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# The Threat of Terrorism and the Changing Public Discourse on Immigration after September 11

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**The Threat of Terrorism and the Changing Public**  
**Discourse on Immigration after September 11**

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Abstract

This article uses articles from the opinion-leading press to investigate how the news media's repertoire of negative portrayals changed after the September 11 terrorist attacks. It is based on a systematic random sample of 360 articles from two, opinion-leading newspapers---one known for its liberal slant (*New York Times*) and one known for its conservative slant (*Wall Street Journal*). The sample is drawn from a large population of articles published over a six-year period (1998-2004). The findings show that the percentage of negative frames involving not only terrorism but also other non-terrorist threats increased significantly after September 11. The elevated frequency of negative frames was found in both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, but the increase was significantly greater in the conservative periodical. Immigrants from non-European countries were also significantly more likely to be associated with negative frames than European immigrants. These three variables-national origin, news source, and September 11-were strong predictors of negative frames, even when controlling for other correlates. Suggesting an *authoritarian turn* in American political discourse, the study highlights cultural factors, as opposed to the conventional psychological explanations, as key determinants of the changing public discussion of immigration after September 11.

The news media's portrayal of immigrants in the United States has interested scholars from various disciplines. From public opinion experts and media effects researchers to scholars of political culture and public policy, a range of investigators have described and analyzed representations of immigrants in newspapers, television shows, political speeches, movies and other areas of popular culture. Most of these studies examine media portrayals of a single immigrant group over multiple time periods (Branton and Dunaway 2009a; Chavez 2008; Montalvo and Torres 2005), or multiple immigrant groups at a single point in time (Cisneros 2008; Fujiwara 2005; Keogan 2002). Given our interest in how cultural and historical factors shape images of immigrants in the news, we examine both of these factors: the historical context of the immigration debate, and the media's differing treatments of ethnic minorities.

We explore, in particular, why and how much the proportion of negative news stories on immigration increased after the September 11 terrorist attacks, while also determining the differences in negative news coverage across immigrant groups. To investigate these patterns, data are drawn from a large population of newspaper articles published over a six-year period in two, opinion-leading newspapers—one known for its liberal slant (*New York Times*) and one known for its conservative slant (*Wall Street Journal*). In addition, we control for other possible correlates, including the type of article (news versus opinion), the location of the article within the newspaper (sections A, B, C, or D), and the extent to which immigration is discussed in the article (salience).

Although we do not offer a definitive causal explanation, the findings demonstrate that the percentage of negative news frames involving immigrants increased significantly in the post-September 11 period. The elevated frequency of these frames was found in both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, but the increase was significantly greater in the latter

newspaper. Immigrants from non-European countries were significantly more likely to be associated with negative frames than European or Canadian immigrants. Non-Europeans also suffered a greater backlash in terms of the increase in negative news coverage after September 11. These three factors-national origin, news source, and September 11-were strong predictors of negative framing of immigrants even when controlling for the other potential correlates mentioned above. Suggesting an *authoritarian turn* in American political discourse, the study highlights cultural factors, as opposed to the conventional psychological explanations, as key determinants of the changing public discussion of immigration after September 11.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The Authoritarian Turn in Political Culture

The idea that heightened public concerns over safety are associated with various forms of harshness and intolerance dates back to the work of classic political philosophers such as Niccolò Machiavelli (1999) and Thomas Hobbes (1950). Since the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950), the theory has become prominent across multiple social scientific disciplines. Using aggregated, cross-national survey data from three waves of World Values Surveys, Inglehart and Baker (2000) found that people in societies where survival is perceived as less certain are more likely to see foreigners as dangerous and feel more threatened by diversity and cultural change than people in societies where physical safety and well-being is not a major concern. Several other cross-national studies have offered similar findings (e.g., Fischer, Katja, and Sibley 2012). Based on data from 17 countries, Cohrs and Stelzl (2010) showed that perceptions of resource-based threats, such as unemployment, predicted negative attitudes toward immigrant groups.

Evidence for the claim that threat perceptions activate authoritarian sentiments, including negative attitudes toward immigrants, is even more common in experimental studies and individual-level analyses (Dovidio and Esses 2001; Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Greenberg et al. 1990; Jackson and Esses 2000; Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas 2005; Pyszczynski et al. 2006). Tajfel and Turner's (1979) intergroup conflict theory, for instance, suggests that higher levels of perceived threat are associated with increased outgroup bashing, stereotyping and attribution errors. In their turn, terror management theorists (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 2003) have also shown that perceived threat activates greater adherence to conventional values, conformity to group norms, submissiveness to moral authorities, and rejection of outsiders.

Although the theoretical explanations in these studies differ in important ways, they share a common thread. Using survey respondents or participants in experiments as units of analysis, their explanations of authoritarianism are rooted in psychological processes. In this study, rather than investigating authoritarianism as a psychological reaction or a set of personality traits, we examine it in the form of cultural elements in opinion-leading newspapers—a proxy for elite political discourse (Bennett 1990). Although research that takes this approach is sparse, one study stands out in this respect. Based on a content analysis of letters to the editor, Perrin (2005: 169) argued that authoritarian tendencies represent enduring aspects of Americans' political-cultural repertoire, and that the September 11 terrorist attacks encouraged the expression of these elements in political discourse. His coding scheme characterized the rhetorical appeals in the letters as either matching or rejecting the abstract authoritarian characteristics in Adorno and colleagues' (1950) classic F scale. He found, for instance, that letters published after September 11 were more likely to "condemn, reject, and punish people

who violate conventional values" (*authoritarian aggression*), and increasingly revealed a "disposition to think in rigid categories" (*superstition and stereotypy*) (Perrin 2005: 176-77).<sup>1</sup> If authoritarian cultural scripts were detectable in letters at higher rates after September 11, it is plausible that anti-immigrant rhetoric in all types of news articles also became more prevalent.

Any differences in immigration news coverage after September 11 should be traced to the "cultural tools" utilized by news organizations, as well as to the unwritten norms and roles of the broader culture. This perspective, most notably developed by Swidler (2001), is echoed in what Maney, Woehrle, and Coy (2005) and Williams (2002) refer to as the "dominant symbolic repertoire."<sup>2</sup> They define the repertoire as the "enduring norms, beliefs, language, visual images, narrations, and collective identities circulating widely among the general public" (Maney, Woehrle, and Coy 2005: 358). It is like a smorgasbord of symbols and ideas that are prepared and offered to the public by those whose social position grants privileged access to the channels of mass communication.

Over years of being socialized in a given culture, people come to accept and take for granted the meanings of the dominant symbolic repertoire. These predispositions allow them to easily translate and understand new events using the older, more stable set of ideas. Although the repertoire may shift and reconfigure in response to historical circumstances like September 11, the change itself is made possible by the stable meanings that people attach to its various elements. After September 11, for instance, the "war on terrorism" discourse was certainly new

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<sup>1</sup>Perrin's study (2005) also demonstrated that "antiauthoritarian" scripts were also more common in letters to the editor after September 11.

<sup>2</sup>Maney, Woehrle, and Coy (2005) noted that their concept draws on previous cultural concepts by Swidler (1986), Gamson (1992), Tarrow (1992), and Nagel (1994). To this list of helpful perspectives, we add the concept of "national cultural repertoires," developed in studies by both Lamont and Thevenot (2000) and Benson and Saguy (2005).

in many respects, but it tapped into a preexisting cultural script—a way of seeing the world that formed over decades, not months or years. The United States has been involved in military conflicts for much of its history. Regardless of what originally caused these wars, they reinforced ideas, outlooks and behaviors that increased the ease and likelihood of people understanding future wars in a similar light. For this reason, there was no need for the Bush administration to invent a new ideology on September 11. The norms and values that cultivated public support for war and other aggressive policies, including tighter restrictions on foreigners and harsher immigration law enforcement practices, were already in place. Government officials have pushed for restrictions on the foreign-born or those believed to be loyal to a foreign country because of their immigrant ancestry at many times in response to public hysteria or concern, resulting in regrettable policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the forced internment of Japanese, Germans, and Italians during World War II.

Prior to September 11, news stories linking immigrants to various deviant or criminal behaviors were already common in mainstream media. Newsmakers often created spectacles around the so-called foreign invasion and associated the influx of immigrants with social problems such as crime, economic decline, cultural degradation, overpopulation, and disease (Chavez 2008). After September 11, the immigration threat narrative was refined, institutionalized, and increasingly invoked by public officials, government agencies, and the mainstream news media. Only days after the attacks, officials identified the prime suspects as foreigners, and the security breach itself was later traced to failures within the Immigration and Naturalization Service (Mitchell 2001). Thousands of immigrants instantly became suspects and many were detained in the ensuing investigation (Bernstein 2004). Although Arabs and Muslims were especially prominent in the media's rising negative coverage of immigration, the threat of

terrorism became part of a more generalized immigrant threat narrative involving Latinos and other groups (Chavez 2008).

President George W. Bush and other White House officials made it clear that the U.S.-Mexico border was now a primary homeland security concern, in spite of the fact that none of the September 11 terrorists had entered the United States illegally through Mexico.<sup>3</sup> The Bush Administration carried out one of the largest bureaucratic reorganizations in U.S. history when it placed the Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services under a new agency, the Department of Homeland Security. The change reshaped the mission statement of the agency to one involving terrorism management and prevention. The idea of a "borderless world" went out of fashion in Washington policy circles, while pundits and anti-immigration groups made sweeping claims about the link between immigration and terrorism (Andreas 2002; DeParle 2011; Elliot 2011) and used the new threat to legitimize their calls for enhanced border security (Shenon 2003), a crackdown on illegal immigration (Sterngold 2001), and the legalization of racial profiling.<sup>4</sup>

Paralleling these institutional changes, the supposed link between terrorism and immigration also appeared in American public opinion. The number of Americans who believed that "immigration should be decreased" stood at 38 percent in September 2000. Roughly one year later, as the nation responded to the terrorist attacks on September 11, this indicator rose to

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<sup>3</sup>In 2002, President Bush suggested that the flow of immigrants from Mexico served as "a conduit for terrorists, weapons of mass destruction, illegal migrants, contraband, and other unlawful commodities" (see Office of the Press Secretary 2002, retrieved January 29, 2014 from <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020125.html>).

<sup>4</sup>Lawmakers in Arizona passed a measure in April 2010 that allowed the police to check the documentation of anyone they suspected of being an illegal immigrant (see Gaynor and Schwartz 2010). In the new measure's defense, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer said that it was necessary because her state "has been under terrorist attacks ... with all of this illegal immigration" (see a video of Governor Brewer's statements online at <http://thinkprogress.org/2010/04/30/brewer-terrorist-attacks>).



58 percent.<sup>5</sup> Similar results were found on several related polling questions.<sup>6</sup> Unfavorable attitudes toward immigration remained above the pre-September 11 levels for nearly a decade. Americans were particularly worried about "illegal" immigrants. In April 2001, only 28 percent of respondents said that they were "greatly concerned" about illegal immigration; as late as April 2007, 45 percent of respondents reported the same thing (Segovia and Defever 2010).

Given the four factors discussed above—the preexistence of an anti-immigrant discourse, the persistent link between terrorism and immigration in public opinion, the rise in authoritarian scripts in political culture (Perrin 2005), and the permanence of harsher, more restrictive immigration policies and law enforcement procedures—it is plausible that the mass mediated discussion of immigration contained greater concern and intolerance toward foreigners and more discussion of immigration as a national security issue after September 11. Specifically, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Newspaper articles on immigration will contain a greater number of negative news frames in the post-September 11 period than in the pre-September 11 period.

As mentioned, one element of authoritarian political culture is the use of stereotypes, rigid social categories and the rejection of outsiders (Perrin 2005). For this reason, differences in the extent to which certain immigrant groups are portrayed in media as foreign or *outside* the

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<sup>5</sup>See Gallup Organization, Gallup's Pulse of Democracy: Immigration; accessed online on October 5, 2007 at [www.galluppoll.com](http://www.galluppoll.com).

<sup>6</sup>For example, the percentage of Americans who thought that "immigration is a bad thing for this country" increased from 31 percent in June 2001 to 42 percent in October 2001 (see Gallup Organization, Gallup's Pulse of Democracy: Immigration; accessed online on October 5, 2007 at [www.galluppoll.com](http://www.galluppoll.com)). For more on the post-September 11 increase in negative attitudes toward immigration, see Segovia and Defever 2010; Newport 2007; Jones 2007; Moore 2002; Panagopoulos 2006; Esses, Dovidio, and Hodson 2002; Nagel 2002; Woods 2011a, 2012.

dominant Anglo norm should be taken into account. Numerous studies have reported racial and ethnic biases in news coverage and oversimplified media representations of minorities, including immigrant groups (Branton and Dunaway 2008; Branton and Dunaway 2009b; Fryberg et al. 2011; Hood and Morris 1998). Drawing on these studies, we expect that non-European immigrants, whose national origin has been racialized in the U.S. cultural context and ranked lower in the social hierarchy, are more likely to be portrayed with negative frames than Europeans, whose race and ethnicity are widely perceived as closer to the traditional Anglo norm. In addition to the research on racial bias in media, a number of studies have demonstrated that public attitudes toward immigrants are influenced by symbolic orientations and ideologies, including racial prejudice (Ayers et al. 2009; Dustmann and Preston 2007; Fetzer 2000; Hood and Morris 1997; Loveman and Hofstetter 1984; Short and Magana 2002). As an investigation of political culture, however, this study must remain agnostic on whether racial prejudice (at the level of individuals) influences the portrait of immigrants in the news. We argue instead, as we did previously, that differences in the portrayals of European and non-European immigrant groups should be traced to the cultural tools or symbolic repertoires used by newsmakers within a particular historical context. Specifically, we offer the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* Newspaper articles on immigration will associate negative news frames

With non-European immigrants more often than with European (or Canadian) immigrants.

Following both the psychological and cultural literatures on authoritarianism, it is reasonable to assume that a newspaper with a decidedly conservative or right-leaning political ideology will tend to express more authoritarian cultural scripts than a liberal or left-leaning newspaper. For the same reason, it may be further hypothesized that a newspaper with marked

authoritarian tendencies is more likely to circulate negative framing of outsiders such as immigrants than a newspaper without these tendencies.

To explore these assumptions, the first task is to consider whether the political ideologies of the two newspapers in this study (*New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*) can be accurately measured and compared. We should stress that any attempt to classify a daily newspaper as having a "liberal" or "conservative" bias is a challenging and controversial endeavor, and one whose results should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, there is some agreement among social scientists that the *New York Times* conveys a more liberal slant and a pro-Democrat bias, and that the *Wall Street Journal* is a more conservative, Republican-leaning newspaper.

The scientific measurement of "slant" often involves a comparison between a newspaper's language use and the words and phrases uttered by Republicans versus Democrats in their official congressional statements. Following this line of research, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) used a computerized "text categorization" procedure to identify certain phrases in the *Congressional Record* that are likely to be informative about partisanship.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Republicans are more likely to use the phrase "death tax" to describe the federal tax on assets of the deceased than by Democrats who tend to use the alternative phrase "estate tax." Incidentally, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) also found that the phrase "illegal immigrants" is uttered more frequently by Republicans than by Democrats. Using their findings on a large number of common partisan phrases, the researchers then computed the slant of newspapers based on how often each used the specified sets of phrases. According to Gentzkow and Shapiro's slant index (2006), the *Wall Street Journal* is more likely to utilize Republican phraseology and less likely

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<sup>7</sup>Taking a similar approach, Groseclose and Milyo (2005) count the number of references made by congressional partisans to various think tanks and policy groups, and then compare these figures to the number of times that a given media outlet cites the same groups.

to use the Democrats' favored terms than the *New York Times*. Their study also noted that a large (though non-random) sample of website users ([www.mondotimes.com](http://www.mondotimes.com)) rated the ideological leaning of the *Wall Street Journal* as far more conservative than the *New York Times*.

The slant of news outlets has also been measured using the self-reported political views of the readerships. According to a study by the Pew Research Center (2010), among the regular readers of the *New York Times*, only 9 percent report being Republicans and 11 percent characterize their political ideology as conservative (a plurality of these readers report being democrats and liberals). Among the *Wall Street Journal's* regular readers, 36 percent are Republicans and 45 percent report being conservative (only 22 percent are Democrats and 12 percent are liberal). The two readerships also diverge consistently on specific political attitudes. *New York Times* readers are much more likely than *Wall Street Journal* readers to consider themselves "environmentalists," "progressives," and "gay rights supporters," whereas *Wall Street Journal* readers outnumber their counterparts as self-described "Christian Conservatives," "NRA supporters" and "Tea Party supporters" (Pew Research Center For The People & The Press 2010).

Although these findings indicate that the two newspapers do indeed represent different ideological frameworks, the issue of immigration may, as a special case, cut across these contexts. Historically, the editorial staff at the *Wall Street Journal* has taken a neo-liberal conservative stance on immigration and favored open borders as a strategy for economic growth. Although the *Wall Street Journal* may be more conservative than the *New York Times* on most issues, immigration may be an exception. In our sample of articles, especially those published in the years prior to September 11, we found a number of *Wall Street Journal* editorials that support this notion. In an April 2000 editorial, for instance, the staff criticized "the arbitrariness that

characterizes the Immigration and Naturalization Service's (INS) approach to people whose only crime is to have arrived here in search of a better life for themselves" (*WSJ* editorial 2000). The editors further argued that the executives of large corporations who need foreign workers and favor open borders are better equipped to decide who is allowed to enter the country. An editorial published in July 2001 promoted a quicker, easier pathway to citizenship for immigrants, and described three dramatic cases of immigrants who risked everything to reach the United States, worked hard and achieved much (*WSJ* editorial 2001).

According to a study by Page (1996), if the editorials in the *Wall Street Journal* generally offer a positive take on immigration, it is likely that other parts of the newspaper follow suit. Furthermore, in a study of the press in France and the United States, Benson (2009) found that financial newspapers in both countries emphasized the economic benefits of immigration and produced more favorable coverage on this issue. Given the contradictory nature of previous studies, we investigate the effects of the news source on the framing of immigration as a research question:

**Research Question 1:** Do articles on immigration published in the *Wall Street Journal* contain a greater number of negative news frames than those appearing in the *New York Times*?

#### Other Potential Correlates of Negative News Frames

In addition to the three variables above, we also consider whether the use of negative frames in press coverage of immigration depends in part on the article's type (news versus opinion), location in the newspaper (sections A, B, C, or D), and the extent to which the topic of immigration itself plays a central or peripheral role in the story (salience). To our best

knowledge, there are no previous studies that provide guidance for developing hypotheses about these variables. Conventional wisdom may suggest that negative frames are more common in the opinion pages where strong polemics and emotional debates are welcomed by editors. However, news articles about the immigration debate also contain opinionated statements, slogans and emotive sound bites from both sides. The location where articles are placed should also be taken into account, because articles located in the front of newspapers are more likely to be read and therefore more likely to influence public perceptions of immigration (Bogart 1989; Graber 1988). The extent to which the topic itself is covered in a given newspaper article must be considered as well. Immigration is the main subject in some articles, but receives only a minor mention in others. Although we expect, based on common sense, to find a greater number of negative frames in articles that spend more time on the topic, the extent to which this assumption holds true is unknown, and therefore examining this variable may provide new information. Moreover, controlling for each of these variables (article type, section location, and salience) will help guard the validity of other possible predictors of negative framing in our multivariate analysis. Given the general lack of previous research on these variables, we investigate them with the following questions:

**Research Question 2:** Do opinion articles on immigration contain a greater number of

Negative news frames than news articles?

**Research Question 3:** Do articles located closer to the front page of the newspaper

contain a greater number of negative news frames than articles located nearer to the back of the newspaper?

**Research Question 4:** Do articles in which the majority of paragraphs are relevant to

Immigration contain a greater number of negative news frames than articles in

which less than half the paragraphs are relevant to immigration?

### The Framing Nexus

Each of the hypotheses and research questions discussed above involves an assumed coalescence of various images and ideas about immigrants or immigration. We refer to such a communicative package as a "framing nexus." A nexus, as its dictionary definition specifies, is a connection or link between objects. Cellular biologists define a nexus as the fusion of the plasma membranes of two or more adjacent cells (Dewey and Barr 1964). Nexuses permit chemical or electrical communication to pass between cells, enabling the organization and operation of complex biological functions. In cardiac muscles, for instance, nexuses allow the muscles of the heart to contract in tandem. In a similar fashion, a framing nexus involves the fusion of two or more news frames in a given newspaper article, television show, or political speech that enables the transmission of a more complex message.

A framing nexus refers merely to a co-occurrence of carefully identified words, phrases, or images (e.g., "immigrant," "Mexican," "illegal," "terrorism"). Three related issues—to what extent framing nexuses exist in the mass media, why they exist as they do, and whether they influence human consciousness—represent a challenging set of empirical questions to which there may not always be straightforward answers (Woods 2011b). In the immigration debate, framing nexuses are used by some elites to denounce and limit immigration and curb dissenting voices, but they are also used by frame-challengers to defy the dominant symbolic repertoire and push for more open or humane immigration policies (Entman 2003). In short, a framing nexus is a conceptual tool, not a predictive or theoretical model.<sup>8</sup>

## METHOD

### Data

Our aim is to analyze news stories about immigration in the "opinion-leading" (or elite) press in the United States. Based on previous studies (Hertog 2000; Horvit 2003; Swain 2007; Ten Eyck and Williment 2003), we chose the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* as proxies of the elite press. Both of these high-circulation newspapers play key roles in national decision-making and influence the news coverage of other media outlets (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Gans 1979; Gitlin 1980). As previously discussed, the former newspaper is known for its liberal slant, investigate the effects of September 11 on leading newspapers in general and also examine the potentially divergent reactions in liberal versus conservative news outlets. Put differently, the choice of these two newspapers represents a purposive sample that will offer preliminary findings upon which to establish a broader investigation of the relationship between terrorist events, political ideology, and the public discussion of immigration in the United States.

We utilized two online databases (Lexis-Nexis Academic and Proquest) to construct a large sampling frame of articles that were published over a six-year time period centered on the events of September 11 (September 11, 1998 to September 10, 2004). In total, the sampling frame consisted of 20,667 articles, all of which contained at least one of the four designated and the latter is thought to be more conservative, which makes it possible to simultaneously

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<sup>8</sup>To further clarify our definition of the framing nexus as a *concept*, it may be helpful to distinguish it from the closely related theory of structural intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Lutz, Vivar, and Supik 2011). The theory suggests that discourses of identity are shaped by intersecting patterns of racial, ethnic, class, and gender bias that become embedded and institutionalized in society. From this perspective, the American immigrant identity is not only influenced by longstanding prejudices against foreigners, but also a set of cultural understandings that place immigrants within hierarchies based on their nationality, religion, ethnic group, skin color, age, gender, and economic standing. The theory may lead to hypotheses about how certain intersectional identities—for instance, young, male Muslim immigrants from Middle Eastern countries—are portrayed in media. Although the framing nexus may be an especially helpful tool in such an investigation, it does not explain why a given news portrayal is likely or unlikely, how it is related to social structure, or what effect it may have on audiences.



search terms (immigrant, immigrate, immigration, alien). From this population, a systematic random sampling technique, stratified by year, was used to select 180 articles from each newspaper (90 from the pre-September 11 period, 90 from the post-September 11 period) for a total sample of 360 articles.

Several articles in the sample mentioned immigrants from more than one country of origin. In some cases, immigrants of two different nationalities were associated with different negative frames. For instance, an article might mention *illegal Mexican* immigrants, as well as discuss a *terrorism* suspect from *Egypt*. If such an article appeared in the sample, it was broken into two separate recording units, one for each country of origin mentioned. A limit of five recording units per article was instated in order to moderate the influence of any one article on the overall results. In total, 537 recording units were extracted from the 360 articles in the sample (286 from the *New York Times* and 251 from the *Wall Street Journal*).

#### Coding the Anti-Immigration Framing Nexus

Each recording unit was coded on 10 variables, including the period of publication (1 =After September 11; 0 =Before September 11 ), the type of article (1 =opinion; 0 =news), newspaper section (1 =Section A; 0 =Sections B, C, D and deeper), the salience of immigration as a topic in the article (1 =majority of paragraphs are on topic; 0 =majority of paragraphs are off topic), the region of origin of the immigrant in the story (1 =Non-European/Non-Canadian; 0 =European/Canadian), as well as four variables designed to identify whether an immigrant was associated with undesirable actions, outcomes or labels (1 =Mentioned; 0 =Not mentioned). Before the quantitative coding procedure began, we identified these four dimensions (illegal,

criminal, terrorism, and economic threat) as the most common negative framing devices by examining more than 100 newspaper articles using an open coding procedure. In addition, we included an "other" category in our quantitative coding scheme, which allowed us to determine that the four selected frames did indeed rank among the most common negative descriptors in our large sample of *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* articles.

The first negative framing nexus involves the mentioning of an immigrant's illegal or undocumented status. Although there are various examples of this nexus, the most common case is the label "illegal immigrants" (or "illegal immigration"). For instance, as reported in the *New York Times*, Texas Congressman Lamar Smith criticized a new federal rule, suggesting that it "encourages more illegal immigration" (Brinkley 1999). The second nexus can be found in stories that associate immigrants with various other crimes (not including immigration violations or terrorism), such as the sale of illicit drugs, prostitution, gang violence and human trafficking. As one example, the *New York Times* reported on a law enforcement operation in San Diego that involved the arrest of immigrants on "weapons and drug charges" ("Cab Drivers and Guards Detained" 2003).

The third nexus was operationalized as any reference, direct or indirect, that links immigrants or immigration to terrorism. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed piece, for instance, Griffen Bell, a former U.S. attorney general, defended the Justice Department's post-September 11 round-up and detention of terrorism suspects, many of them immigrants, stating that "The new provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which permit the indefinite detention of suspected terrorists pending criminal or removal proceedings, are consistent with the discretion afforded the administration in fighting this unique threat" (Bell 2001). The fourth and most general category of analysis involved the supposed link between immigration and a range of

economic threats. An article might suggest that immigrants take away jobs from American workers, drive down wages, hurt tax payers, weaken real-estate values, inflate hospital costs, or harm the public education system. For instance, a *New York Times* article attributed the problem of overcrowding in New York City schools to "an influx of immigrants, mainly from the Dominican Republic" (Archibold 1999).

## Reliability

A great deal of time and energy went into testing the reliability of the data. Standard inter-coder agreement tests were conducted on all the variables using roughly 30 percent (105 articles) of the total articles in the sample. The percentage of agreement on the ten variables ranged from 86 percent to 100 percent. Scott's Pi, which corrects for chance agreement, ranged from .78 to .95 on these variables. Compared to other acceptable reliability coefficients, such as Cohen's Kappa, Scott's Pi is a more conservative measure (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005). Krippendorff (1978) has suggested that Alpha levels of .80 or higher indicate adequate reliability. This standard is also commonly found in published research (Riffe, Lacy and Fico 2005). Only one of the ten variables (the variable measuring the salience of immigration as a topic in the article) had an Alpha that was slightly below the .80 standard at .78. Overall, the intercoder reliability tests returned results that far exceeded conventional standards.

This method of testing reliability involved two, well-trained coders who spent several hours perfecting their ability to interpret newspaper articles independently in roughly the same manner. One critique of this method suggests that the careful training of coders may ensure reliability, but it also produces an artificial, specialized set of interpretations. Put differently, the statistical validation of intercoder reliability does not ensure that members of the general

population will draw similar conclusions as the well-trained coders. To explore this concern, we carried out an additional reliability assessment using 12 coders who received only cursory training on how to categorize content according to the codebook and protocol. These tests showed that a very high level of intersubjectivity exists on each of the 10 issues in the codebook.

The 12 coders were asked to read 15 abbreviated portions of articles from the sample and identify the country of origin of any immigrant mentioned (or indicate that no country was mentioned), and whether the given immigrant or source country was associated with any of the negative frames (illegal, criminal, terrorism, and economic threats). On 13 out of 15 units of analysis, all 12 coders, working independently, identified the same country of origin. The average percentage of agreement among the 12 coders was roughly 92 percent on mentions of illegality, 98 percent on mentions of other criminal acts, 98 percent on references to terrorism, and 94 percent on mentions of immigrants as economic threats. In short, the coding scheme seems to be reliable even when using a large group of coders with far less training.

## MEASUREMENT

### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the frequency of negative frames in newspaper articles on immigration. We measure this variable in three ways. Each of these measurements reveals a different aspect of the news coverage. First, we calculate the *mean* number of distinct negative frames per recording unit. Given the fact that there are four different negative frames (illegal, criminal, terrorism, and economic threat), this measure ranges from 0 to 4. We refer to it as the *threat index*. The purpose of this variable is to highlight the intensity and diversity of negative framing of immigrants in a given unit. Second, we dichotomize the variable and determine

whether *at least one* negative frame was used in the given recording unit. This operationalization has the advantage of parsimony. The variable allows us to make simple percentage comparisons across the categories of the independent variables. This operationalization rests on the most meaningful difference between newspaper articles, as it differentiates those which contain no negative frames from those which contain at least one. Third, we also report on the varying prevalence of each of the four negative frames separately (illegal, criminal, terrorism, and economic threat).

### Independent Variables

All the independent variables are dichotomous. Essentially, we ask the same question over and over: Are negative frames involving immigrants more common under Condition A or Condition B? We answer these questions by (1) comparing the percentage of units containing *at least one* negative frame across the two conditions, and by (2) comparing the *mean* number of frames per unit across the two conditions. In the first case, we test the variables with a chi-square test for independence. The test demonstrates whether at least one negative frame appeared in significantly more post-September 11 articles than pre-September 11 articles (Hypothesis 1), in more articles about non-European immigrants than European/Canadian immigrants (Hypothesis 2), and in more *Wall Street Journal* articles than *New York Times* articles (Research Question 1). In the second case, we retest the hypotheses with a one-way analysis of variance, which will determine whether the mean number of distinct negative frames varied significantly in the expected directions. After concluding the bivariate investigation, we create a binary logistic regression model to explore the predictive ability of the three main independent variables on the categorical dependent variable (i.e., *at least one* negative frame used versus no negative frames

used), while controlling for the effects of the other predictors in the model. We also run a multiple regression model for the same purpose but switch in the threat index (a ratio-level, continuous variable).

## RESULTS

### Bivariate Analysis

Confirming Hypothesis 1, September 11 had a strong and consistent effect on the framing of immigration (see Tables 1 and 2). The percentage of units containing at least one negative frame increased from 23 percent before September 11 to 50 percent after September 11. The change was significant at the .05 alpha level for three of the four frames (illegal, criminal, terrorism), though immigrants were not significantly more (or less) likely to be associated with economic harms in the post-September 11 period. Using the threat index as the dependent variable, the mean number of negative frames was significantly higher after ( $M = .74$ ) than before ( $M = .30$ ) the September 11 attacks ( $F(1, 535) = 44.79$ ,  $\eta^2 = .077$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As shown in Table 2, the increase in negative news coverage of immigration increased significantly in both the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, as well as for both immigrants from European countries and those from non-European regions of the world.

TABLE 1

Effects of September 11 on the Use of Negative Immigrant Frames

	Before Sep. 11 % (units)	After Sep. 11 % (units)	$\Delta\%$	$X^2$	$P$
At least one negative frame mentioned	23 (63)	50 (130)	+27	42.42	<.001
Illegal mentioned	15 (42)	26 (69)	+11	10.30	.001
Criminal mentioned	10 (28)	16 (41)	+6	3.71	.054
Terrorism mentioned	2 (5)	28 (73)	+26	73.93	<.001
Economic threat mentioned	3 (8)	5 (13)	+2	1.55	.213
Total units	276	261			

TABLE 2

A Comparison of the Effects of September 11 on the Use of Negative Immigrant Frames by News Source and Immigrant Group

	Before Sep. 11 % (units)	After Sep. 11 % (units)	Δ%	X <sup>2</sup>	P
News Source					
<i>New York Times</i> units with at least one negative frame	27 (41/150)	43 (59 /136)	+16	8.08	.004
<i>Wall Street Journal</i> units with at least one negative frame	17 (22/126)	57 (71 /125)	+40	41.64	<.001
Immigrant Group					
European immigrant units with at least one negative frame	6 (4/62)	21 (8/39)	+15	4.52	.033'
Non-European immigrant units with at least one negative frame	28 (59/214)	55 (122/222)	+27	33.66	<.001

Note. 'p = .037, Fisher's Exact Test.

TABLE 3

Effects of Immigrant Group on the Use of Negative Immigrant Frames

	Europeans % (units)	Non-Europeans % (units)	Diff. %	X <sup>2</sup>	P
At least one negative frame mentioned	12 (12)	42 (181)	30	31.28	<.001
Illegal mentioned	5 (5)	24 (106)	19	18.75	<.001
Criminal mentioned	6 (6)	14 (63)	8	5.30	.021
Terrorism mentioned	5 (5)	17 (73)	12	9.19	.002
Economic threat mentioned	0 (0)	5 (21)	5	5.06	.024'
Total units	101	436			

Note. 'p = .020, Fisher's Exact Test.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported by the data. European immigrants were linked to at least one negative frame in 12 percent of the units, while non-Europeans were cast in an unfavorable light in 42 percent of units (see Table 3). The percentage difference was significant for all four negative frames. Non-Europeans were more likely to be linked to illegality, crime, terrorism and

economic threats than their European counterparts. As shown in Table 2, following September 11, there was a considerable rise in the amount of negative coverage of both groups, but the increase was roughly two times greater for non-European immigrants. Based on the threat index, non-Europeans ( $M = .60$ ) were also associated with significantly more negative frames per unit than Europeans ( $M = .16$ ) ( $F(1, 535) = 26.22$ ,  $\eta^2 = .047$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Moving to Research Question 1, the news source, at first glance, did not seem to affect the use of negative frames. About the same percentage of units from the *New York Times* (35 percent) and *Wall Street Journal* (37 percent) contained at least one frame. The differences between the news sources were trivial on all but one of the four frames. The *Wall Street Journal* (20 percent), however, did use a significantly greater percentage of terrorism frames than the *New York Times* (10 percent) ( $\chi^2 = 9.48$ ,  $p = .002$ ). On the threat index, there was only a minute, insignificant difference of .03 between the two newspapers ( $F(1, 535) = .146$ ,  $\eta^2 = .000$ ,  $p = .702$ ). (These figures are not shown in tables.)

After further analysis, however, we discovered that the post-September 11 increase in negative coverage was substantially greater in the *Wall Street Journal* than in the *New York Times*. Surprisingly, the former newspaper contained 10 percent fewer negative frames in the pre-September 11 period than the latter newspaper, but then the relationship flip-flopped after September 11. In the *New York Times*, the percentage units with negative frames rose from 27 percent to 43 percent, while in the *Wall Street Journal* the same indicator jumped from 17 percent to 57 percent. In short, the *Wall Street Journal* was significantly less likely to offer negative news coverage of immigration before September 11, and significantly more likely to contain such framing after the tragic events.

Mixed results were found in regard to the other research questions. First, as it pertains to



Research Question 2, negative news coverage of immigration did not vary much by article type. The percentage of news articles (37 percent) with at least one negative frame was not significantly greater than the percentage of opinion articles with one negative frame (33 percent). The difference between article types was also trivial on the threat index.

TABLE 4

Regression Model Showing Standardized Regression Coefficients for Four Predictors of the Number of Negative Immigrant Frames in News Articles

	Standardized regression coefficients	<i>P</i>
Majority of Paragraphs "On Topic"	.295	<.001
Published after September 11	.256	<.001
Non-European Immigrants	.166	<.001
Published in Section A	.084	.032
<i>R</i> Square	.213	<.001

The data provided more definitive answers to Research Questions 3 and 4. Articles appearing in Section A (44 percent) were far more likely to contain at least one negative frame than articles in Section B and beyond (26 percent) ( $\chi^2 = 18.86, p < .001$ ). Based on the threat index, the mean for articles in Section A was .61, while the mean was .41 in articles appearing in Section B or later ( $F(1, 535) = 8.34, \eta^2 = .015, p = .004$ ). Finally, in response to Research Question 4, the salience of immigration as a topic was a strong predictor of the use of negative frames. Among articles coded as "mostly on topic," 47 percent contained at least one negative frame, whereas only 18 percent of articles coded as "mostly off topic" included such a frame. The mean difference between these conditions was also significant on the threat index (mostly on topic mean = .72; mostly off topic mean = .19) ( $F(1, 535) = 62.60, \eta^2 = .11, p < .001$ ).

## Multivariate Analysis

To further investigate the individual predictive power of the relationships discussed above, we conducted a multiple regression analysis. The threat index served as the dependent variable. The independent variables were the four significant predictors of negative framing, as established by the bivariate analyses (majority of paragraphs on topic, published after September 11, non-European immigrants, and published in Section A). In constructing the model, the basic assumptions and potential shortcomings of regression were considered and found to be unproblematic.<sup>9</sup> As shown in Table 4, all four independent variables contributed significantly to the explained variance of the threat index, while controlling for the other factors. Confining Hypothesis 1, articles published after September 11 contained significantly more negative frames than those published before ( $\beta = .256; p < .001$ ). Confirming Hypothesis 2, region of origin was another powerful predictor of negative framing, with non-European immigrants being significantly more likely to be associated with negative frames than European immigrants ( $\beta = .166; p < .001$ ).

Table 4 shows that the salience of immigration in the given article and the location of the article in the newspaper were also significant predictors. Articles that were mostly on topic were far more likely to contain negative frames than mostly off topic articles. Articles located in the first section of the newspaper were also significantly more likely to contain such frames.

To test the power of these predictors on the dichotomized dependent variable (*at least one negative frame used*), we conducted a logistic regression. As shown in Table 5, with all the

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<sup>9</sup>The dependent variable was normally distributed. We checked for multicollinearity and found that the four significant predictors in the model had very weak correlations with each other and strong correlations with the dependent variable. By adding these variables into the model one at a time, we also found that each increased *R* Square substantially.

TABLE 5

Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Models of the Use of at Least One Negative Frame in News Articles

	B	Standard error	Wald	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>
Majority of Paragraphs "On Topic"	1.478	.231	40.815	4.384	<.001
Published After September 11	1.363	.213	40.836	3.908	<.001
Non-European Immigrants	1.579	.344	21.077	4.851	<.001
Published in Section A	.811	.214	14.304	2.250	<.001

variables in the model simultaneously, each of the predictors was significantly associated with the probability of a news article containing at least one negative frame. Holding all the other variables constant, articles published after September 11 were roughly four times more likely to contain a negative frame than articles published before September 11. Compared to European immigrants, non-European immigrants were almost five times more likely to be linked to at least one of the threatening frames. Articles that were mostly on topic were about four times more likely than articles mostly off topic to contain a negative frame. And, articles located in Section A were more than twice as likely as articles in Section B and beyond to contain such a frame.

## DISCUSSION

Our study makes a number of important theoretical and methodological contributions to research on framing, authoritarianism, and the immigration debate in the United States. Building on Perrin's (2005) study of authoritarian sentiment in letters to the editor, we demonstrated that negative news coverage on immigration increased substantially after the attacks on September 11. Although authoritarian discourse was not actually coded in this study, our results were consistent with an authoritarian shift in language. Our study contributes in particular by showing that the general cultural shift discussed by Perrin (2005) materialized in the framing of a specific

political issue. While our study can only speak to immigration, media discourses on other topics, such as crime, war, civil liberties, Middle East politics, and gay marriage, may have changed in similar ways (Woods 2007, 2011, 2012).

The rise of the immigrant threat narrative after September 11 represents one case of a more general coarsening of political culture—a trend we refer to as the *authoritarian turn* (Abramson et al. 2007; Cohen et al. 2004; Gailliot, Schmeichel, and Baumeister 2006; Gaines 2002; Gordijn and Stapel 2008; Landau et al. 2004; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 2003; Skitka, Bauman, and Mullen 2004; Smith, Rasinski, and Toce 2001; Verkasalo, Goodwin, and Bezmenova 2006; Arthur and Woods 2013; Woods 2012; Woods 2011b). Two additional findings in this study offer further evidence that is consistent with the authoritarian turn. First, while there was a significant increase in negative framing of all immigrant groups, the jump in negativity was far greater for non-Europeans than for Europeans. As Americans responded to the most vivid foreign attack in U.S. history, the news coverage of immigrants was least kind to those whose skin color and culture differed most from the dominant Anglo norm. Second, this shift in coverage was more pronounced in the conservative *Wall Street Journal* than in the liberal *New York Times*. In fact, the post-September 11 increase in negative framing was two times greater in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Also indicated by the data, the immigrant threat narrative was more prevalent in articles appearing in the front of the newspaper than in later sections. The placement of articles in traditional newspapers is a powerful cue that allows editors to influence how readers process and consume the news. As shown by Graber (1988) and others (Bogart 1989), the great majority of reading—up to 72 percent of it—is done in the first section, where negative frames, according to our study, are far more likely to appear. This means that the typical reader is more likely to be

exposed to the immigrant threat narrative. In a related finding, we also showed that articles in which the subject of immigration was central to the story were more likely to contain negative coverage of immigration, suggesting that serious or in-depth analyses rarely avoid references to crime, terrorism, or other forms of deviance.

Our study's descriptive results should also be recognized as a contribution (Nov 2009). Using an innovative conceptual tool (the *framing nexus*) and a highly reliable coding procedure, we identified the four most common news frames in the immigrant threat narrative (illegal, criminal, terrorism, and economic threat), determined the relative prominence of each in the opinion-leading press, and highlighted the differences in negative framing across immigrant groups, news sources, and historical contexts. These straightforward descriptions may be informative and useful to agencies and individuals who wish to counter the dominant threat narrative, ensure the safety and civil rights of immigrants, and call into question the "immigration industrial complex" (Brotherton and Kretsedemas 2008; Diaz, Jr. 2011; Fernandes 2007; Golash-Boza 2009; Lee, Ramiro, and Rosenfeld 2001).

Our focus on producing a detailed, reliable measurement of the anti-immigration framing nexus may also lead to advances in future studies, as well as help us overcome one of the main limitations in this one. As discussed, our analysis covered a relatively short time period and does not attempt to parse out the changes in news coverage between yearly intervals. If we are to substantiate the supposed transformation in the discourse, we would need to demonstrate the continuity and longevity of the authoritarian turn. Given our detailed (descriptive) knowledge of the anti-immigration framing nexus, we can investigate its main components over a longer period of time using electronic search engines instead of human coding. As a preliminary step in this direction, we searched back to the 1980s for articles in the *New York Times* and *The Wall Street*

*Journal* that contained the words "immigrant" or "immigration" as well as at least one of the main components of the anti-immigration framing nexus ("illegal," "crime," "terror"). Although we cannot tell how these frames are arranged or contextualized in the articles, the results provide an intriguing indication of the strength and longevity of the post-September 11 authoritarian turn.

As illustrated in Figure 1, throughout the 1980s the amount of negative coverage of immigration was quite stable, ranging from 32 percent to 43 percent in both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Prior to the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the percentage of articles with negative frames stood at the low end of the range in both newspapers. After this attack, the percentages spiked to 47 percent, but then dropped and remained on a steady downward trend until 2000. Following the September 11 attacks, the increase in negative frames was even greater and lasted longer, jumping from the 30 percent baseline to more than 50 percent. In the decade following September 11, the percentage of negative frames never returned to pre-September 11 levels, and has seemingly found a new equilibrium (Baumgartner

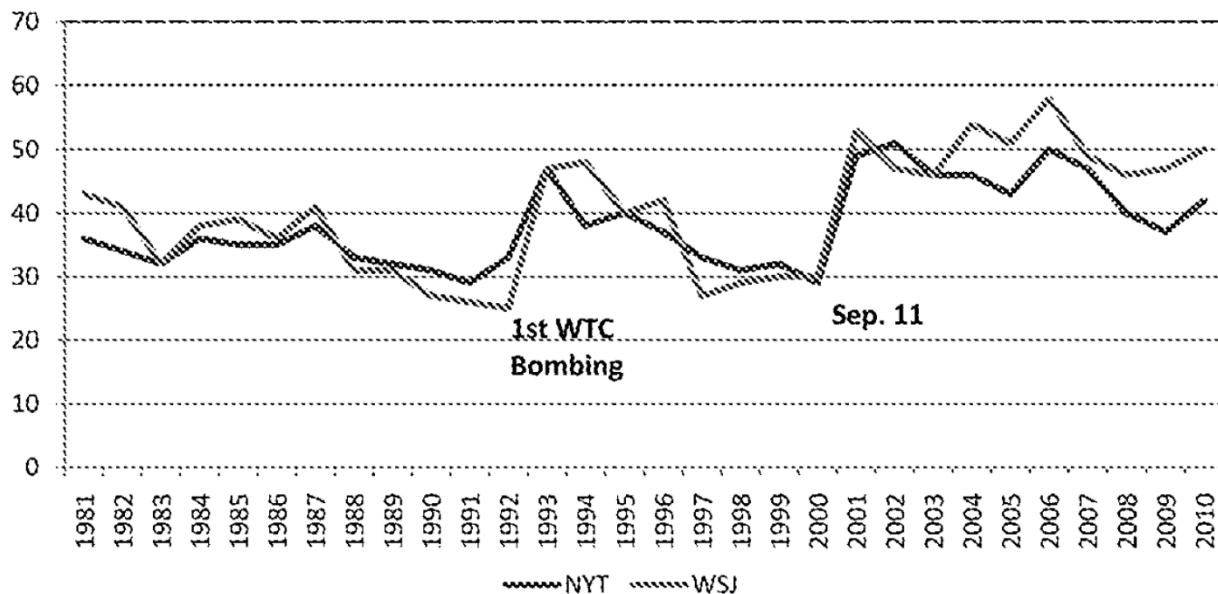


FIGURE 1 Percentage of *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* Articles on Immigration Containing References to Illegality, Crime or Terrorism.

and Jones 2009). While the negative framing rate fluctuated between 30 percent and 40 percent throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, the post-September 11 news era saw a range between 40 percent and nearly 60 percent. In this period, the *Wall Street Journal*, as expected, offered consistently higher rates of negative framing than the *New York Times*. Although forecasting changes in U.S. immigration policy goes beyond the scope of this article, the social conditions underlying the immigration debate of the 21st century favored anti-immigration groups and proponents of increased border security and harsher law enforcement procedures.

There are, of course, a number of limitations to this study. One weakness lies in our small sample of newspapers. We have only demonstrated that one conservative newspaper had a more adverse reaction to September 11 than one liberal newspaper. While the data shed a new and interesting light on this subject, especially given the social significance of the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, we cannot make sweeping claims about the power of political ideology in shaping the post-September 11 immigration debate. Further research is needed to test our hypotheses across a broader sample of liberal and conservative news outlets.

We should also qualify our claims about the authoritarian turn and acknowledge the limits of our political cultural explanation. As noted in Perrin's study (2005), an investigation of authoritarianism in the form of "cultural elements" in newspaper articles can neither confirm nor reject the classic social psychological arguments that treat authoritarianism as a psychological reaction to perceived threat or as a set of personality traits. Moreover, even though we showed that the immigrant threat narrative became more dominant after September 11, our data cannot explain the precise social processes behind this change. As one potential remedy, a future study might draw on the concept of hegemony (Gramsci 1971), explore the need of public officials to

legitimate their authority, and conduct a content analysis of presidential or congressional rhetoric to determine whether political elites shape the mass-mediated discussion of immigration in the United States.

#### AUTHOR NOTES

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