Media Framing and Partisan Identity:
The Effect of Immigration Coverage on White Macropartisanship

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Abstract

Laboratory studies frequently find that framing changes individual issue positions. But few real world studies have demonstrated framing induced shifts in aggregate political opinions, let alone political identities. One explanation for these divergent findings is that the competitive nature of most real world political debates presents multiple frames that cancel each other out. We assess this proposition and the extent of real world framing by focusing on the issue of immigration which has been framed in largely negative terms by the media. Specifically, we assess the link between *New York Times* coverage of immigration and aggregate white partisanship over the last three decades. We find that negative framing on immigration is linked to shifts toward the Republican Party – the Party linked with anti-immigrant positions – not just public opinion. This suggests that under the right circumstances, framing alters core political predispositions and shapes the partisan balance of power.

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Are media effects ephemeral and fleeting, subject to rapid decay and counter-frames (Druckman 2004; Druckman and Nelson 2003)? Or are media effects deeply felt and enduring (Lecheler and de Vreese 2011; Mendelberg 2001)? On one hand extensive laboratory research has shown that the opinion formation and decision making processes are susceptible to framing effects (Chong and Druckman 2013; Chong and Druckman 2007; Shen and Edwards 2005; Druckman 2004). By focusing on different elements of a problem, these studies suggest that the media can prioritize different considerations and alter an individual's assessment of a particular issue or candidate.

On the other hand, scholars have raised a series of important concerns about existing studies. Are framing effects only signaling short term changes to top-of-the-head responses (Zaller 1992)? Are the effects limited to questions that ask about policy views that are neither well thought out nor stable? Others have expressed doubts about the external validity of these laboratory experiments. Although they may disregard it in their considerations (Druckman and Leeper 2012), respondents in the lab cannot tune out or ignore a particular frame (Druckman 2001). Nor are they exposed to a volume and range of environmental interference that could drown out the framing (Druckman and Nelson 2003). And most importantly, respondents in these experiments are generally not subject to counter framing (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Chong and Druckman 2013). Perhaps not surprisingly, when studies of framing shift to the real world, they find more limited or even negligible effects (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Gerber et al 2011; but see Kellstedt 2003, Mendelberg 2001). In addition, while the effects of framing on

issue positions is still debated, to our knowledge, no study of framing effects has demonstrated meaningful shifts in core political identities and predispositions at the aggregate level.

This paper has two goals. First, we seek to help explain the divergent findings between framing effects in the lab and those in the real world. Second, we want to highlight the potential of framing to induce meaningful shifts in core political identities and predispositions - shifts that could alter the partisan balance of power in American politics. To do this, we focus on media coverage of immigration and assess the effects of that coverage on aggregate white partisanship.

Immigration is an issue that we believe has a unique set of attributes and thus is particularly well suited to induce large scale change in partisanship. For most issues, there are vocal champions on both sides of the debate. But on immigration, there is growing evidence that media coverage and partisan debates both present a largely negative image of immigration (Chavez 2008; Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano 2010; Merolla et al 2013). If the preponderance of coverage presents only one side of the story, then framing might have more profound aggregate effects.

To assess the influence of media frames on immigration, we measure and gauge the impact of all immigration coverage in the *New York Times* between 1980 and 2011 on quarterly white macropartisanship compiled over the same period from the CBS/NYT poll series. We find that immigration frames appear to have a substantial impact on partisanship. Negative frames of immigration are tied to greater white ties to the Republican Party and a reduced likelihood of identifying as Democrats. Overall these findings suggest the powerful, wide-ranging effects that framing can have.

The Media and Framing Effects

Many contend that how issues are framed and presented in the news can influence voters'

evaluations of those issues as well as the evaluations of political actors associated with those

issues (Iyengar 1991). Chong and Druckman (2007b) define framing as "the process by which

people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an

issue." Because of cognitive limitations individuals organize concepts thematically and can only

retain a finite number of important considerations in the forefront of our minds. The media or

other actors influence our opinions by privileging some considerations over others (Zaller 1992).

The literature has marshaled impressive evidence in favor of this framing effects

hypothesis. We highlight two different types of documented framing effects here.[1]   First and

perhaps most basically, framing can alter the way we see an issue by privileging one aspect of a

problem over another or altering the group imagery associated with an issue (Nelson and Kinder

1996). This occurs when media coverage causes individuals to focus their considerations on a

subset of relevant considerations when formulating opinions (Druckman 2004). For example,

experimental studies have shown that support for welfare can change depending on whether

coverage highlights work requirements or need (Shen and Edwards 2005). Variations in media

coverage of race relations have been shown to change the public's racial policy preferences over

time (Kellstedt 2003). Critically, Merolla et al (2013) show that issue framing can affect

attitudes on immigration. Given that most Americans think the majority of immigrants are here

without legal status, the crime frame may be especially powerful at priming a subset of

considerations used in the formation of opinions (Enos 2012).

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[1] Persuasion is another potentially important means of influence we ignore here (Nelson et al 1997).

Similarly, by focusing repeatedly on a particular group, news coverage can lead to evaluations of issues based on attitudes towards the group in question rather than on the issue at hand (Nelson and Kinder 1996; Gilens 1999). If the particular group highlighted is associated with negative stereotypes or perceived as a threat to the social group of the respondent– as is often the case with racial and ethnic minorities – news coverage can lead to more limited public support for certain policies (Outten et al. 2012; Gilliam et al 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). Particularly relevant is the finding that perceptions of physical or social threats prompt higher support for conservative policies and stances (Thórisdóttir and Jost 2011; Craig and Richeson 2014; Giles and Hertz 1994). The fear of immigration may really be a fear of and a perceived threat from a specific group of immigrants—Latinos and that priming respondents with images of Latinos can elicit more negative assessments of immigration (Perez 2013; Ramakrishnan et al 2010; Brader et al 2012).

The other category of framing is more direct. The media can affect our evaluation of an issue simply by altering the tone of coverage (Hester and Gibson 2003). Tone can evoke feelings that directly influence one's evaluation of an issue (Lodge and Taber 2013), or can bias the set of considerations stored in or retrieved from memory (Zaller 1992). Coverage that is more negative in tone and that highlights undesirable features of a phenomenon rather than positive attributes can limit support for that phenomenon.

The Minimal Effects View

There are, however, those who question the extent of the impact of framing (Druckman 2004). Most of our understanding about the influence of framing has emanated from research conducted in experimental settings where individuals receive only a single frame in a single

exposure. Critics raise concerns about external validity and have highlighted several problems with this format.

One real concern is that the effects of framing tend to be ephemeral or fleeting. When tested immediately after being exposed to a particular frame, subjects display distinct views. But the effects of framing tend to erode quickly over time. When the subjects are queried a day, a week, or a month later, few significant results emerge (Chong and Druckman 2007b).

Other issues relate to the unrealistic nature of the laboratory in which most of the numerous framing experiments are run. When studies of framing switch to natural world settings, evidence of framing becomes more limited in its impact and scope (Gerber et al 2011, Druckman 2004; Druckman and Nelson 2003; but see Rose and Baumgartner 2013; Dardis et al. 2008; Kellstedt 2003). In the laboratory subjects tend to receive very limited stimuli, all of the 'noise' of daily life is blocked out, and there is little to focus on other than the frame. Studies indicate, however, that more information reduces the impact of any one piece of information frame (Druckman and Nelson 2003). Relatedly, subjects in these experiments do not control the frames or media outlets to which they are exposed. Framing effects in the real world may be more limited because citizens selectively screen out frames (Druckman 2001) and ignore frames or sources they do not trust (Lupia and McCubins 1998). Finally, and we believe most importantly, subjects typically do not receive a counter frame as they would in most political debates. If only one side speaks, it is likely to be powerful and effective. In contrast, recent experimental studies that present a counter-frame show little to no overall effects (Chong and Druckman 2013; Druckman 2004).   As a result, it is uncertain just how much framing matters in the real world.

One final limitation of the existing research is that studies about framing effects have focused almost exclusively on the opinions individuals have about specific policy issues. However, as many scholars have demonstrated, individual positions on most issues are not well thought out and are often highly volatile (Converse 1964). If issue positions are not deeply held and change regularly over time, it may be easy for framing or agenda setting to have an effect. Simply, issue positions represent an easy case for media and framing effects.

Immigration and Party Identification

We seek to offer a better understanding of the nature and efficacy of framing effects in the real world. We do so by focusing on the connection between framing on immigration and aggregate partisanship in the United States. Immigration has a range of unique attributes that provide a telling test of real world framing effects. Compared to other issues, media portrayals of immigration appear to be more one-sided and negative (Chavez 2008). If one of the keys to framing effects in the real world is the relative balance of messages, then a study of immigration could prove to be revealing.

Many of the existing studies of immigration coverage are anecdotal but there is growing evidence that media overwhelming focuses on an 'immigrant threat narrative' that links immigration to economic costs, social dysfunction, illegality, and cultural decline (Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano 2010; Merolla et al. 2013). The perception of threat can have a significant effect on an individual's policy preferences. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, or in situations where mortality is made salient, individuals are more likely to endorse conservative policies and support conservative leaders (Nail et al. 2009; Ulrich and Cohrs 2007). These effects, however, are not limited to physical threats (Cotrell and Neurberg 2005). Indeed, new research demonstrates that attitudes on immigration and the salience of racial demographic shifts

influence partisanship (Craig and Richeson 2014) and concern about immigration is now a primary driver of changes in individual partisanship (Hajnal and Rivera 2014).

There are also a number of other features of immigration that suggest that it could be especially powerful in shaping partisan attachments on the macro level. Like other issues that have led to realignment or substantial partisan change, immigration is simple, symbolic, and salient (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Layman and Carmines 1997). Equally importantly, the two major parties have staked out increasingly divergent positions on immigration over the last two decades (Wong 2013; Jeong et al 2011). All of this means that there is real potential for framing to impact attitudes on immigration and for immigration to shape white partisanship.

With that in mind we offer a relative straightforward test of real world immigration framing on partisanship. We guage the impact of framing in all *New York Times* stories on immigration on aggregate party identification measured quarterly over the roughly thirty year period for which immigration has been on the nation's agenda in modern times. The basic test is to see if more negative framing of immigration leads to shifts toward the Republican Party – the Party associated with more restrictionist immigration policies.

This test adds to our understanding of framing effects in three important ways. First we hope to offer a more faithful test of framing by assessing the impact of the media, not in quiet confines of the lab, but in the real world, where multiple frames and multiple voices are possible and where individual Americans can choose to listen to or tune out these messages. Second, by focusing on an emerging issue that is subject to a disproportionate amount of negative framing, we hope to be able to better understand the factors that help explain when framing matters and when it does not. Third, we hope to able to demonstrate how powerful framing can be in shaping core elements of the political process and the balance of power within a polity. By focusing on

party identification rather than issue positions, we put forward a particularly tough test of media effects. Issue positions which have been the subject of most of the previous framing effects literature tend to be relatively unstable and malleable at the indivdiual level (Converse 1964; Feldman 1988 but see Ansolabehere et al 2008). In contrast to opinions, party identification is viewed as one of the most immovable objects in American politics (Goren 2005; Green et al 2002; Campbell et al 1960). Moreover, party identification is not only durable, it is impressively potent – the'unmoved mover' that drives almost everything in American politics.[2] If we find media effects here, we will have greatly expanded our understanding of how the media can influence politics. Likewise, by focusing on aggregate partisanship rather than on individual partisan decisions, we can see how framing affects the overall balance of power in American politics. It is one thing to shift the political orientations of a small number of individuals. It is quite another to sway a nation in one direction or the other. In short, we hope to not only learn more about when framing matters but also about how broadly and deeply framing can matter.

Data

To assess the effects of news media coverage on immigration, we analyzed the volume and content of all articles from *The New York Times* (NYT) between 1980 and 2011 that mentioned immigration –almost 7000 in total. Using the LexisNexis database of newspapers, we employed the following search terms: immigration, immigrant, immigrants, migration etc. [3]

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[2] Scholars do disagree on how stable party identification really is and how much it influences or is influenced by issue positions (Erickson et al 1998; Fiorina 1981).

[3] Since we wanted to ensure that the main focus of the story was on immigration, the initial search was limited to the newspaper headline or lead. If such criteria were satisfied we analyzed the entire article. We only examined news stories that focused on the U.S.

We selected the NYT for two reasons. First, we were interested in an outlet that would provide national coverage and readership. The NYT has the second largest circulation in the US, at approximately 1.86 million and reaches a nationwide audience. Second, as a more liberal news outlet, the NYT is an especially difficult test of our immigrant threat hypothesis. The NYT is one of the news outlets that would be least likely to propagate the immigrant threat narrative. If a mainstream, liberal news outlet has fallen prey to using the "immigrant threat" narrative, then it is likely that other media outlets, especially those with a conservative bent, would see a much larger share of their immigration news stories adopting this narrative.

Our choice to focus on newspaper articles, as opposed to television news programs, was motivated by the amount of information that can be gained from newspapers as opposed to televisions news. A typical TV segment about immigration may be, at best, 20-30 seconds in length. As our theory and hypotheses focus specifically on the frames used by the media, newspapers offer much more content to assess these frames than does broadcast news. It is, however worth noting that our results are not likely to differ from analysis of television news coverage. The volume and content of national political news coverage on television is remarkably similar to coverage in the *New York Times* (Hassell 2014; Durr et al 1997). We focus on the time frame from 1980-2011 since this is roughly the period where immigration has been on the nation's agenda.

Based on the existing framing literature as well as studies more specifically focused on the immigrant threat narrative, we coded the NYT stories across three dimensions of framing: tone, issue content, and immigrant group mentioned. The most subjective of these frames is the tone of the news story. We grouped stories by whether the story provided a positive, negative, or neutral account of immigration. Our coders judged an article to be negative if the primary focus

of the article was the problems associated with immigration; for example, an article about an arrested immigrant is coded as negative. Likewise an article focusing on the benefits of labor migrants to the national economy would have been coded as positive. Negative and positive tone was also derived from the overall conclusions presented in the article. If, for example, the article appeared to be critical of politicians or organizations that supported immigrants' rights, it was coded as negative. The coders identified neutral tone when the article gave no preference for either side of a policy.

Issue content coding was more straightforward. Coders examined whether the newspaper article focused on crime, economic issues, homeland security, and/or immigration policy. We expect stories focused on crime, the economy, and security to frame immigration in a negative light. In contrast we expect stories about policy solutions to immigration frame immigration in a neutral or positive light. Many stories also highlighted positive externalities associated with immigration and the proposed policy solutions. For this particular area of coding, a news story could be coded to contain up to three types of issues.

Finally, we coded for the particular immigrant group featured in the article. We noted stories that mentioned Latinos, Hispanics, or immigrants from Latin America, those stories that referred to Asian Americans or Asia, and those that highlighted immigration from Europe or other regions. More than one immigrant group could be mentioned in the article. It is also important to note that these three types of frames (tone, issue content, and immigrant group) are not mutually exclusive from one another; that is, an article featuring a Latino immigrant could discuss crime and the economy, and also adopt a negative tone. We aggregate these various frames by quarter. Thus, as an example, we would assess the proportion of articles over a given

time period that mention Latinos. For tone, we take the proportion of articles that are negative versus those that are positive in nature.

Due to concerns about the subjective nature of some of this coding, we performed the coding using two distinct methods. Newspaper articles were coded both by research assistants and also using machine coding. The automated content analysis used machine learning techniques and the text classification package, Rtexttools (Jurka et al 2012), and incorporated information from the hand-coded articles classification for the articles before 2000. Several tests of intercoder reliability between the automated dataset and the hand-coded dataset reveal a high degree of agreement. Moreover, the results of the following analysis are consistent across the two different coding methods. How we code the articles makes little difference. We include details on each method and a comparison of the two in the Online Appendix.

How is Immigration Framed?

In order to assess the role of the media in framing immigration and its effects on white partisanship, we first have to determine what the media reports on immigration. Are the frames that are used to discuss immigration disproportionately negative? Are they overwhelmingly centered on Latinos? And are they focused on more problematic policy issues like crime and terrorism than on more positive topics like families and assimilation?

There are strong assertions as well as a growing body of evidence that media portrayals of immigration are, in fact, negative (on metaphors and media message see Chavez 2008; Brader et al 2012; for a more systematic approach see Merolla et al 2013; Valentino et al 2012; Perez 2013). Our data collection effort significantly improves upon existing studies both by offering more detailed information on the content of framing and by assessing news stories over an extended period. Simply, our data offers a more comprehensive look at immigration coverage.

Before distinguishing between the different frames employed in immigration news coverage, it is worth briefly assessing the total amount of coverage on immigration. Altogether, we identified 6,778 articles that discussed immigration between 1980 and 2011. That is roughly 227 articles per year – arguably enough coverage to make the issue salient and to potentially sway opinions.[4] There is considerable variation in the volume of immigration news coverage across this time span but the most obvious pattern is the increasing attention to immigration over time. We see a clear spike in coverage in 2006 likely related to the introduction of the Sensenbrenner Bill (HR 4437) which increased penalties for undocumented immigrants and sparked protests from millions of immigrants' rights supporters across more than 140 cities and 39 states.

As we expect we find that that news coverage generally follows the immigrant threat narrative and that most of the frames used to describe immigrants are negative ones. By the overall tone of stories, there are four times as many negative news stories on immigration as there are positive news stories. All told, 48.9 percent of immigration news articles adopt a negative tone. By contrast, only 12.1 percent of immigration news stories frame immigrants in a positive manner. The remaining news stories, 39 percent, take on a neutral tone.[5]

The immigrant group depicted in news coverage of immigration is equally lopsided. Fully 65.5 percent of all articles mention immigrants from Latin American. By contrast, only 26.3 percent of stories reference immigrants from Asian countries and fewer still focus on

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[4] To compare, there were 1463 articles that focused on the economy in 1986, 1234 articles in 1996 and 990 articles in 2006.

[5] Over our 31 year time span, we find that the tone of immigration news articles fluctuates from quarter to quarter but it fluctuates between neutral and negative, with few time periods where the tone of immigration news articles is consistently positive.

immigrants hailing from Europe, Russia and Eastern Europe, or the Middle East. All of this is consistent with the composition of the immigrant population in the United States but it, nevertheless, highlights how prevalent the Latino immigrant frame is in news stories (see also Valentino et al 2012). Because images of Latinos spur negative associations among white Americans (Outten et al. 2012; Valentino et al. 2012) this coverage could have consequences for partisan ties.

We now move on to examine the issue content of these immigration articles. Among all of the different issues that could be associated with immigration, the NYT most frequently framed immigration with the economy. Approximately 25 percent of immigration news articles adopted this frame. The next most commonly used frame discussed immigration in the context of some aspect of immigration policy. About 20 percent of the news stories featured these frames. Crime was associated with only 9 percent of all immigration news stories, perhaps less than the immigrant threat narrative would suggest. Finally, national security frames were used very rarely, only about 1.8 percent of the time.[6] Given the predominantly negative view of immigrants' contributions to the economy, crime, and national security, we expect these frames to have negative consequences, while policy solutions frames might be neutral or even have positive effects.

All told, when the public reads stories dealing with immigration, a scant few do so in a way that portrays immigrants in a positive light. The immigrant threat narrative, as previous accounts have argued, is prevalent (Valentino et al 2012; Chavez 2008). Given that we will be analyzing changes over time, it is important to note that each of these different immigration

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[6] Surprisingly welfare was mentioned in only 1.1 percent of all stories. Other issues that got limited attention were health (0.7 percent), and family reunification (0.4 percent). A national culture or the social fabric of the nation frame was present in 3.8 percent of news stories.

frames varies over time. Figures A1-A3 in the Supplementary Online Appendix illustrate wide

temporal variation in the total amount of coverage devoted to immigration as well as the extent

that it focuses on Latinos and employs a negative or positive tone. Although it does so to

varying degrees over time, coverage generally highlights negative aspects of immigration. This

skewed coverage makes it difficult for Americans to consider the full spectrum of immigrants'

contributions to society. This predominantly negative coverage has the potential to fuel fears

amongst the public – fears that should shift white Americans toward the Republican Party.

Immigration Frames and White Macropartisanship

The patterns presented so far highlight the prevalence of the immigrant threat narrative

and hint at the role that media coverage could have played in driving white Americans to the

Republican Party. In this next section, we directly assess the link between media coverage of

immigration and white macropartisanship. We focus on the partisanship of white Americans

because they are more concerned about and more opposed to immigration than either Latinos or

Asian Americans (Polling Report 2013). As such we suspect that white Americans tend to

respond differently to the issue of immigration and framing on immigration than other racial and

ethnic groups. In contrast, members of primarily immigrant-based groups Latinos and Asian

Americans may feel personally attacked at media frames that highlight negative aspects of

immigration (Perez 2014).[7]

Such an analysis requires us to collect data on partisan preferences from the same period

of time as our media data (1980-2011). To gather our party identification data, we turn to the

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[7] It is less clear where African Americans fit. They are most likely to be in competition with immigrants for jobs and resources but as a minority group often portrayed negatively in the media, they may take umbrage at negative media portrayals of other minorities. There has been evidence that suggests that African Americans hold sympathetic views towards immigration (see Abrajano and Lundgren 2014).

CBS/NYT poll series.[8] This poll series is unique in that it contains a considerable amount of

data over regular intervals of time. Importantly, the CBS/NYT series also asks the standard

party identification question: "Generally speaking do you usually consider yourself a Democrat,

Republican, or what?" Altogether, 488 surveys include a question on party identification during

our period of interest.[9] As our focus is on white Americans, we exclude respondents who self-

identify as non-whites. On average there are 934 non-Hispanic white respondents in each

survey.[10] The average number of surveys per year is 18.[11] This data allows us to assess white

partisanship accurately and to test the effects of immigration coverage on partisanship.

In our main analysis we focus on the percentage of white respondents who identify as

Democrats, the percentage who identify as Independents in response to the first party

identification prompt, and the percentage who identify as weak Republicans.[12] Mirroring

Mackuen et al (1989) and their work on macropartisanship, we calculate the mean responses

from each survey and aggregate by quarter.

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[8]Our data is from the *iPoll* databank housed at the Roper Center.
http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

[9] The only other option – the Gallup poll series– asks respondents to indicate their partisanship "as of today." That difference in wording can, according to some research, artificially inflate changes in partisanship in the Gallup Poll (Green et al 2002). We, therefore, opt for the more conservative measure.

[10] White samples range from 405 to 3,909 respondents.

[11] The series averages 4 surveys per quarter. Less than ten percent of quarters have only one survey.

[12] We focus on weak Republicans or those who "lean" towards the Republican Party, as opposed to those who already self-identify as Republican, since this is the group of individuals where we would expect immigration to exert its greatest effect. Such individuals are at the "cusp" of identifying as Republicans. In contrast, those who already self-identify as Republican are unlikely to become "more" Republican as a result of immigration news coverage. Alternate tests incorporating the proportion of respondents who "strongly favor" and those who lean towards either party show the same results.

Figure 1 plots the percentage of Democratic Party identifiers spanning from 1980-2011. The graph reveals two important patterns in aggregate white partisanship. First, over time there is a decrease in Democratic identifiers. White attachment to the Democratic Party falls from a high of 43 percent in 1980 all the way down to about 28 percent in 2010.[13] As attention to immigration has grown, the amount of white support for the Democratic Party has been on the decline. Subsequent analysis will show that these gains accrue both to Independents and the Republican Party. Second, despite the widespread view that party identification is stable, there is quite a bit of variation over time. Overall, our examination of white macropartisanship squares well with the existing evidence presented by MacKuen et al (1989) and others (Erickson et al 2002).

Figure 1: Percentage of Democratic identifiers, 1980-2011

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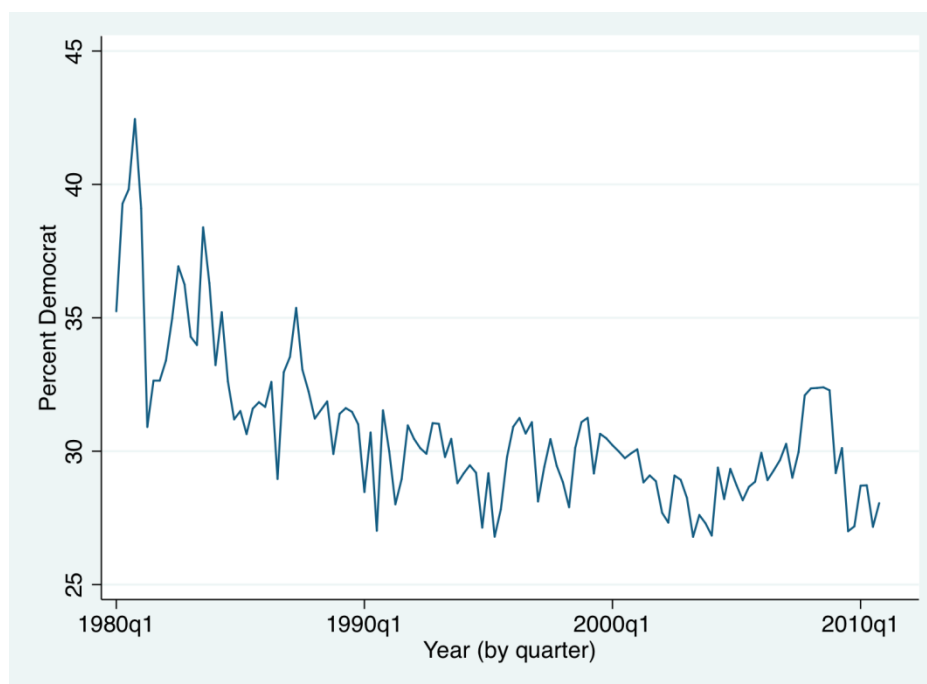
[13] If we add Democratic leaners to Figure 5, we see the same decline.

Can the 'immigrant threat' narrative help explain some of this movement in white partisanship? We turn to an analysis of the connection between immigration news framing and macropartisanship. Our models of macropartisanship use the percentage of those who identified as Democrats, Independents, and weak Republicans as dependent variables. Our primary explanatory variables of interest are those capturing the different framing dimensions used in immigrations news coverage. Specifically in terms of framing we evaluate the tone of the coverage (as measured by the ratio of negative to positive news), the use of the group centric frame (as measured by news stories focusing on Latino immigrants), and the proportion of stories that use the crime and economy issue frame.

Immigration frames are not, of course, the only factors that could drive aggregate partisanship. The two main documented sources of change in macropartisanship are experiences with the party in power and current national economic conditions (Erikson et al 1998; Fiorina 1981; MacKuen et al 1989). The former is conventionally measured with presidential approval and the latter with the national unemployment rate[14] (Erikson et al 1998; MacKuen et al 1989). To help ensure that these other factors are not driving our immigration framing results, we include both aggregate presidential approval and national unemployment in our model.[15] Finally, we also include the total number of stories on immigration to account for the possibility that agenda-setting could also influence the partisan attachments of white Americans.[16]

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[14] Presidential approval comes from the Gallup time series and the U.S. unemployment rate comes from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[15] Presidential approval is coded in such a way that the polarity corresponds to different partisan administrations consistent with MacKuen et al (1989) and subsequent research on macropartisanship.

[16] In alternate specifications we add dummy variables for the dates surrounding particularly salient immigration-related events (IRCA, Prop 187, 9/11, and immigration protests related to

We performed a series of diagnostic tests to assess the properties of our time series. First, we performed the Phillips-Perron test where the null hypothesis is that the series has a unit root with a change in its level.[17] The alternative hypothesis is that the series is stationary with a structural break. We tested this using an additive outlier (AO) model, which is appropriate for a sudden change in the series. The model utilizes an endogenous selection procedure wherein the break date is selected when the t-statistic for testing unit roots is minimized. To assess the robustness of the results, we also implemented the test using an innovational outlier (IO) model (which is appropriate for a gradual change).[18] The result from this test indicates that the presence of a gradual change should be rejected at the $p < .01$ level. Finally, we checked for the possibility of multiple breaks using the Clemente, Montañes, Reyes unit root test (Clemente et al 1998). The results indicate that the presence of multiple breaks should be also rejected at the $p < .01$ level.[19]

As with most time-series data, we were unable to reject the null of no serial correlation, using the calculated the Durbon-Watson test statistic. Thus, we estimate our time-series data using Prais-Winsten AR(1) regressions, which assumes that the errors follow a first-order autoregressive process. Table 1 looks to see if immigration coverage predicts changes in aggregate partisanship.

HR4437 in 2003) to ensure that our results were not driven by these events. The inclusion of these variables makes no difference to our overall results.

[17] The test statistic was -3.203 and significant at $p < .01$ level.

[18] We used the Clemente, Montañes, Reyes unit root test with single-mean shift, (IO) model. The coefficient value was -.31 and the t-statistic is -4.75.

[19] The coefficient from this test was -.33 and the t-statistic was -2.55.

Table 1: The Effect of Immigration Frames on White Partisanship

	Percent Democratic Identifiers	Percent Independents	Percent Weak Republican Identifiers
Immigration Frames			
TONE Negative	-.85 (.61)	.61 (.69)	-.13 (1.02)
IMMIGRANT GROUP Latino	-3.32 (1.61)**	5.01 (1.90)**	7.28 (3.00)**
ISSUE CONTENT Crime	-1.86 (1.89)	1.76 (2.01)	-1.13 (2.94)
Economy	1.62 (3.20)	-5.61 (3.17)	-.38 (4.58)
Controls			
Presidential Approval	-.05 (.02)**	-.01 (.01)	.05 (.02)**
Unemployment Rate	.34 (.30)	.51 (.14)***	-.36 (.28)
Volume of Coverage	.001 (.006)	-.004 (.006)	-.002 (.01)
Constant	32.24 (2.51)***	28.12(1.27)**	43.6 (2.40)**
N	115	115	94
R^2	.74	.44	.84

***p<.01,**p<.05, *p<.10
Coefficients are Prais-Winsten AR(1) regression estimates. Standard errors in parentheses.

As expected, the immigrant threat narrative is strongly linked to white macropartisanship. The more stories that focus on Latino immigrants, the more likely whites are to subsequently shift away from the Democratic Party and the more likely they are to identify as independents or Republicans. The model predicts a 0.7 percentage point increase in white Republican identifiers when NYT coverage of immigration focusing on Latinos increases by ten percent. A similar increase in Latino frames reduces the proportion of white Democratic identifiers by about 0.3 percent. As hypothesized, the immigrant threat narrative, as construed via frames that focus on

Latino immigrants, activates the fears that many in the public have over immigration, which makes them less likely to affiliate with the party traditionally more sympathetic to immigrants.

We also considered the possibility that group-centric frames which focus on the second largest immigrant group in the US, Asians, may provoke the same reaction among white Americans. As such, we also performed an analysis that includes Asian-immigrant frames. It does not have the same effect on macropartisanship as Latinos immigrant frames does. That is, the coefficient capturing Asian immigrant frames fails to achieve statistical significance at conventional levels.[20] As existing research suggests, Asian immigrants do not elicit the same the kinds of anxiety and fears that Latino immigrants generate, either due to the way Latinos are covered by the media (Chavez 2008) or the differential stereotypes that are associated with each group or both (Chavez 2008; Kim 1999).

These findings suggest two conclusions. First, framing effects may be more powerful than previously suggested. Real shifts in party identification – the unmoved mover of American politics – appear to be linked to how the media covers immigration. If the framing of news stories can affect the national balance of power between Democrats and Republicans, it is a formidable shaper of political behavior. Second, the immigrant threat narrative is a potent frame. Stories that highlight Latino immigrants activate the fears of large segments of the public and generate enough anxiety to sway partisan attachments.

However, the remaining estimates presented in Table 1 also indicate that not everything that the media puts forward resonates with the public enough to alter partisan identities in a measurable way. Existing research on the media framing of African Americans suggests that

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[20] The addition of these variables has no effect on the results presented here. Analysis available upon request from the authors.

crime frames can be an effective tool in shaping white views (Gilliam et al 1986; Gilliam and

Iyengar 2000). This coefficient is, not, however, statistically significant in our model. The

proportion of immigration-related stories that focused on crime is unrelated to subsequent white

partisanship. Moreover, when we controlled for other issue frames in the model, the main results

remain largely unchanged.[21] More coverage featuring border security or terrorism frames also

had no appreciable effect on aggregate white partisanship. Likewise, greater media attention to

the impact of immigration on the economy did not push white partisanship one way or the other.

There were signs, albeit weak ones, that when the *New York Times* focused specifically on

immigration policy frames, white Democratic identity increased. But we could find no link

between immigration policy coverage and Republican Party attachment or Independence. All

told issue specific frames seemed to matter little in explaining white partisanship.

There was also no evidence that agenda setting appreciably affected aggregate

partisanship. An increase in the number of immigration-related news stories may increase the

perceived salience of this issue to the public but as Table 1 reveals, there is no indication that it

leads to systematic shifts to one party or another. Alternate tests that assessed volume without

other controls, suggest that the volume of news coverage does not matter. In many

circumstances, agenda setting is one of the most powerful tools in a democracy but it appears to

be relatively unimportant for this study of partisanship. It is the content of the coverage, not the

volume of coverage that matters here.

Robustness Checks

To increase confidence in our conclusions, we conducted a series of robustness checks

altering the analysis in various, hopefully informative ways. First, rather than focusing

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[21] See Table A1 in the Online Appendix for these alternate specifications.

separately on the number of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans in the population, we

created a series of measures of overall partisanship that either measured the ratio of Democratic

identifiers and leaners to Republican identifiers and leaners or focused on the absolute difference

in the proportion of Democratic and Republican identifiers. The pattern of results was the same.

As Table 2 shows, regardless of how we measure macropartisanship, news coverage of Latinos is

associated with significant and substantial shifts to the partisan right.

Table 2: The Effect of Immigration Frames on White Macropartisanship
Dependent Variable: Democrats Relative to Republicans

	Democrats Relative to Republicans
Immigration Frames	
TONE Negative	-1.36 (1.84)
IMMIGRANT GROUP Latino	-12.03 (5.39)**
ISSUE CONTENT Crime	-2.72 (5.27)
Economy	0.87 (8.41)
Controls	
Presidential Approval	-.12 (.05)**
Unemployment Rate	.81 (.62)
Volume of Coverage	-.02 (.03)
Constant	-.55 (5.13)
N	94
R^2	.13

***p<.01,**p<.05, *p<.10
Coefficients are Prais-Winsten AR(1) regression estimates. Standard errors in parentheses.

We also looked to see if altering how we measure the key independent variables makes

any difference. Specifically, in alternate tests rather than measure the percentage of stories that

focus on each immigration frame, we focused on the total number of stories that employed each

frame. Once again, our story was unchanged. Group centric images continued to be central, while tone and issue context were not relevant to white partisan choices.

We do, however, arrive at some more interesting and novel findings if we interact the tone of coverage with the total amount of immigration coverage. Essentially, we find that tone matters more when immigration gets lots of coverage. In other words, the more overall coverage, the more negative coverage leads to declines in Democratic Party identity. This suggests that when the immigration issue is particularly salient the tone of the coverage can matter. This is, however, a very tentative finding as the interaction between tone and total coverage is only marginally significant when added to one of the models in Table 1 (the proportion Democratic) and is insignificant in the other two cases.[22]

One might also wonder whether the partisan effects of immigration framing have increased in recent decades when the Republican and Democratic Parties have been more polarized on immigration policy. It is hard to pinpoint an exact date for the divide since partisan divisions on immigration appear to evolve differently at different levels. One could argue that there was not a significant partisan gap on immigration at the presidential level until the 2012 election but also note that partisan divisions on immigration were well entrenched in California in the early 1990s (e.g. Proposition 187). We choose to separate out our analysis into periods pre- and post the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). IRCA, which was signed into law by President Reagan, is a seminal moment not only in that it generated the nation's largest scale legalization effort but also represents that last bi-partisan effort to pass major immigration legislation. We look to see if immigration framing has more partisan consequences

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[22] Analysis available upon request from authors.

when the parties diverge after 1986. As Table 3 illustrates, we find no effect of framing prior to

IRCA.

Table 3: The Effect of Immigration Frames on White Macropartisanship. Before and After ICRA

	Before ICRA	**After ICRA**
	Democrats Relative to Republicans	
Immigration Frames		
TONE Negative	-.85 (.61)	-2.18 (1.42)
IMMIGRANT GROUP Latino	-.19 (15.3)	-9.88 (3.61)***
ISSUE CONTENT Crime	-8.29 (7.80)	-.53 (4.85)
Economy	3.72 (12.50)	3.12 (7.92)
Controls		
Presidential Approval	-.07 (.09)	-.10 (.03)***
Unemployment Rate	1.99 (1.37)	-.40 (.36)
Volume of Coverage	.02 (.07)	-.003 (.02)
Constant	-19.49 (13.24)	-8.12 (2.81)***
N	34	60
R^2	.0	.51

***p<.01,**p<.05, *p<.10
Coefficients are Prais-Winsten AR(1) regression estimates. Standard errors in parentheses.

In more recent years, however, the Latino immigrant frame in the media exerts a

statistically significant and substantial effect on partisanship. This is further evidence that the

real world political effects of framing depend on context.

The test in Table 3 is important for a second reason. The fact that white Republican identity and media attention to immigration both increase substantially from 1980 to 1986 raises the possibility of spurious correlation. However, since most of the shift in white partisanship occurs by 1986, we can assuage concerns about spurious correlation by dropping this time period and re-running our analysis, as we do in Table 3. This analysis strengthens confidence in the relationships since it shows that frames matter even after the large-scale shift to the Republican Party occurred.

Two Concerns

One legitimate concern that skeptics might raise is whether immigration coverage by the NYT can in and of itself really have this sort of impact on partisanship. After all, the vast majority of Americans never read the newspaper. We, in fact, have no doubt that the NYT cannot do all of this alone. Robustness checks indicate that immigration coverage in the NYT over this period mirrors that of other news outlets. [23] There is already persuasive, if somewhat anecdotal, evidence that the media generally chooses an immigrant threat narrative when it covers immigration (Merolla et al 2013; Chavez 2008). As we mentioned before, there is also compelling evidence that the NYT coverage closely matches other print coverage and television coverage (Hassell 2014; Durr et al 1997). Thus, the effects on macropartisanship that are evident

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[23] We analyzed *TIME* magazine and *US News and World Report* magazine immigration coverage. We applied the same coding scheme as the one used to analyze the content of the *New York Times*. We find a similar trend in terms of the volume and tone of coverage; that is, we see an increase the in number of immigration articles from 2006-2011 and most of these news stories adopt a negative tone. For instance, 72 percent of all immigration articles from *US News and World Report* are negatively framed, and for TIME magazine, this percentage is even greater at 88.7 percent. Thus, the patterns in immigration coverage we observe from the *New York Times* are fairly conservative when compared to other news sources. Finally, the policy content of these ads followed the same patterns as those we uncovered in the *New York Times*. This provides us with assurance that the news outlet used in our analysis is not a major outlier when compared to other sources.

here are the cumulated effects of the entire range of media coverage at different points in time. The NYT may not be powerful enough to influence the partisan balance of power on its own but the media as a whole is capable of doing just that.

One could also question a different aspect of the causal story. Cynics about media framing might argue that the media is simply reporting real world events and it is the events rather than the media itself that is driving changes in white partisanship. We offer two rejoinders. First, we know that all media outlets have a bias in the newsmaking process (Graber 1996), and no coverage of news is ever purely objective. Second, the media coverage of immigration is overwhelmingly negative yet academic studies of immigration show that immigrants today are assimilating just as rapidly as immigrants in the past and that the economic consequences of immigration are either positive or inconsequential for the vast majority of Americans (Alba and Nee 2005; Bean and Stevens 2003).

The media has the choice of covering a complex, multi-faceted issue like immigration in any number of different ways. If the underlying story is a relatively positive one, why is the coverage negative? We suspect that because the news media outlets are primarily driven by profit (Hamilton 2000), they are apt to favor negative stories because they garner attention; such stories drive up readership and in turn increase profit. Thus, even though the vast majority of Americans does not see or experience these events first-hand, the media plays a critical role in deciding what the public is exposed to. By choosing what to cover or not cover and how to cover it, the media can influences not only opinions but also partisan identities in ways that are consequential to political outcomes.

Conclusion

Our three decades long content analysis of a prominent national newspaper reveals that much of the news coverage of immigration promulgates a Latino threat narrative. Even within the liberal confines of the *New York Times*, coverage is lopsided and emphasizes the negative consequences of immigration and focuses on Latino images. All of this fuels fears about immigration and shifts the core partisan attachments of white America to the right. After reading about the negative impact of Latino immigration, white America responds by identifying more with the Republican Party.

These patterns have important implications both for our understanding of framing and media effects and for our understanding of the place of immigration and race in American politics. First, for media framing, our results suggest that the media and framing may be more powerful than recent minimalist critics have argued (Druckman 2004). In our analysis, we have abandoned the isolated world of the lab in order to examine media and framing effects in the real world where individuals are exposed to a plethora of different messages across various formats – messages that they can miss in the dense media environment. We assess the effect of news coverage at one point in time on subsequent changes in white partisanship over a thirty year time span while controlling for other factors that influence partisanship. Our findings indicate that the connection between news coverage and party identification is both clear and pronounced.

Our analysis differs from existing studies of framing effects in two other important ways. First, unlike previous studies that look for relatively short-term individual level shifts on specific issue positions, we focus on party identification, one of the most stable, most deep-seated psychological attachments in the realm of politics. Partisan attachments are not fleeting, oft-altered top-of-the-head responses. Party identification is, for many Americans, something that arrives in early adulthood and rarely if ever changes. The fact that the group frames presented by

the media predict changes in white partisanship indicates the powerful, wide-ranging effects that framing can have. Moreover, that these framing effects work at the aggregate level lead to real shifts in the balance of national partisan power only serves to reinforce the notion that media framing can change politics at its core.

We also garner some insight into the question of when framing matters. Why do we see such powerful media effects here when any number of recent studies have shown that framing has relatively little, long-term impact in the real world. We think the answer is that immigration may be a unique issue in American politics (Tichenor 2002). For most issues there are vocal champions in the media on both sides. But as we have seen here, positive stories on immigration are relatively rare. Even in the liberal bastion of the *New York Times*, negative stories on immigration outnumber positive stories by four to one.[24] More than likely that ratio of negative to positive is more severe elsewhere. If the public is only exposed to one frame and no counter-frame, this frame can be powerful. On the other hand, if the respondent is exposed to a counter-frame, the effects generally wash out. Immigration coverage may have widespread effects because it is one-sided. Immigration may shift white Americans to the right because that one-sided coverage is predominately negative. At the same time, much more work needs to be done before we can answer this question with certainty. Immigration differs from other issues on several other dimensions. The highly salient and symbolic nature of immigration, the

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[24] It may also matter that the discussion among political elites on immigration is equally skewed. There are many outspoken opponents of immigration on the Republican side of the aisle but relatively few forceful defenders of immigration on the Democratic side. Wong's (2013) analysis of the vote in Congress shows for example that over the last decade over 90 percent of Republicans favor the restrictionist side on the typical immigration bill while only about 40 percent of Democrats favor the liberal side.

ambivalence that many white Americans feel about immigration could also help to shape the pronounced framing effects we see here.

The findings in this article hint at the growing role that immigration and race may be playing in American politics. What is striking about the patterns we present is not that immigration or race is relevant to American politics. We know that many white Americans have felt threatened by minorities and different immigrant groups across American history (Tichenor 2002). What is impressive is just how deep the effects still are today. In a political era, in which many claim that the significance of race has faded, Latino frames on immigration are linked to a shift in the political orientation of many members of the white population. Party identification – the most influential variable in American politics – responds, at least in part, to the way individual white Americans see immigration in the news. In short, who we are politically seems to be shaped substantially by concerns about immigration and racial change.

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