, it seems less likely that a) all Americans get the same basic information about elite positions on issues from media, and b) that media passively relay information to their audiences without producing any independent impact on opinions. For this reason, I consider both potential elite leadership of mass opinion on immigration, as well as potential independent impact from media coverage.

One obvious takeaway from the review of recent trends in public opinion is that Trump has been ineffective as an opinion leader on immigration. Despite frequent references to "bad hombres" and immigrant rapists, public opinion has not become more anti-immigration even among Republicans. If Republicans were "following their leader," one would expect increasingly negative attitudes toward immigration among Republicans in particular. Poll data gathered both before and after Trump's election shows no indication of increasing opposition.

In a sea of evidence of elite-driven opinion trends, immigration appears to be an important exception. It is possible that

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Democrats have become increasingly favorable toward trade as a result of elite opinion leadership from Democratic leaders. Figure 4 illustrates the perceptions of both Republicans and Democrats of the Republican and Democratic candidates' positions on immigration, as well as the average opinions of each of these groups in the mass public. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a 7 point scale ranging from "Return illegal immigrants to their native countries" on the low support end, to "Create a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants" on the high end.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the average citizen (S) became slightly, yet significantly more favorable toward a path to citizenship over this four-year period. The candidates of the Republican (R) and Democratic (D) parties were perceived to be more polarized on this issue in 2016 than in 2012. By far the largest shift is in the perceived Republican candidate stance on this issue.

The lower two panels in Figure 4 shown these same responses broken down by Republican and Democratic respondents. Both groups became more positive toward immigration during this period, but Democrats were especially likely to change in more supportive directions, thus indicating possible opinion leadership within this group. Most interestingly, Trump's extreme stance on immigration in 2016 actually increased the distance of his views from those of Americans as a whole, as well as from those of the average Republican. This is consistent with evidence that his extreme stance was a net negative for him in producing new Republican defectors in the 2016 election (Mutz 2018).

What Type of Media is Likely to Produce These Effects?

The way in which immigration and immigrants are portrayed by the media can make a big difference in how people react to what is otherwise the very same story. Based on experimental studies comparing the impact of different framings stories about immigration, I offer evidence of a few consistent findings.

Immigration lends itself easily to human interest stories, far more so than many other policy issues. So while media coverage could show abstract charts illustrating immigration flows into the US over time, the amount it costs to resettle refugees, or perhaps world maps of where immigrants are coming from, these are not popular forms of media coverage. Instead, immigrants' stories lend themselves to human narratives about where they come from and why they left, what they have been through along the way, and what they hope lies ahead. Narratives are the bread and butter of interesting journalism, so it is not surprising that coverage that is not linked to specific political elites often takes this form.

The One Rather than The Many

Stalin supposedly noted that one man's death is a tragedy, but the loss of millions of lives is a statistic. Likewise, research ssuggests that stories framed around single individuals elicit more emotion than those framed around large numbers of people: "Human sympathy differs reliably toward actual 'identified' victims on the one hand, and more abstract 'statistical' victims on the other" (Small and Loewenstein, 2005:. 311; Fetherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson, & Friedrich, 1997; Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Small & Loewenstein, 2003).

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Figure 4. Change in Immigration Opinions and the Perceived Positions of Major Party Candidates, 2012-2016

S = Self (own opinions)   R = Perceived position of Republican candidate   D = Perceived position of Democratic candidate

Source: Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics, University of Pennsylvania.

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Empathy and sympathy are the most common positive emotions elicited by immigrants' stories, so individual narratives are likely to produce more supportive policy opinions. Even providing a specific name for an individual appears to make a difference in promoting more supportive policy opinions than otherwise identical stories about unidentified victims (Gamer, 2005; Guéguen, Pichot & Le Dreff, 2005).

The positive impact of featuring identified individual victims is, however, contingent on some degree of similarity between the audience and the identified victims. When immigrants come from racially and culturally different countries, this caveat is potentially problematic. Without some dimension of similarity, it is possible for individual immigrants to decrease the extent to which the story encourages victim-supportive policy attitudes. Even identified individuals of different races and cultures may produc emore positive attitudes toward immigration, so long as other similarities are emphasized more than differences. For example, when the body of three-year old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi washed up on a beach in the Mediterranean Sea, this image made global headlines. He and his family were attempting to make it to Europe. Millions of refugees have faced similar circumstances, but the picture of one child and his grieving parents evoked international response in a way that statistical descriptions of these masses of refugees had not. Appeals using universal life experiences such as people's roles as parents and children, difficulties providing for one's family, etc., thus become very important to connecting people to immigrants' experiences. People of different races also may identify with one another as members of religious groups, and even as children of former immigrants. Conversely, a specific identified wrongdoer (such as an immigrant gang member) increases people's level of punitiveness toward the group relative to an abstract group of wrongdoers, just as an identified victim increases their generosity (Small & Loewenstein, 2005).

The Importance of Assimilation

Emphasizing similarities between immigrants and refugees and the news audiences learning about them can reduce negative reactions on. In one experimental study altering both the race (black versus white) and level of assimilation of immigrants in America who were about to be deported, extent of assimilation had a much stronger effect on policy attitudes than race. For example, if the immigrants in danger of deportation were described as discussing how well the local baseball team was faring, as opposed to how well the baseball team in their native country was doing, then audiences were more likely to support a policy allowing them to stay. Likewise, if they were speaking English as opposed to their native language, or eating mozzarella sticks and buffalo wings as opposed to an ethnic dish involving goat, these minor details conveyed enough similarity to readers that they were more supportive of a policy to stop deportation.

Another experimental study hypothesizing that immigrants who speak Spanish or have darker skin tones should provoke more support for restricting immigration produced similar findings. As in the study above, Hopkins (2015) found that skin tone did not matter, and those exposed to immigrants speaking in accented English prompted more positive immigration views, because the accented English is seen as a signal of the immigrant's desire to assimilate. Conversely, Enos (2014) found that being around people who speak Spanish had negative effects on attitudes toward immigrants, at least among whites who had little such exposure previously.

The perceived desire to assimilate and/or integrate with "the American way of life" is clearly a plus in the minds of many

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Americans. Those who want to become more like Americans are seen as sympathetic, whereas those who are perceived as resisting by interacting mainly within their own communities or by not learning English are seen as more threatening. In short, although some Americans are interested in experiencing new people and cultures, Americans can also be very sensitive about having their culture and norms rejected by newcomers. Americans like those who like them back; when immigrants don't integrate, Americans may feel this as a rejection of their American way of life.

When the exemplars used to illustrate news stories are similar to the audience, they trigger greater affinity and liking. Among adults, adolescents, and indeed, even 3-year-olds, similarity has been well documented as a cause of interpersonal liking (Fawcett & Markson, 2009; see Sunnafrank, 1983, for a review). Fortunately, the dimensions of similarity that produce greater liking are broad. They include similarities in attitudes (Byrne, 1971; Neimeyer & Mitchell, 1988), behaviors (Urberg, Degirmencioglu, & Tolson, 1998), preferences (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Brewer & Silver, 1978), values and background (Johnson, 1989), physical characteristics (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Berscheid & Walster, 1974), and sharing a cultural background (Sturmer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006). Perceived similarity contributes to valuing the other's welfare and producing empathic concern (Batson, 2011).

Negative Material Matters Most

News stories about immigration have a distinct advantage over other policies in that the kinds of stories Americans find interesting and empathy-producing also have natural advantages in gaining news audiences. Human interest stories also stick in people's minds over a longer period of time. However, when exposed to news stories that feature both winners and losers, or good news and bad news, it is the negative information that people are most likely to remember. For evolutionary reasons, it has probably always been more important for human beings to react quickly to negatives in their environment (a tiger on the prowl) as opposed to positives (a sunny spot for a nap). Likewise, when people are given information about both winners and losers from any given policy, they are most likely to visualize, and be moved by, those who have lost something, and/or experienced hardships and atrocities. By highlighting these negative experiences, journalists call public attention more readily to the issue. Through this process, news stories change the kind of mental imagery that comes to people's minds when they think about an issue. In the case of immigration, if what comes to mind most easily is Trump's criminal refugees engaged in gang violence, people will have a very different reaction to immigration policy proposals from people whose mental imagery is of boy soldiers being forced to fight against their will. Journalists need to be mindful of the advantage in attention and memory enjoyed by negative information. Due to basic human psychology, balanced coverage will not necessarily produce balanced outcomes.

Using Media to Transcend Distance

People respond differently to objects near and far. For example, when shown a picture of a person they are told is nearby, the thoughts people have are different from if they are told that same person is thousands of miles away (Williams & Bargh. 2008). Things that are close are viewed as concrete, personal and trustworthy; things that are distant are more likely to be objectified and categorized in impersonal terms (Amit, Algom & Trope, 2009). In this sense, generating positive attitudes toward faraway human beings is a difficult task psychologically. However, because media and especially visual media--can simulate the impression of being physically close to

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another human being, it has the potential to offset the ingrained tendency to distrust targets that are far away.

Policy Recommendations

Immigration taking place in a distant location can seem highly abstract and impersonal to news audiences. However, photographs, and particularly close-ups of individuals, can help overcome an abstract and impersonal reaction to immigration. Further, emphasis on similarities between immigrants and citizens in their host countries can serve to bridge gaps and even overcomes differences in race and culture. Immigration may be a controversial political policy, but immigrants are actual people, and this makes the issue a natural for coverage by means of human interest stories, which also attract news audiences.

By focusing on immigrants rather than immigration as an abstract policy, coverage will be more widely read and viewed, as well as more influential. For immigrants who are already in the US, coverage focusing on immigrants who are integrated or trying to integrate into American society will have especially beneficial effects on attitudes. Coverage of immigrants should emphasize similarities rather than differences between Americans and immigrant populations because this will help to overcome the tendency to objectify those who are different and distant, and thus encourage more positive attitudes toward immigration.

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