
Immigration, Trump, and Agenda-Setting in the 2016 Election

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Donald J. Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States, with immigration, and undocumented immigration in particular, serving as a pivotal topic. Exit polling by CNN found that 13 percent of voters considered this to be the most important issue facing the country, tied for third with foreign policy, behind the economy and terrorism.¹ From the very beginning, a cornerstone of Donald J. Trump's candidacy for president was a pledge to toughen the response to migrants, and to "build a great wall" on the United States' southern border. Yet the two most recent U.S. elections for president, in 2008 and 2012, appeared to include far less focus on immigration. In fact, the subject had been referred to by one notable immigration scholar as a "second-tier policy priority,"² with much of the focus on unemployment, and dissatisfaction with government.³ What explains these differences in the importance of immigration—was it the context, the media, or the candidate that drove the focus on this topic? For the sake of choosing a particularly relevant

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means of testing the question, this research examines Trump and immigration, a candidate and topic seemingly inextricably tied during the recent election.

An ongoing debate in scholarship about leaders (including presidential candidates) has to do with agenda-setting, meaning the channels that determine the most salient topics for voting. In the electoral environment, are issues that garner public focus and by which voters judge candidates driven by broader socio-economic trends, media, or politicians themselves? In order to analyze this question, the research considers variation in public perception over past elections about one of the topics upon which Trump rode to victory: immigration. It determines: 1) whether immigration indeed held particular resonance in 2016 as compared to prior elections; and, if so, 2) the most influential agenda-setting channel related to immigration: the broader context, the media, a candidate's communication, or a combination among them. The findings have implications for how we view this critical element of leadership—the ability of candidates to define political discourse during election season.

The remainder of this article is divided into a number of sections. It begins by providing background on recent U.S. elections, and evidence that there were indeed differences in the views of voters. In doing so it determines whether immigration was actually viewed as more important by the public in 2016 in comparison to previous elections. Next, it briefly reviews key scholarly explanations as to why immigration increases or decreases in the public consciousness, leading to this article's main hypotheses. Then, it considers evidence for each of the hypothesized explanations for attitudes about immigration during the most recent U.S. presidential election, and whether leaders set the agenda. Finally, the conclusion pulls together the main findings, and suggests implications for the future.

II. BACKGROUND

In the United States, there is variation in 1) mention of immigration as a top issue by the electorate, and 2) opinions about whether it is beneficial or harmful to the country. The 2016 election revealed an up-tick in both the issue's recognition and unfavorable views.

A. Ranking Immigration

While historically the United States public has considered immigration to be of secondary importance in comparison to foreign policy

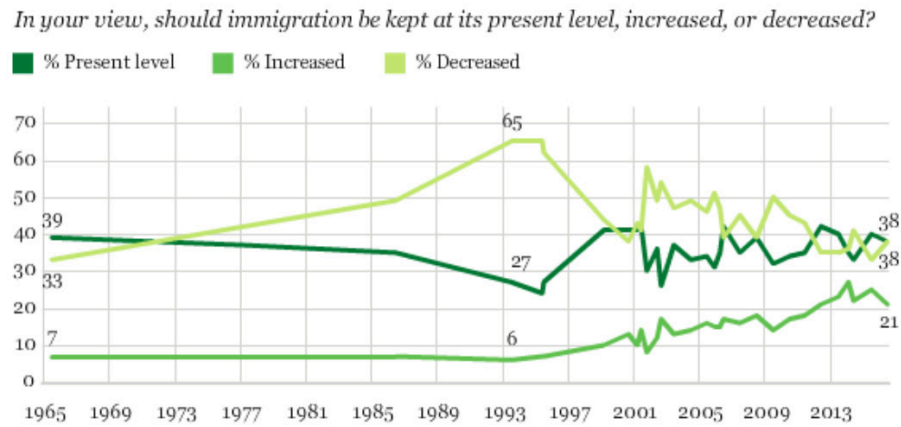
concerns like terrorism, or domestic issues such as the state of the economy, there can be notable variation in the U.S. electorate's focus on immigration, depending on the context. Although before the year 2000 it was unusual for the U.S. public to consider immigration among top concerns, recent events periodically raised its profile.⁴ For example, the 9/11 terrorist attacks clearly showed that U.S. borders are porous. Later, in 2006, widespread marches and protests in support of immigration reform led 19 percent of respondents to claim immigration as the nation's top problem. And yet two years later, studies show that immigration had less than expected influence on the 2008 election, when, economic concerns failed to translate into voter demand for hardened anti-immigrant policies or candidate.⁵ Then, in July 2014, with a surge of unaccompanied minors from Central America, 17 percent of the public considered immigration a top issue.⁶ As Newport explains, "immigration flares up from time to time on this most important problem measure."⁷

Given these broader trends, research findings confirm that the importance of immigration in the minds of voters sometimes varies across presidential elections, from year to year, and even on a monthly basis. As Suro explains in a 2009 study of the U.S. electorate, "immigration ebbs and flows in importance," and its "ranking as a priority has risen and fallen sharply depending on its prominence in the policy arena."⁸ However, his investigation also shows that sometimes a socio-economic context seeming to favor immigration as an influential topic still does not affect election results.⁹

B. Historical Views About Immigration During Elections

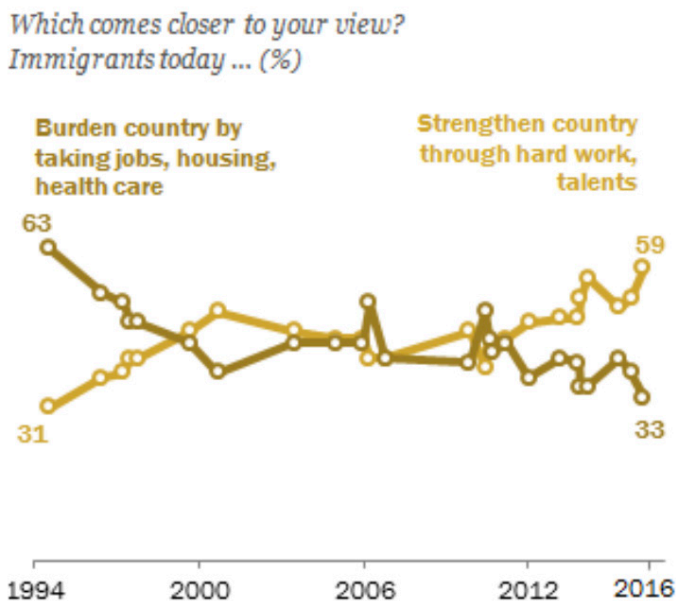
Although views towards immigration in the United States change over time, they have remained generally positive during the first decades of the 21st century.¹⁰ A 2015 Pew study found that nationwide support for immigrants in 2015 was near its highest point over the past 20 years, with 51 percent seeing immigrants as strengthening rather than burdening the country.¹¹ This compares to the mid-1990s, when nearly two in three Americans believed that immigration should be decreased (see Figure 1).¹²

Figure 1: U.S. Public's Views on Immigration¹³



Notably, Figure 1 also shows that there can be short and sharp rises and falls in public views, such as post-9/11. Additionally, one can see about a 4 percent increase in support of immigration decreases during the year following Trump’s declaration of his presidential campaign in June 2015. During that same time period, however, Pew research in Figure 2 indicates an increase in the percentage (59 percent) of people considering immigrants as a strength, based on hard work and talents, as compared to those viewing them as a burden (33 percent). As such, there might be increased attention on the issue, but it is not necessarily negative.

Figure 2: Views of Immigrant Impact on the U.S.¹⁴



C. The 2016 Election

Polling appears to reveal that in comparison to recent elections, immigration played a more prominent role in people's voting in 2016. Gallup Poll data from March of election years shows that the U.S. public's views on immigration varied—in response to the question “how much do you personally worry about illegal immigration?”, a combined 59 percent of respondents said a “great deal” or a “fair amount” in 2004, 70 percent in 2008, 57 percent in 2012, and 60 percent in 2016. However, polling seemed to find that immigration served as a top issue as last year progressed. By May 2016, voters cited immigration as the second most important issue for the incoming president. In response to a question on what they wanted a president of either party to address, respondents listed the top-5 as the economy (19 percent), immigration (14 percent), healthcare (10 percent), national defense (9 percent), and education (8 percent).¹⁵ Pew Research also noted a shift in opinion; while 54 percent of respondents in their survey saw immigration as important in 2008, this dropped to 41 percent in 2012, and then spiked to 70 percent in 2016.¹⁶ In addition, CNN exit polls confirmed that voters took immigration into account. The issue did not break into the top-5 in 2008 or 2012, but on election day 2016 tied for third in mentions as the key issue, with the economy at 52 percent, terrorism at 18 percent, and immigration and health care at 13 percent each.¹⁷

D. Summary

Overall, this background highlights how immigration was indeed more relevant in the 2016 election. The measurable differences in perceptions about immigration across time means that 1) it is possible that there are elections in which immigration plays a more important role than one would expect, and 2) there are influences on variation in public views, such as the broader socio-economic context, the media, and the candidates themselves.

III. THEORY

Literature reveals a number of ways in which the political topic of immigration is influenced, with three of the most important being socio-economic context, media, and the politician's own discourse. The notion of agenda-setting is traditionally seen as the media's efforts to establish

subject-matter priorities for the public to follow and consider important. As Min and McCombs (2016) point out, “at the core of the agenda-setting process is a nexus of interactions among the media agenda, a variety of political agendas, and the public agenda.”¹⁸ If it is not bottom-up influences based on socio-economic conditions, could it also be top-down positions taken by the politicians and mediated by journalists?

A. Context

Unsurprisingly, there is evidence that the broader contextual situation influences the attention paid towards immigration.

Public views on immigration are complex, and might be affected by multiple socio-economic elements. Suro (2009) notes that the factors bringing about change in public opinion can sometimes be difficult to define, conceding that “it is impossible to draw clear lines of causality” when there is variation over time in opinions on the topic.¹⁹ The existing scholarship provides a number of reasons that immigration may be consequential in a particular election year, thereby affecting the viewpoints of voters.²⁰ First, increases or decreases in the number of arriving immigrants may have differential effects on local communities. Second, there can be gradual or rapid changes in other contextual factors—such as the overall state of the economy and levels of unemployment, or a terrorist attack—which alter the prioritization of and viewpoints towards immigration. Third, there might be variation in the discussion and debate about migration among presidential candidates, and the coverage of the issue by the media. It appears that in the 2016 vote, not only did immigration influence voters’ choices, so too did leading politicians harness public sentiment in order to gain public support.

B. Media

In scholarship on agenda-setting, it is argued that the media has a particular influence on public opinion in terms of the particular issues that draw their attention, as well as their perspectives and importance.²¹ McCombs (2011) notes the media’s effect can be measured and compared across elections, and is often looked at in terms of TV and newspapers.²² Various forms of media and actors “play an important part in shaping political reality.”²³ The media often has an influence on the public’s choice of a candidate, depending on who they think is most capable of addressing it successfully.²⁴ In addition, “some aspects of issues are emphasized in the

news and in how people think and talk about issues.”²⁵ The way this works is that the media gives salience to a topic, by drawing attention, mentioning characteristics, and comparing its level of importance compared to other issues.²⁶

C. Politicians

Literature also considers changes in the discourse of presidential candidates, as they seek to define the issues on which voters decide an election. According to Kendall (1995), the candidates seek to appeal to the public interests, by promoting their candidacy and “presidential campaign discourse” at a national level.²⁷ Interestingly, Kendall also states that financing, defined positions on issues, and consideration of image are essential, all aspects which did not appear to hold Trump back.²⁸ Kendall notes that a campaign’s discourse requires an approach to media, and that while candidates can try to work around the newspaper and TV positions, they are largely dependent on the media for exposure to their messages.²⁹ Overall, communications are a major part of campaigns, enabling candidates to promote their positions in search of public support.³⁰ In defining the issues, and in an environment of “competing discourses,” they signal that they are the right (wo)man for the job.³¹ Stuckey and Antczak (1995) consider as “the most fundamental goal of campaign communication: establishing the authority of the candidate’s perspective, the foundation of interpretive dominance.”³²

D. Summary

Admittedly, there may be interconnection among these explanations. For example, an altered economic context does not preclude a politician from also putting forth their interpretation of key events. As Kendall (1995) puts it, “political communication is an interactive process, involving candidates, media, and citizens.”³³ The next section examines evidence in response to the question of what led to greater resonance of the topic of immigration.

IV. EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

This section reflects on the three proposed reasons that the issue of immigration rose in perceived relevance in the U.S. public consciousness during 2016.

A. Context

Economic Changes

There is mixed evidence as to whether the state of the economy can influence perceptions of immigrants. Some historical evidence shows that concerns about immigration typically rise in times of greater unemployment.³⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, however, opinion about immigration does not always coincide with the state of the economy. Roberto Suro's research analyzed differences in the American public's response to immigration, and from 2003 to 2009 noted little difference in its effect. In fact, he found that the focus on immigration remains more or less stable, and even decreased in spite of the economic recession.³⁵ It also seems fair to assume that lower wage growth and lower consumer confidence would be associated with more negative views of immigration.

Leading up to the 2016 election, economic indicators remained fairly positive. An unemployment rate that peaked at 10 percent in October 2009 and was at 8.0 percent as recently as January 2013, had declined to 4.6 percent in 2016.³⁶ Consumer confidence was steadily higher in the 2012–2016 period as compared to the previous four years.³⁷ In November 2015, Casselman of FiveThirtyEight noted that indicators showed that the presidential election would be affected by mixed economic concerns, including a decline in unemployment, but a stagnation in the number of people employed, and a rise in GDP during previous quarters that coincided with a fall median household income.³⁸

Demographic Changes

Immigrants in the United States are increasing in overall numbers, and as a percentage of the population. The last few decades saw a significant rise in the overall number of immigrants, from 19.8 million in 1990, to 40.7 million in 2012, making up 7.9 percent and then 13.0 percent of the overall population.³⁹ This is not quite the level of recorded historic high of 14.9 percent in 1890,⁴⁰ though projections are that immigrants will make up 18 percent of the U.S. population in 2065.⁴¹ The origin of the immigrants also shifted, from predominately European countries, to Latin America and Asia.⁴² Combined, this has led to demographic change in the U.S., with the country on track to become “majority minority” in 2055.

Immigrants did not settle uniformly around the country. While the overall number of immigrants in the U.S. increased over the past decades,

those states with the highest percentage of their population being immigrants remained largely the same, led by California and New York.⁴³ The states that already had a high immigrant population leaned Democratic. In terms of the percentage change in the immigrant population, however, Republican-leaning states topped the list. Comparing 2000 to 2010, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Kentucky all saw at least a 75 percent increase in their number of immigrants. Between 2010 and 2015, the top states were North Dakota, Wyoming, West Virginia, South Dakota, and Delaware.

Critical Domestic Events

Events can also influence voter perceptions. Politics, for example, affects the public's focus, as "the level of interest in immigration seems highly responsive to its prominence in the political arena."⁴⁴ One area of focus are political conversations about immigration, such as when there are publicized Congressional debates.⁴⁵ For example, immigrants last drew attention during comprehensive immigration reform efforts in mid-2007,⁴⁶ and Obama's executive order to limit deportations in late 2014. Suro (2009) draws his conclusion about domestic events from research showing that "public interest in the issue is marked by sharp ups and downs coinciding with policy debates and the resultant media attention."⁴⁷ Another way that attention becomes attuned to immigration is what Tichenor (2002) refers to as "new international crises or threats."⁴⁸ Of course the 9/11 terrorist attack serves as a prime example, with Table 1 showing a quick but relatively small rise in those favoring a decrease in immigration. Over the past years, a number of further events, from the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013, to the San Bernadino shooting in December 2015, along with the concomitant media hype, seem to have amped up the public's focus on immigration.

In the end, once these intense events pass, however, Muste (2013) finds that anti-immigrant attitudes decrease in intensity and remain steady.⁴⁹ Instead, there needs to be more than just the context. As Suro (2009) notes, "the extent to which preoccupation with immigration relative to other issues rises and falls with its prominence in the public arena, regardless of the facts on the ground, suggests that concern over this issue is highly susceptible to messaging and leadership."⁵⁰

Given this background, Trump appeared to be the right man at the right time, able to ride a wave of discontent with immigration among at least a subset of the population. Immigration, along with trade, served as

one of the main populist messages that drove support to Trump's camp.⁵¹ In fact, "Trump bet his whole campaign on the idea that popular hostility to liberal immigration and free trade policies would propel him to the White

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House. From the beginning to the end of his campaign, he returned time and again to those two cornerstone issues."⁵²

Though his anti-immigrant messaging was not a new stance, Trump can be credited with recognizing the populist groundswell and those disaffected by how the economy and immigration did not work for them. Overall, this gives some credence to arguments in favor of

context, though it is not clear that there are fundamental changes in overall viewpoints in the U.S. The next sections consider the role played by the media and politicians.

B. Media

Role and Overall Coverage

At the end of 2016, a report by the Shorenstein Center found that during the 2016 primaries and the general election period Trump received more press than any other person.⁵³ From the announcement that he was running for president, to his nomination by the Republican party, Trump's news coverage at least doubled that of his closest rival.⁵⁴ During the general election the media's focus on Trump was on average 15 percent higher than that for Clinton.⁵⁵ The Tyndall Report also found that traditional news networks had a near absence of focus on policy. Reporting on the top 20 news stories of 2016 showed that coverage of Trump on ABC, CBS, and NBC more than doubled that of Clinton, and made up more than one third of all of the campaign stories.⁵⁶ Trump's high level of coverage gave greater opportunity to focus public attention on some of his core issues, including immigration.

The media plays an essential role in informing the U.S. public about candidates and policy issues. Research by Menjivar (2016) confirms that this is also the case with immigration, and she states that "news outlets are where attitudes are shaped and through which politicians' actions are conveyed to their constituencies, as well as, in turn, what politicians may react to."⁵⁷ Part of this depends on the way immigration is framed, and

difference in terms like “illegal” or “undocumented,” which can affect views about whether or not immigrants need a pathway to citizenship.⁵⁸

At the same time, the type of media exposure affects the electorate’s type of response. A Pew Research Center study released in July 2016 found voters exhausted by the coverage, and stating that there is too much focus on candidates’ comments (44 percent too much as compared to 15 percent too little), and not enough on candi-

dates’ stances on the issues (13 percent too much and 55 percent too little).⁵⁹ In addition, extensive negative coverage weakened the public’s ability to differentiate between candidates Clinton and Trump. The criticism meant that their favorability ratings reached historical lows, and that it became difficult for viewers to differentiate between the magnitude of allegations directed at them, the result being that “large numbers of voters concluded that the candidates’ indiscretions were equally

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disqualifying.”⁶⁰ At the same time, the media’s negative tendencies became even more accentuated in reporting about immigration. During 2010-2016 the ratio of economic news stories was 2:1 negative to positive, and for immigration 5:1.⁶¹ As such, even when immigration was mentioned, it was likely unfavorable, and so played into Trump’s hand in critiquing government policy on the subject.

Issue Selection

Admittedly, immigration was already seen as an important election issue by the public and the media. In May 2015, before Trump announced his campaign, a USA Today headline read “Immigration at front of 2016 presidential race.”⁶² Furthermore, Newport writes that “all of this suggests that Trump’s focus on immigration in his controversial campaign announcement remarks are focused on an issue that—while not the very top problem on the public’s radar—is at least one of a cluster of mid-range issues of concern to Americans.”⁶³ It is not that Trump increased attention to immigration in general, since this is already a major issue. But the case can be made for his continual focus on the issue leading to greater attention on the concept of a border wall with Mexico, and even the possibility

of mass deportations. Though immigration was already in the American consciousness, it can be argued that Trump increased attention about the issue more recently. In part, it became a symbolic issue for voters.

And yet in 2016, pre-election news coverage often overlooked policy; some believe that in so doing it failed in its role of informing the electorate.⁶⁴ According to the December 2016 Shorenstein Center report, it is now typical for reporting on presidential elections to focus on the horserace between candidates, as opposed to policy stances, and 2016 was no different (42 percent of all stories compared to 10 percent). When media did cover policy, immigration stood near the top of the list.⁶⁵ Among stories, only 9 percent on Clinton, and 12 percent on Trump addressed policy issues. Though minimal, there was more coverage of Trump than Clinton, and within this, a greater focus on immigration policy.⁶⁶ As explained in the Tyndall Report, “this election was presented as a contest of personalities rather than of public policy issues.”⁶⁷ It found a complete lack of in-depth coverage of policy issues among the traditional news networks of ABC, CBS, and NBC. Whereas the three channels had a total of 220 minutes of policy coverage during the 2008 campaign, this diminished to 32 minutes through October 2016.⁶⁸ Some of that, by CBS, briefly looked at immigration, but the report noted the complete absence of a number of topics, stating “to the extent that these issues have been mentioned, it has been on the candidates’ terms, not on the networks’ initiative.”⁶⁹ The Stanford Political Journal also concluded that “campaigns seem to be focusing more on candidates’ personas rather than on their policy platforms,” as Trump took an entertainment approach.⁷⁰

There is evidence that rather than determining which topics received coverage, the media followed Trump’s lead on the issues. Ballotpedia examined coverage of Trump on major news websites between 22 June and 22 September 2015, and coded major issues.⁷¹ The study added three additional codes due to frequency, based on Trump’s comments on McCain, Mexican immigrants, and Muslims in the U.S. This shows how he drove the news content. The report noted that Trump’s website had little substance beyond explanations of positions on immigration, taxes, and the Second Amendment. The most covered issues were 1) Mexican immigrants, and 2) Trump’s campaign and interaction with the media. When only policy issues were considered, they were dominated by his comments on Mexico, immigration policy, anti-Muslim sentiment, and McCain, in that order. The speech in which he declared his run for the presidency defined anti-immigration as one of his core policies. This, along with an immigration policy on his campaign website, “continues to receive, more attention from

the news outlets included in this study than any other issue.” The majority of the coverage was critical of Trump’s stance on immigration, though tellingly, a CNN conversation with a small group of Trump supporters found that none were thrown off by his comments.⁷²

Far-Right Messaging

At the same time, Trump’s messaging aligned with the anti-immigrant agenda of the right-wing media. In March 2017, Columbia Journalism Review released its findings an examination of more than 1.25 million online news stories between 1 April 2015 and 8 November 2016, and noted the effect of right-wing media, as well as the symbiosis between Trump and Breitbart. Each already possessed concerns about immigration, with Trump expressing concerns in the 1980s, while “Breitbart had an ideology that pre-dated the Trump candidacy.”⁷³ Their overlapping interests, explained Zuckerman (2016), led to Breitbart’s amplification of Trump’s anti-immigrant message to the media environment at large.⁷⁴ Whereas, between 10-12 percent of stories from Fox, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, CNN, Politico, and the Huffington Post touched on immigration, 38 percent of Breitbart stories did so.⁷⁵ As a result, “Donald Trump’s substantive agenda—heavily focused on immigration and direct attacks on Hillary Clinton—came to dominate public discussions.”⁷⁶

There is no doubt Trump rose in stature because of the great deal of media focus. Ultimately, while this section shows that the media does play an important role in agenda-setting, the next reveals how Trump played the situation to his advantage, so his positions on immigration received extensive coverage. Given the media’s obsession with Trump, and his focus on irregular immigration, one can argue that the presidential candidate’s positions drove public focus on the topic. As Newport (2016) explains, “Presidential candidate Donald Trump brought the issue of immigration back into the forefront of the news media focus” in his speech announcing his run for president.⁷⁷

C. Candidate

Messaging Style

Trump received a far higher amount of coverage, in large part due to the way he communicated his messages. As the Shorenstein Center puts it, his language and approach drew journalists because of its atypical

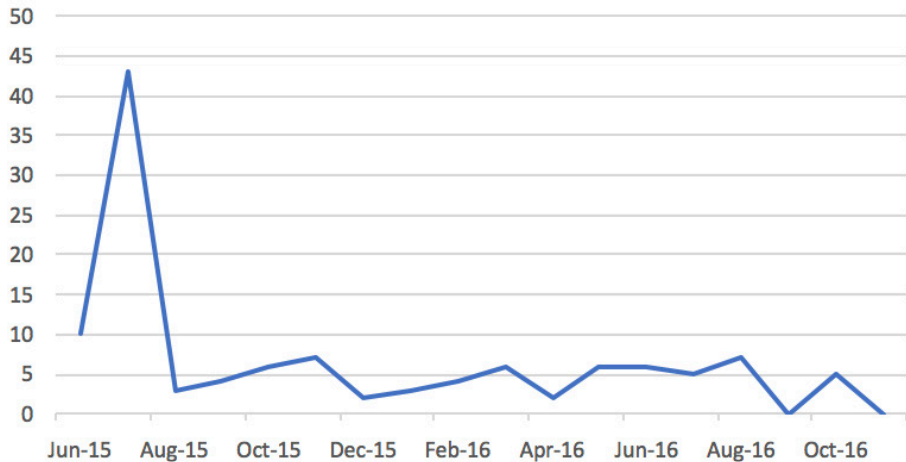
nature, often outrageous, such that Trump met journalists' story needs as no other presidential nominee in modern times.⁷⁸ In the Republican and Democratic primaries, Trump staked out the most extreme position on undocumented immigration. With the majority of candidates favoring some means of undocumented to stay in the country, Trump was the only person to call for deportations.⁷⁹ In addition, "Trump's words made it newsworthy. Immigrants were 'rapists,' 'murderers,' 'terrorists.'"⁸⁰ Somehow, despite what many referred to as anti-American and xenophobic statements, the political environment did not punish Trump for transgressions. As Newport wrote in July 2015, his aim "to secure the country's borders to prevent illegal immigrants is something most Americans will agree with—perhaps because it's hard to disagree with a proposal to do more to stop something that is illegal," and meaning that there was a fit with sufficient public opinion.⁸¹

The continual shifts by Trump in his positions drew further reporting and "captured journalists' attention."⁸² Policy positions often lack the dynamism desired by the news cycle, so that "when a candidate first announces a policy stand, it makes news. Later on, it's old news and likely to make headlines only if it has a new wrinkle."⁸³ NBC news reported that Trump's stances on issues changed frequently during the 511 days between the beginning of his presidential campaign, and the election. On immigration, for example, he took 19 stances, referring to a border wall and deportation, but later a "softening" of this position, then spoke about a "deportation force," but also a path to citizenship.⁸⁴ Whatever his final position, it appears that this approach enabled Trump to maintain press coverage about immigration and his (often) hardline take on the issue. Evidence of shifting positions occurred almost as soon as Trump announced his presidency on 16 June 2015. Three days after his pronouncement, and criticism of a permeable U.S.-Mexico frontier, Trump tweeted a more conciliatory message "I like Mexico and love the spirit of Mexican people, but we must protect our borders from people, from all over, pouring into the U.S.," only to follow it an hour later with "druggies, drug dealers, rapists and killers are coming across the southern border."⁸⁵ In this way, it appears that Trump was able to drive the media towards his agenda. At the same time, though Trump's specific policy changed, he remained steadfast in his commitment to some type of hardening of the border, and this won the admiration of his supporters.

Individual Communication

Trump's reliance on Twitter also appeared to do an end run on the media. As a *Wired.com* article noted a week after the election, "the President-elect has shown he can turn a news cycle in 140 characters or less."⁸⁶ His followers, and therefore likely his influence, increased over time. Zuckerman (2017) referred to him as "a candidate who personally used social media with an extremely personal idiosyncratic voice, and I think that's quite powerful."⁸⁷ Figure 3 shows how many tweets Trump made in reference to the U.S.-Mexico border, and how he began his campaign with a flurry of comments.

Figure 3: Number of Trump's Border-related Tweets per Month (June 2015 to November 2016)



As the months passed, Trump's tweets about the border declines, but each individual message drew an increasing number of followers. Table 1 shows how they rose after the first Republican debate on 6 August 2015, and then even more the following year. Certainly there was some variation in response depending on the particular content of each tweet, as shown in the 19 October 2016 message, his last tweet about immigration before election day.

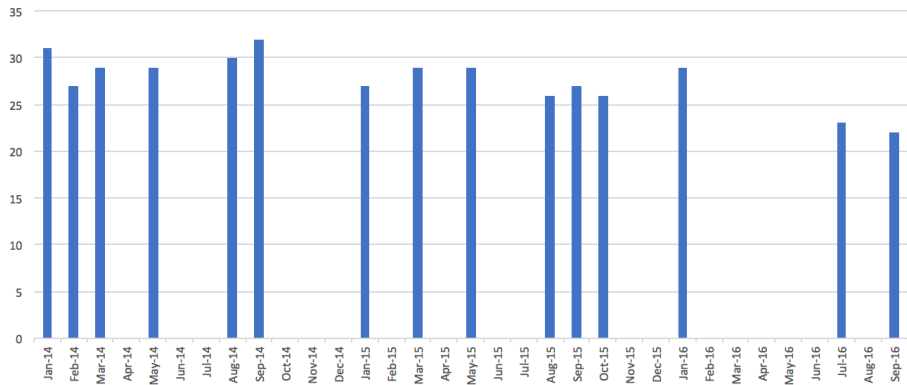
Table 1: Select Trump Tweets and Number of Retweets and Likes

<i>Date</i>	<i>Tweet</i>	<i># of Retweets</i>	<i># of Likes</i>
30 June 2015	"We MUST have strong borders and stop illegal immigration. Without that we do not have a country. Also, Mexico is killing U.S. on trade. WIN!"	1,289	2,161
25 July 2015	"A nation WITHOUT BORDERS is not a nation at all. We must have a wall. The rule of law matters. Jeb just doesn't get it."	2,763	5,274
22 August 2015	"Now that I started my war on illegal immigration and securing the border, most other candidates are finally speaking up. Just politicians!"	3,691	7,987
30 August 2016	"From day one I said that I was going to build a great wall on the SOUTHERN BORDER, and much more. Stop illegal immigration"	11,040	33,318
19 October 2016	"One of my first acts as President will be to deport the drug lords and then secure the border"	6,443	15,921

Source: LexisNexis and in domestic and international newspapers.

Though Trump's attacks on immigrants did not diminish overall public support for them, it is likely that he directed his comments towards supporters. Notably, responses to a CBS News Poll conducted periodically from 2014 through September 2016, and asking about views on illegal immigrants, show a decline in the desire for immigrants to leave (see Figure 4).⁸⁸

Figure 4: Percentage Stating Illegal Immigrants in the U.S. Should be “Required to Leave”



Source: LexisNexis and in domestic and international newspapers.

Increased Focus

There is mixed evidence as to whether or not Trump himself increased focus on immigration. According to Politifact, the candidate’s personal claims are often overstated. They investigated his statement during the first debate among Republican candidates that, “if it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even be talking about illegal immigration.”⁸⁹ In August 2015, Politifact conducted a Lexis-Nexis search to examine the association between the terms “undocumented” and “illegal immigrant” and reference to “president” during the 51 days after his 16 June 2015 presidential declaration, and the same time period before. The results showed little change, with “undocumented” appearing less in major newspapers (from 65 to 42), with “illegal immigrants” being more common (from 60 to 79).⁹⁰ If this is extended to the 511 days between Trump’s 16 June 2015 announcement of his candidacy and the 8 November 2016 election, as compared to the 511 days preceding the election (back to 20 January 2014), we see similar mixed results. However, if the terms are changed to “border wall” and “deportation,” the increase in the frequency of these terms is significant (see Table 2).

Table 2: Major Newspaper Mentions in Searches for Key Terms

Time Period	20 January 2014 to 15 June 2015	16 June 2015 to 8 November 2016
Term “undocumented” within 10 words of “president”	1,060	745
Term “illegal immigrant” within 10 words of “president”	1,942	1,468
Term “border wall” within 10 words of “president”	2	140
Term “deportation” within 10 words of “president”	639	1,534

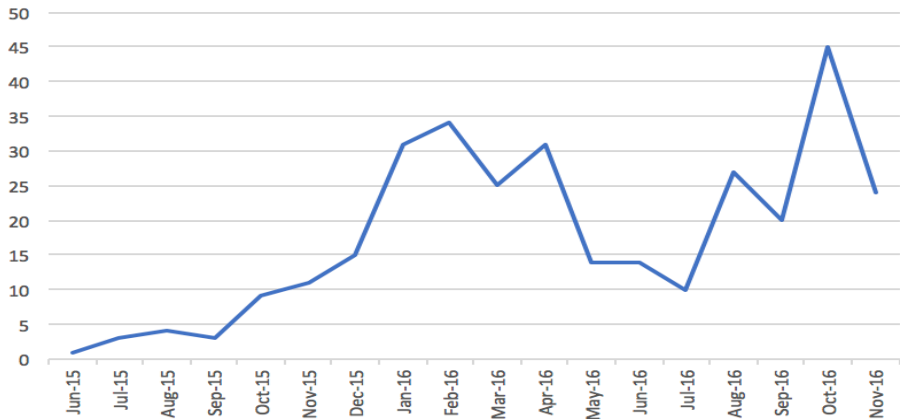
Source: LexisNexis and in domestic and international newspapers.

Causation cannot be proven, but there does appear to be a correlation between Trump’s mentions of the U.S. border with Mexico, and an increased focus on this topic. Trump himself raised the profile of immigration. As Newport and Brands wrote for Gallup in October 2016, “immigration has become a significant issue in the 2016 presidential campaign, in large part because of Republican candidate Donald Trump’s continuing emphasis on high-profile proposals to restrict who comes into the country and to determine what happens to immigrants here illegally now.”⁹¹

An important question is whether Trump swayed people towards this position, or if he only attracted those already possessing similar viewpoints. The answer is probably a bit of both.

Nevertheless, an important question is whether Trump swayed people towards this position, or if he only attracted those already possessing similar viewpoints. The answer is probably a bit of both. The views of those backing Trump are indeed more negative toward immigration.⁹² As of August 2016, the Pew Research Center found that 66 percent of potential voters favoring Trump felt immigration was a major problem, as compared to 17 percent of Clinton supporters.⁹³ In terms of the border wall, 79 percent of Trump voters favor this as compared to 10 percent of Clinton supporters.⁹⁴ One possibility is to consider the effort that Trump made in conducting campaign rallies (Figure 5), and comparing the number of rallies with increases in searches for terms in Google (Figures 6-8).

Figure 5: Number of Trump's Campaign Rallies per Month (June 2015 to November 2016)



If the number of Trump's campaign rallies serve a proxy for getting his own message out to the public, an increase of the public's focus on deportations and a wall on the southern U.S. border is not surprising.

Further support, through online searches, indicates that Trump did increase the focus on certain aspects of immigration—particularly the border wall and deportations. Google Trends show what people are asking about and checking, not as much what is mediated through the news. The searches below consider key terms from the United States. The “numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time.” Similar to Table 2, search interest on Google for terms related to immigration follows the major events over the previous 511 days leading up to the election. In examining these figures, consider Trump's entrance into the election as being from the mid-way point going forward.

Figure 6: Frequency of Searches for the Term “Immigration” Between 1/19/2014 and 11/8/2016

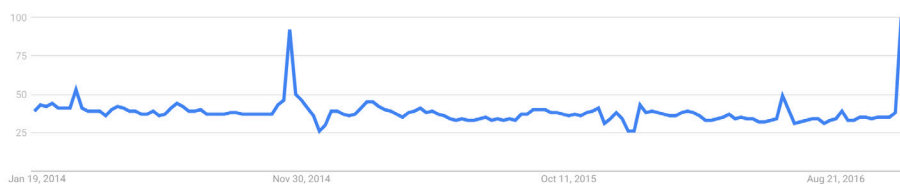
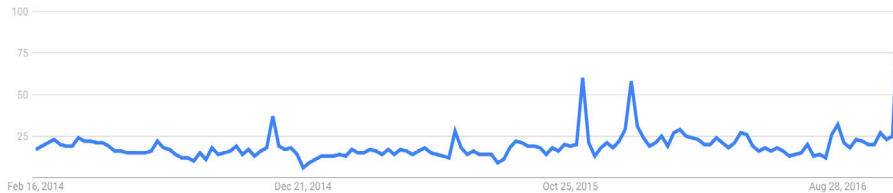


Figure 6 and Figure 8 run from 1/19/14 since Google Trends covers full weeks, starting on Sundays.

Figure 6 shows that the announcement of Trump's candidacy did not raise the overall profile of immigration, though we can see that it spiked in the last week of the election. The previous high point over the time period has to do with Obama's November 2014 executive orders on illegal immigrants, meant to better protect them from deportation.

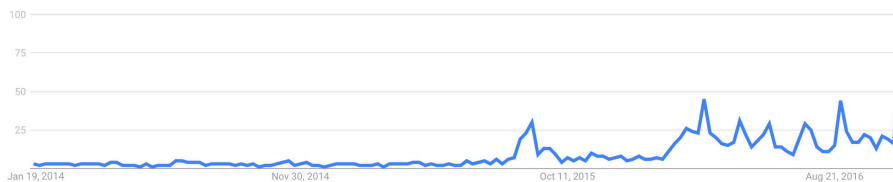
Figure 7: Frequency of Searches for the Term "Deportation" Between 2/16/2014 and 11/8/2016



The chart for "deportation" runs from the second half of February given that there was great interest in January 2014 about a White House petition calling for the deportation of Justin Beiber.

In Figure 7, we see that there was a small up-tick in focus on deportation around the time of Trump's candidacy announcement (14–20 June 2015), and then larger spikes in the weeks of 8–14 November 2015, and 3–9 January 2016, perhaps related to the increases in his campaign rallies.

Figure 8: Frequency of Searches for the Term "Border Wall" Between 1/19/2014 and 11/8/2016



There is no measurable increase in use of the term "border wall" after Trump's campaign announcement in mid-2015 (see Figure 8). However, there is an increase around 16-22 August 2015, coming after the first Republican debate on 6 August 2015. This trend remained consistently higher from 21-27 February 2016.

V. CONCLUSION

Trump, like any candidate, was responsive to a pre-existing social and economic climate, and had to respond at least to some degree to some

media preferences. Overall, the 2016 election is an example of a politician almost singularly driving his core topic—immigration. It is not that Trump was the first to raise this issue of immigration, but this research affirms that he brought about greater focus on undocumented immigration, a border wall for Mexico, and the potential for deportation. In doing so, he also used media coverage to his advantage, and succeeded in making this issue area significant for voters.

In the end, what leads people to be influenced to vote on the issue of migration? The evidence presented here shows that even while acknowledging underlying economic and demographic contextual factors, and the power of the media, it can be an individual politician and leader, who super-charges core issues which voters

consider at the ballot box. The implications for future elections are that the public—and media—need to be more fully aware of the potential for one particular political leader to drive the political discussion. Only in 2020 and beyond will we learn whether Trump’s successful approach here was a one-time occurrence, or represents a permanent shift in the way that agenda-setting takes place in the United States.*f*

Trump, like any candidate, was responsive to a pre-existing social and economic climate, and had to respond at least to some degree to some media preferences.

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