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# Framing and immigration through the trump era

Rudy Alamillo, Chris Haynes, and Raul Madrid, Jr.

## Abstract

For the last decade, undocumented or illegal immigration has been one of the most contested policy issues in the United States, with significant news attention on policies affecting the undocumented population, ranging from deportations to comprehensive immigration reform, the DREAM Act, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Despite these prominent and multifaceted policy debates, scholarship on media framing and public opinion remain more focused on the portrayal of immigrants rather than policies affecting them. In general, we find that policy frames are far more consequential to public opinion than equivalency frames (variations in how news media describe unauthorized immigrants, either as "illegal" or "undocumented") or episodic frames (whether news articles are heavy on human-interest stories rather than policy facts and statistics). In addition, negative frames generally have stronger effects than positive frames, and these effects sometimes vary by partisanship and family migration history. Finally, the relative infrequency of powerful frames in news stories, like time spent living in the United States, provides opportunities for advocates to move public opinion on immigration policy. These findings have important implications for future battles over immigration policy in the United States, which show no signs of abating.

## Introduction

For many years, immigration has been a hotly contested issue in American politics, with Republicans and Democrats sparring over how best to address both legal and undocumented migration into the United States. While the politics of immigration reform have never been harmonious, they have deteriorated even more in recent years. This could be due in large part to the fact that Congress, today, is extremely polarized, producing unprecedented gridlock and legislative inaction particularly on divisive issues such as immigration (Binder, 1999; Brady, Han, and Pope, 2007; Hetherington, 2001; Theriault, 2006; Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinski, 2017). In addition to polarization in Congress, the extant literature also suggests that more ideological extremists are winning congressional elections (Moskowitz, Rogowski, and Snyder, 2017). These ideologues – both Republican and Democrat alike – in turn, espouse rhetorical messages to the American public that have the propensity to shape mass opinion.

The first step in tracking mass opinion is to measure the extent to which it has shifted in recent years. The Gallup organization consistently surveys Americans about what they believe is the most important problem facing the country. In 2008, about 7% of Americans cited immigration, but by 2010, this rose to about 10%. By 2014, however, approximately 17% of Americans mentioned immigration as the most important problem (Newport, 2018). That is, between 2008 and 2014, the percentage of Americans who believed that immigration was the country's most pressing issue more than doubled. Over the last couple of years, immigration has remained relatively salient, and as of January of 2018, about 15% of Americans named immigration as America's most important problem, second only to dissatisfaction with government (Newport, 2018). What is more, those who believe immigration to be an important problem vary significantly by political party. As of February 2018, 25% of Republicans

compared to 6% of Democrats believed immigration to be the nation's most important problem (Newport, 2018).

Perhaps this marked difference between parties is exaggerated by political elites – who have increasingly entered the ranks of Congress – framing immigration, and immigrants, as problematic. Take, for example, the political rhetoric espoused by politicians and media outlets during the 2015 Republican presidential primaries in which candidates vying for the presidency debated the merits of birthright citizenship and more generally the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. While discussing birthright citizenship, candidates questioned whether the children of undocumented immigrants should automatically be granted citizenship. Then-candidate Trump framed the debate by calling said children “anchor babies,” and others followed suit, including Jeb Bush (Ross, 2015). The use of the “anchor babies” frame was widely criticized as pejorative, but did framing the debate in such a manner change the way Americans thought of birthright citizenship?

What about the debate that erupted in late 2015, into 2016, and even into 2017 about Kate Steinle, the woman killed in 2015 by Jose Inez Garcia Zarate, an undocumented immigrant with a checkered criminal history who was living in San Francisco? Shortly after the killing, many in the mass media questioned whether Steinle would still be alive were it not for San Francisco's sanctuary city policy. Sanctuary city policies are defined broadly as not cooperating to the fullest extent with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in removing undocumented immigrants, even if they come into contact with police authorities. To many in the media, because San Francisco maintained a sanctuary city policy and because Zarate had a criminal record, the city was partly to blame. As the case proceeded through the court system where Zarate was eventually acquitted, many politicians and media outlets called into question the

merits of sanctuary policies. For example, *Breitbart* ran the headline, “Regardless, Kate Steinle Would Still be Alive if San Francisco Were Not a Sanctuary City” (Pollak, 2017). Additionally, a spokesman for ICE told the San Jose *Mercury News*, “This tragedy could have been prevented if San Francisco had simply turned the alien over to ICE, as we requested, instead of releasing him back onto the streets. It is unconscionable that politicians across the country continue to endanger the lives of Americans with sanctuary policies while ignoring the harm inflicted on their constituents” (Ruggiero, 2017). In response to the not guilty finding by the jury in the Steinle-Zarate case, President Trump chimed in, tweeting, “A disgraceful verdict in the Kate Steinle case! No wonder the people of our Country are so angry with Illegal Immigration,” and “The Kate Steinle killer came back and back over the weakly protected Obama border, always committing crimes and being violent, and yet this info was not used in court. His exoneration is a complete travesty of justice. BUILD THE WALL!” (Trump, 2017a, 2017b). The debate surrounding the Steinle killing is illustrative of the notion that political actors and media outlets discuss issues in uneven ways to fit their political perspective; they strategically frame items in the news to shift opinions.

In the framing of sanctuary cities as dangerous for ordinary American citizens and “anchor babies” as undeserving of American citizenship, we see how media outlets and political actors attempt to shift public opinion by using language in a deliberate manner. As Dennis Chong and James Druckman (2007) wrote in their seminal piece on framing theory, framing is “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue [...]” given the way in which the topic is characterized (p. 104). Given scholarship that shows that frames affect the way in which individuals perceive issues, it is critically important that we understand how language can affect attitudes toward immigration in

particular, and how different types of frames can alter the public's perception of these topics (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Igartua and Cheng, 2009; Rose and Baumgartner, 2013; Haynes et al., 2016).

Research demonstrates that framing has the propensity to not only shift public attitudes but also the public policy process, particularly in terms of agenda setting (Eilders, 2000; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Agenda setting is when an issue or issue frame by gaining salience in the media consequently alters the political agenda (Eilders, 2000). When media outlets consistently adopt frames, those frames can shape what and how individuals think about the issue (Haynes et al., 2016; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; MacKuen, 1984; Merolla et al., 2013). Previous research has examined the impact of a number of different frames on immigration attitudes including issue frames, equivalency frames, and episodic and thematic frames. The impacts of these frames, however, vary significantly. Note, for example, that frames can be episodic or thematic, and the presentation of frames in either manner can have implications for how those frames are received (Haynes et al., 2016). In other words, when media outlets like the *New York Times*, the *New York Post*, MSNBC, CNN, or Fox News present immigration stories, the use of particular frames over others can have significant implications for how individuals interpret these accounts and formulate and adjust their immigration attitudes as a result. Equivalency frames can also alter the way people think of issues. We also know that the positive or negative tone of news stories can also shape attitudes (Sheafer, 2007; Soroka, 2006; Abrajano, Hajnal, and Hassell, 2017; Van Klingeren, 2014; Boydston et al., 2013; Madrid, 2018). In what follows, we will discuss some of the extant literature on issue, episodic, thematic, and equivalency frames, and discuss how these types of frames impact our perception of immigration, especially in an era of President Donald Trump.

### *Episodic Frames*

Episodic frames present an issue by offering a specific example, case study, or event-oriented report (Haynes et al., 2016). For example, when President Trump tweeted about the Kate Steinle case, he was referring to a specific instance of perceived criminality in which Jose Inez Garcia Zarate was acquitted of the murder of Steinle. To President Trump, the case was a miscarriage of justice in that Zarate was in the country without proper documentation. Research on episodic framing demonstrates that these frames have the propensity to induce empathy, perhaps because episodic frames makes stories more concrete and may be seen as more compelling (Gross, 2008; Merolla, Ramakrishnan, and Haynes, 2013; Tsang, 2018). With the aforementioned Trump example, however, the logic of the tweet would indicate that the President was simply trying to induce empathy for Steinle and in turn reduce empathy for undocumented immigrants. Regardless of Trump's motives, the extant literature suggests that, whether he knew it or not, emphasizing individual cases rather than mass trends can be more effective at shifting public opinion (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). With respect to immigration, however, episodic frames may not be as effective, as they may instead increase the tendency to blame undocumented immigrants rather than the system (Iyengar, 1991; Chavez, 2013; Berg, 2009; Masuoka and Junn, 2013). That said, the latest research on the effectiveness of episodic frames suggests their effects may be limited or inconsequential when it comes to public opinion on immigration, and particularly as it relates to the DREAM Act and deportations (Haynes et al., 2016). Yet while episodic frames may not be effective at shifting public opinion on immigration, their frequency in appearance at least suggests that the field should assess their impact.

### *Thematic Frames*

Thematic frames present issues in a broader context, using generalities instead of concrete, real-life examples (Haynes et al., 2016). Thematic frames tend to focus on statistics (e.g., number of border apprehensions and deportations) rather than concrete and specific circumstances. Thus, during the 2015 debate about “anchor babies,” after Donald Trump and Jeb Bush sparred using the pejorative term for birthright citizenship, much of the media firestorm centered on the brash, negative phrasing. In response to candidate Trump, Tim Kaine, the Democratic vice presidential nominee, said, “Donald Trump wants to deport 16 million people, 11 million of them who are here without documents. And both Donald Trump and Mike Pence want to get rid of birthright citizenship [...] So if you’re born here, but your parents don’t have documents, they want to eliminate that. That’s another 4.5 million people” (Valverde, 2016). In this example of thematic framing, we can see the general way in which Kaine tried to frame the birthright citizenship issue, attempting to paint the Trump-Pence campaign as hostile to both naturalized citizens and undocumented immigrants.

Thematic frames may be useful to citizens living in a democracy, especially considering scholars find that they can lead individuals toward seeing connections they otherwise would not have seen, thus helping them learn about complex issues (Iyengar, 1991; McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy, 1999). Thus, with Kaine shifting the “anchor baby” frame to that of “birthright citizenship” while simultaneously focusing the American people on the volume of American citizens that could be affected, the end result may have been a shift in public opinion toward more permissive immigration policy, or at least an affirmation of the validity of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. While research has yet to explicitly test this claim, other thematic frame research finds such framing to be effective at boosting support for permissive policies such as the DREAM Act (Haynes et al., 2016).



### *Equivalency Frames*

Equivalency frames are those frames that present equivalent alternatives in different ways. The common example of equivalency frames in the immigration debate is the use of the terms, “illegal immigrant,” “illegal alien,” “illegals,” “undocumented immigrant,” or “unauthorized immigrant.” In each, the common referent is the individual who lacks legal documentation in the host country. Yet the framing of the individual may have implications on public opinion. For example, the extant literature suggests that the terms “illegal” and “undocumented” draw about diametrically different associations. With the former, a more negative association is made, while with the latter, a more positive association is formed (Masuoka and Junn, 2013). In addition to the connotations associated with each, research demonstrates that using the “illegal” framing prompts individuals to think about legality, national identity, and the importance of upholding the law (Masuoka and Junn, 2013). That said, the extant literature is also mixed on whether using said equivalency frames leads to differences in opinions. On one hand, some research finds that equivalency frames do not affect public attitudes (Knoll, Redlawsk, and Sanborn, 2010), while others find that it may affect public opinion, particularly when the “illegal immigrant” is associated with Latino immigrants rather than European immigrants (Perez, 2010). More recent research finds that equivalency frames such as “illegal” and “undocumented” have little effect on public attitudes, perhaps because of the normalcy of their use (Haynes et al., 2016). Though some accept or reject the use of “illegal immigrants,” the term has permeated the public for some time, so little effect is likely to be had on public opinion (Haynes et al., 2016).

### *Negative and Positive Issue Frames*

One area of framing research that has demonstrated large-scale effects on public attitudes is the usage of issue or emphasis frames on particular issues related to immigration, such as legalization. In general, issue frames are those frames that place an emphasis on some aspect of an issue, which can lead some to proffer alternate responses (Haynes et al., 2016; Chong and Druckman, 2007). One example of this in the extant literature is framing whether the KKK should be allowed to hold public rallies, emphasizing the need for public safety versus the need to uphold free speech (Druckman, 2004). In said juxtaposition, individuals tend to be more supportive of the free speech frame compared to the public safety frame, which is reflective of the characterization of the rally and framing effects, in general (Druckman, 2004).

Past work, however, shows that not all issue frames have the same impact on immigration opinion (Haynes et al. 2016). It appears that negative immigration frames such as the “amnesty” frame are more powerful than positive frames such as the “humanistic” frame. Haynes and colleagues (2016) found that negative frames presented such as presenting legalization in terms of “amnesty” not only induce more opposition to the DREAM Act but, still do so even in the presence of the positive “child” frame. They also find that the negative “rule of law” frame significantly boosts support for immigrant deportation. In contrast, positive frames such as mentioning that immigrants may have the “opportunity” for legalized status, result in only a mild boost in support for the path to citizenship policy (Haynes et al., 2016). And while presented alone, the “child” frame significantly boosts support for the DREAM Act, when combined with the “amnesty” frame, the “amnesty” frame completely wipes out gains from the child frame and even increases opposition to the DREAM Act compared to the neutral condition (Haynes et al., 2016).

Thus, negative issue framing tends to be more effective at shifting public opinion. Perhaps this is one reason why, as we discussed earlier, immigration has become a top problem for the American people. Since President Trump's candidacy, Trump has framed immigration in a negative manner, often invoking the term "illegal" while discussing some negative potential implication of permissive immigration policies. In this negative information environment, one where the President of the United States is consistently using negative frames, we might expect that the public would take on more restrictionist views on immigration, or at least come to think of immigration as a problem. This issue is exaggerated when looking at the effects of negativity on the President's own political party. As mentioned, Gallup notes that Republicans are much more likely to consider immigration as the nation's most important problem (Newport, 2018). Constructing immigrants as a problem is also fomented in the mass media when images of immigrants are presented negatively, such as the image of Jose Inez Garcia Zarate in an orange jumpsuit awaiting a murder trial or the many pictures of MS-13 gang members referenced often by President Trump. In fact, recent research has found that these types of images may foster a fear of immigrants, thus producing anti-immigrant policy preferences (Farris and Silber Mohamed, 2018).

### *Discussion*

We can use our understanding of frames to explain President Trump's influence of the immigration debate thus far. In August 2015, Trump introduced the term anchor baby into the Republican presidential primary when, during an interview with Bill O'Reilly, Trump suggested that anchor babies may not be citizens (Brait, 2016). Although Trump would use the term anchor baby sporadically throughout the remainder of the campaign, including referring to fellow Republican presidential hopeful Ted Cruz as an anchor baby, given the term's acceptance as a

pejorative, it was not widely used nor reported on by mainstream media sources outside of its emergence in August 2015.

While Trump may not have made anchor babies an issue during the campaign, he successfully introduced and framed the debate on sanctuary cities. On July 4, 2015, Trump seized on the murder of Kate Steinle to negatively frame undocumented immigrants by associating them with crime: “What about the undocumented immigrant with a record who killed the beautiful young woman (in front of her father) in San Fran. Get Smart!” (Trump, 2015). Broadcast transcripts from Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN suggest that sanctuary cities were largely undiscussed until July 2015, when Steinle was murdered. Since then, the association of sanctuary cities with crime has led to sanctuary cities constantly being mentioned in news coverage of immigration, especially on Fox News, where the discussion of sanctuary cities has been used to negatively frame immigrants by associating sanctuary cities with a broad amnesty and violations of the rule of law. While the amount of coverage of sanctuary cities has been comparable on CNN, that coverage has notably not been framed negatively as it was on Fox News.

With the announcement of his immigration plan in August 2017, President Trump introduced two more terms into the debate over immigration: chain migration and the diversity lottery. President Trump planned to limit chain migration, officially known as family-based sponsorship or family reunification, as well as end the Diversity Visa Immigrant Program, more commonly known as the diversity lottery, due to its perceived lack of merit by immigration critics. As was the case with sanctuary cities in the months prior to Kate Steinle’s murder, chain migration and the diversity lottery were largely undiscussed by mainstream media sources prior to the announcement of Trump’s immigration plan and his subsequent attacks on these programs,

which seemingly sought to associate the terms with criminality. This framing continues today, as a page on the White House website labels chain migration and the diversity lottery as threats to national security, and even lists terrorists and criminals who entered the United States via these programs as well as the crimes they committed (White House, 2018).

On chain migration, Trump tweeted: “CHAIN MIGRATION must end now! Some people come in, and they bring their whole family with them, who can be truly evil. NOT ACCEPTABLE!” (Trump, 2017c). Despite the negative reactions a term like chain migration might engender, its appearance across mainstream media outlets suggests that President Trump has succeeded, at least to some degree, in negatively framing the debate over a program originally meant to bring families together. Ironically, this was the program through which First Lady Melania Trump’s parents obtained their United States citizenship. When asked if the Trumps benefitted from chain migration, Trump’s lawyer responded, “I suppose. It’s a dirty - a dirtier word. It stands for a bedrock of our immigration process when it comes to family reunification” (Murdock, 2018). Misgivings over the terminology aside, a comparison of Google Search Trends suggests that chain migration has entered the public lexicon, as it has outranked searches for family reunification since August 2017 (Guild, 2018). Analyses suggest that Trump has succeeded in linking the diversity lottery and chain migration. As of January 2018, the term chain migration appeared in more than half of all stories containing the term diversity lottery on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News.

One area where we see media coverage diverge is on the topic of the 2018 child separations at the border. In June 2018, news broke that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) had separated as many as 1,995 children from 1,940 adults at the border because of the Trump administration’s Zero Tolerance Policy on immigration, which required the DHS to refer

adults crossing the border illegally for prosecution and any children they crossed with sent to separate detention facilities (Ainsley and Timm, 2018). Stories of the child separation crisis dominated immigration coverage on all major media outlets, with many stories on CNN, MSNBC, and the *New York Times* emphasizing the harm these separations could cause to young children. Stories on Fox News, however, often included mention of human trafficking at the border, possibly to frame the separations in a positive light. The child separation crisis, along with the failure to start a national debate over the citizenship status of anchor babies are notable areas where President Trump has been less effective in framing the debate in a more restrictionist light.

### *Conclusion*

Our discussion thus far has reviewed the effectiveness of various frames and applied these findings to the current Trump era debate on immigration. While episodic and equivalency frames appear to have little to no effect on public attitudes regarding immigration (Haynes et al., 2016), thematic frames seem to help individuals learn about complex issues (Iyengar, 1991; McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy, 1999) and induce support for progressive policies such as the DREAM Act (Haynes et al., 2016). Usage of negative and positive frames, however, do not appear to have large-scale effects on immigration attitudes (Haynes et al., 2016; Farris and Silber Mohamed, 2018).

Since 2016, President Trump has relied on negative frames to shape the immigration debate. Although Trump failed to normalize the term anchor baby as a part of a broader effort to raise questions about birthright citizenship, he has been largely successful in framing conversations about sanctuaries cities, chain migration, and the diversity lottery. As we discussed, sanctuary cities, chain migration, and the diversity lottery were largely ignored by

mainstream media sources until Trump capitalized on them to negatively frame immigrants and immigration. Although stories that negatively frame sanctuary cities are most common on Fox News, Trump has succeeded in negatively framing discussions about family reunification and diversity visa programs. Regardless of their content or source, most stories about these programs refer to them as chain migration and the diversity lottery, which are terms designed to strip these programs of their merit. Given Trump's success in negatively framing chain migration and the diversity lottery, we might expect him to continue focusing on framing these issues moving forward. Beyond framing these programs as meritless, Trump may also find success in framing them as threats to national security.

Another area where Trump may succeed in framing the debate is on the push to make immigration more difficult for those who have received government assistance. In September of 2018, the Trump administration announced that immigrants who legally use government assistance programs, such as food stamps or public housing, could be denied green cards (Shear and Baumgaertner, 2018). While federal law already required those seeking green cards to prove they would not become public charges, previously only the acceptance of cash benefits would negatively affect a candidate's application. Critics argue that extending the range of services which could negatively affect one's application for permanent residence could prevent those seeking green cards from accessing services they are legally entitled to. Moreover, these changes might scare immigrants who have already attained green cards, and are thus not affected by these changes, from using public services out of fear of losing their permanent status (Shear and Baumgaertner, 2018; Stiles, 2018). As a result, these new policies could result in worse health outcomes among immigrants, both legal and undocumented, as research suggests that for

Latinos, use of public services is in part conditioned by their immigration context (Pedraza and Osorio 2017).

While our analysis, like others, focuses on mainstream media sources, future research on frames could investigate how media outlets at the fringes, such as *Breitbart* and DailyKos, frame immigration relative to their more mainstream counterparts. Future studies could also incorporate the use of sentiment analysis software for a more in-depth analysis of how political speech and media coverage frame immigration. Beyond analyzing the content of political speech and news stories, research could investigate how individual behavior and attitudes are affected by exposure to different combinations of frames and sentiments. Finally, as more Americans begin to rely on social media for their news, research on framing should investigate how the social aspect of websites like Facebook and Twitter, where users not only share news stories but often frame them with their own commentary, influence the behavior and attitudes of those in their networks. Does adding an additional level of influence between a public figure or media source and an individual moderate the impact of a positive or negative frame? When it comes to influencing one's attitudes on immigration, does the commentary a friend or family member adds to a news story matter more than the content of the story itself? Analysis of political speech and media sources will remain important in the future and continue to contribute to our understanding of frames, but we should also turn our attention to how new media, and the new ways we interact with media, affect our receptivity to frames on issues concerning immigration and more.



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