

# Immigration News Coverage in the Trump Era: A Chronological Assessment of Ideological Trends

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*The period in contemporary U.S. history bracketed by President Donald Trump's ascension to, and descent from, political power is in part characterized by a significant emphasis on immigration in news media coverage and the public consciousness. While scholarship has both examined immigration coverage comparatively and assessed the implications of such coverage on political behavior, emotions, and opinion-forming, research has not yet been conducted regarding the ideological contours of immigration coverage in the U.S. across news networks over time. I argue that Trump-era immigration coverage is marked by a gradual, conservative ideological shift in parallel to the rising electoral popularity of the Republican Party beginning in 2016. Utilizing a content analysis of CNN, FOX News, and CBS broadcast transcripts dated 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024, I instead find evidence of distinct conservative shifts in response to the onset of each Trump administration, rather than a gradual overarching trend in Trump-era news coverage.*

## 1. Introduction

Immigrants and their descendants have assumed a central, and controversial, position in the evolving understanding of what the national identity of the United States can – and should – encompass. Today, the U.S. continues to grapple with the role of immigrants in civil society, as it has since its inception in the 18th century; yet, contemporary dialogue is of particular interest considering the current polarized political climate. Notably, immigration has become increasingly associated with in-group and out-group tensions, economic scarcity concerns, and the anxieties provoked by multiculturalism in a globalized and interconnected world. Considering the complexity and controversy accompanying these contemporary discussions regarding immigration, television news media are an appealing resource, providing immigration news coverage tailored to political ideologies and news frames to appeal to varying degrees of security or alarm in its viewership.

In an effort to examine immigration in the United States, and the media that presents it as a subject of interest to the American public, existing scholarship has widely adopted a comparative approach (1, 2, 3, 4) or, alternatively, has discussed the implications of news framing effects on the development of public opinion and political behavior (5, 6, 7, 8, 9). However, few scholars in political science have examined news framing effects in the United States chronologically. With particular focus on the Trump era, I assess the broad ideological contours of immigration news coverage across television broadcast networks, a medium selected for this analysis on account of its accessibility and

engagement with the American public. I argue that a steady, conservative shift in immigration coverage has occurred, regardless of the political affiliation of the news network.

This paper proceeds as follows. I begin with a summary of the existing body of literature regarding immigration news coverage, offering context for the research question to which this analysis will respond: To what extent has contemporary immigration news coverage evolved? After situating my inquiry in the extant scholarship, I explain the data and methods leveraged in the content analysis employed to attain relevant findings and discuss these results, which ultimately counter my theory and hypotheses. Finally, I discuss the implications and limitations of this research as it stands and suggest opportunities for future study.

## 2. Current Understandings of Immigration News Coverage

Research on immigration news coverage can be broadly categorized into two distinct subgroups: scholarship that leverages a comparative approach to assess coverage on the basis of a range of isolated attributes, and scholarship that focuses on the role of framing effects in achieving particular responses in terms of emotions, political behavior, and public opinion. Select examples of the former provide insight into potential indicators of rising conservatism for assessment in this study. Conversely, thorough engagement with the latter surpasses the scope of this study; however, the research included therein is instead applicable to a discussion of possible implications

of the findings discussed here, or as a reference point for future study.

### **2.1. Comparative Analyses of Immigration Media Coverage**

A prominent subgroup of contemporary political science research provides frameworks by which to conceptualize immigration news coverage by emphasizing subtle distinctions between the content disseminated by media sources defined by various, typically binary, attributes. With particular relevance to the overwhelming focus on Southern border crossings in discussions of immigration centered in the United States, research has examined distinctions between the manner by which English- and Spanish-language news covers and discusses key issues, including immigration. The literature concludes Spanish-language news coverage to be more positive, more informative, and of a larger volume than its English-language counterpart (1, 2). Moreover, extant scholarship analyzes the extent to which immigration news coverage differs between public and commercial news, concluding that commercial news contains marginally more sensational and tabloid characteristics than public news (3). While the topical focus of this select subset of literature is not of immediate applicability to my inquiry, the design of the empirical approach of my research is informed by these experimental designs, and I intend to address the lack of a temporal assessment of immigration news coverage by employing a content analysis to facilitate similarly comparative discussions.

Of conceivably greatest relevance to this inquiry, this subgroup of comparative analyses notably includes media coverage comparisons on the basis of partisanship and ideology. Assessing dissimilarities between conservative and liberal newspaper coverage of immigration, research finds conservative coverage to utilize a less participatory style and to be less likely to invoke positive, accepting framing effects (4). Considering these findings, my research repurposes these attributes associated with conservative coverage as specific indicators of conservative trends across broadcast media platforms. It is in this sense that comparative assessments of partisan distinctions between sources of immigration media coverage are particularly salient, as I resolve the existing gap in immigration literature by noting ideological trends on a chronological basis.

### **2.2. Immigration Media Framing and Its Effects on Politics**

A second and distinct subcategory of immigration-focused political science research examines framing effect, particularly in terms of its influence on political behavior,

emotions, and opinion-forming. Research indicates that as news outlets cover immigration, public concerns regarding immigration diminish (5), and this exposure to immigration news influences the relative importance of immigration to other issues (6). Likewise, additional research concentrates on the role of partisan affiliations in producing emotional and ideological reactions, revealing that coverage produced by FOX News prompts negative perceptions of Mexican immigrants and higher support for restrictive immigration policy among Republicans, as well as liberals (7). This finding is of particular interest regarding the forthcoming analysis, as evidence of a gradual increase in conservatism across networks may warrant examination of resulting perceptions of immigrants and policy preferences. However, it must be noted that these findings predominantly pertain to FOX News, generally excluding parallel findings in regard to CNN, a key motivation in providing an extension to the literature by devising an ideologically balanced research design herein.

Evidently, the immigration framing literature, while thorough, does not yet address the possibility of ideologically motivated framing effects becoming gradually employed across a variety of media and the long-term ramifications of the development of these generalized effects regarding political behavior. The potential existence of this nuanced cause-and-effect dynamic reinforces the relevance of this research inquiry to discussions stimulated by prior scholarship and to the complex contemporary political environment, particularly in terms of immigration and its representation. The discussion and conclusion in which this paper culminates include a brief overview of my speculations, but further dialogue and empirical study are encouraged.

### **2.3. Testable Hypotheses**

In consideration of this robust literature, I propose four hypotheses to motivate my examination of trends across various indicators of ideological shifts over time. I expect Trump-era immigration coverage to be marked by a gradual, conservative ideological shift in parallel to the rising electoral popularity of the Republican Party, marked by Donald Trump's presidential victories in 2016 and 2024. In terms of media coverage, research finds immigration to be an evident priority, particularly among outlets with right-leaning audiences, as the Biden administration began in 2021 (10). This premise implies a high demand for conservative immigration coverage, despite the Democrat-led interval between Donald Trump's first and second administrations, and an increase in such coverage may have presumably occurred in parallel with the continuity of Donald Trump's executive power. This understanding, therefore, motivates my theory. Resultingly, the ideological indicators I consider are expected predictors of

conservatism (4).

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* With a specific focus on the period from 2012 to 2024, the tone of immigration coverage across networks will become increasingly negative, as assessed by negative ideological indicator count.

*Hypothesis 2 (H2):* From 2012 to 2024, the tone of immigration coverage across networks will demonstrate a decrease in positive tone, as assessed by positive ideological indicator count.

*Hypothesis 3 (H3):* From 2012 to 2024, the framing of immigration coverage across networks will increasingly emphasize immigration as a threat.

*Hypothesis 4 (H3):* From 2012 to 2024, the framing of immigration coverage across networks will demonstrate a decrease in sentiments of immigration acceptance.

To account for limitations of previous scholarship, in that an ideologically diverse sample of media has not always been attained for analysis, this study references immigration coverage produced by FOX News, CNN, and CBS – conservative, liberal-leaning, and slightly liberal-leaning, respectively. The immigration news coverage produced by FOX News can be reasonably expected to be conservative; the inclusion of two liberal-leaning news outlets, therefore, allows for greater clarity regarding ideological trends across platforms. Additionally, I selected transcripts of television broadcast coverage as the unit of analysis on account of the accessible nature of the television medium, an attribute perhaps due to an inherent entertainment quality that other media cannot necessarily provide on a comparable scale.

Given 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024 as years of interest for this study, I utilized Nexis Uni to select immigration news coverage from FOX News, CNN, and CBS associated with each election year, respectively. The decision to examine election years lies in the rationale that

Year	Source	Search Terms
2012	FOX News	(USA OR United States OR America) w/s (immigra! OR asyl! OR migra!)
	CNN	
	CBS	
2016	FOX News	(USA OR United States OR America) w/s (immigra! OR asyl! OR migra!)
	CNN	
	CBS	
2020	FOX News	(USA OR United States OR America) w/s (immigra! OR asyl! OR migra!)
	CNN	
	CBS	
2024	FOX News	(USA OR United States OR America) w/s (immigra! OR asyl! OR migra!)
	CNN	
	CBS	

**Figure 1. Nexis Uni Search Procedure.**

**3. Data and Methods**

To assess the above hypotheses, I employ a content analysis of data sourced from Nexis Uni, a comprehensive academic database. In this section, I describe the dataset and the procedure I invoked to attain it, discuss relevant variables in terms of their validity and reliability, as well as their conceptual and operational roles in this analysis, and relay the benefits and shortcomings of conducting a content analysis.

**3.1. Compiling the Dataset**

election years are associated with high political interest among the American public, which will likely exacerbate existing coverage trends, as particularly controversial issues and themes are often amplified. To conduct this search, I applied the following search terms.

As *Figure 1* reveals, a transcript was selected within year and source subcategories on the grounds that its text included language indicating a focus on the United States within a 25-word proximity of language indicating a focus on immigrants, asylees, migrants, or any relevant variations of the associated word stems. Additionally, date parameters were constructed for a duration of one year beginning February 1 of each election year in

question. While extant scholarship includes refugees in similar searches, this search term was not included for analysis as it frequently produced results pertaining to U.S. involvement abroad or reports of official U.S. statements regarding international crises, such as the Syrian Refugee Crisis, which extended beyond the scope of the domestic interests of this research. This search strategy produced a substantial sample of transcripts; however, only the five deemed most relevant by the Nexis Uni search algorithm for each source in each year were selected for analysis, producing a body of 60 transcripts. Although this small sample size may limit or skew the results of this study, the sample size of five transcripts per year was selected on account of an evident lack of relevant transcripts to this inquiry provided by the search algorithm beyond

this threshold. It is therefore recommended that further research address this shortcoming by examining a more expansive selection of sources, for example, as discussed in the concluding sections of this study.

**3.2. Ideological Indicator Variables**

Framing, a largely interdisciplinary concept, can be understood as a process in which words, expressions, and images are selected and emphasized to lend a point of view, focus, or angle to a piece of information (8). Further, research has demonstrated tone and frame to be crucial points of distinction between conservative and liberal media (4). Resultingly, tone and frame are assessed herein as indicators of increased conservatism. The variables

Variable	Description	Observations
election_year	Records the election year associated with the transcript	2012
		2016
		2020
		2024
source	Records the name of the news outlet that produced the transcript	FOX
		CNN
		CBS
tone	Records explicit and implicit attitudes toward immigration embedded in the transcript	pos
		neg
		neut
frame	Records the manner in which the transcript conceptualizes immigration	accept
		threat
		neut

Figure 2. Conceptual Summary of Variables of Interest.

Variable	Observations	Coding Protocol
tone	pos	A positive attitude toward immigration is embedded explicitly and/or implicitly in the transcript. Appeals to humanitarianism, morality, worthiness, and/or human rights may be included within the transcript, but this list is by no means exhaustive (4).
	neg	A negative attitude toward immigration is embedded explicitly and/or implicitly in the transcript. An attitude of aversion, disparagement, and/or appeals to us/them sentiments may be included within the transcript, but this list is by no means exhaustive (4).
	neut	The transcript does not reveal an overwhelming attitude in either noted direction, or, alternatively, influences of positive and negative attitudes balance to near net neutrality.

Figure 2. Operational Summary of tone Variable

Variable	Observations	Coding Protocol
frame	accept	A transcript demonstrates the acceptance frame by conceptualizing immigrants as “innocent and passive victims in need of protection” (4).
	threat	A transcript demonstrates the threat frame by associating immigration with “illegality, terrorism, and crime” (4). Alternatively, a transcript may demonstrate this frame by representing immigration as an issue beyond feasible resolution.
	neut	A transcript does not demonstrate framing, or, alternatively, contains elements of acceptance and threat frames to the extent of net neutrality.

Figure 4. Operational Summary of frame Variable

tone, frame, and any additional relevant variables established for this inquiry are conceptually summarized in Figure 2.

In parallel, the measurement protocol for the above variables, particularly tone and frame, is adapted from the findings of prior binary comparative analyses as discussed in Section 2.1. The coding protocol applied to the variables tone and frame is expanded in Figures 3 and 4.

This coding protocol was applied with reference to the body text of each transcript rather than to headline content or abbreviated proxies. This is on direct account of findings of political science methods scholarship: a comprehensive comparative review of New York Times

Index entries as proxies for full-length news content in the New York Times found proxies to be of inconsistent validity and reliability (11). While the generalizability of this methods study is somewhat limited, especially noting the lack of inclusion of newspaper media in this analysis, its findings are certainly worthy of consideration in this context, nonetheless.

#### 4. Findings

Figures 5 and 7 present my primary findings regarding the variables tone and frame, key indicators of conservatism as demonstrated by the extant literature.

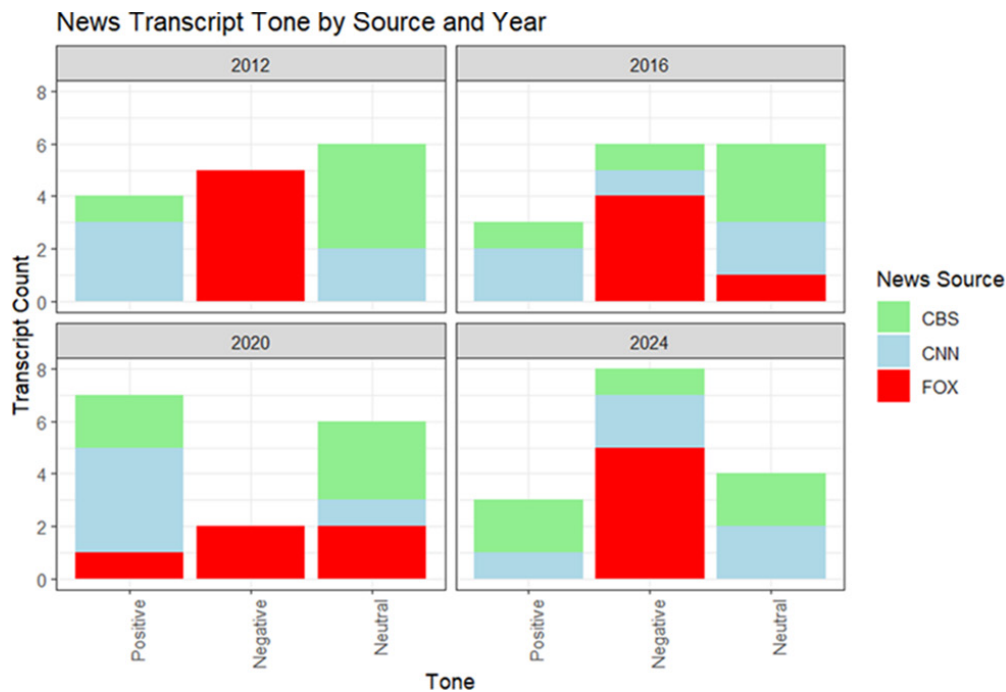


Figure 5. News Transcript Tone by Source and Year

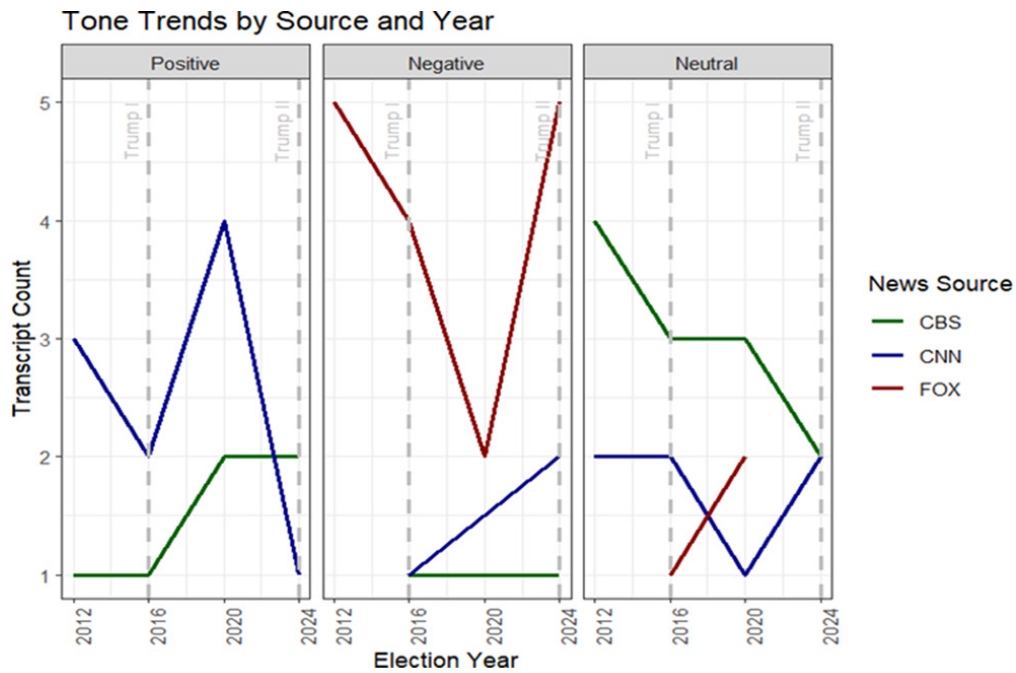


Figure 6. Disaggregated Tone Trends by Source and Year

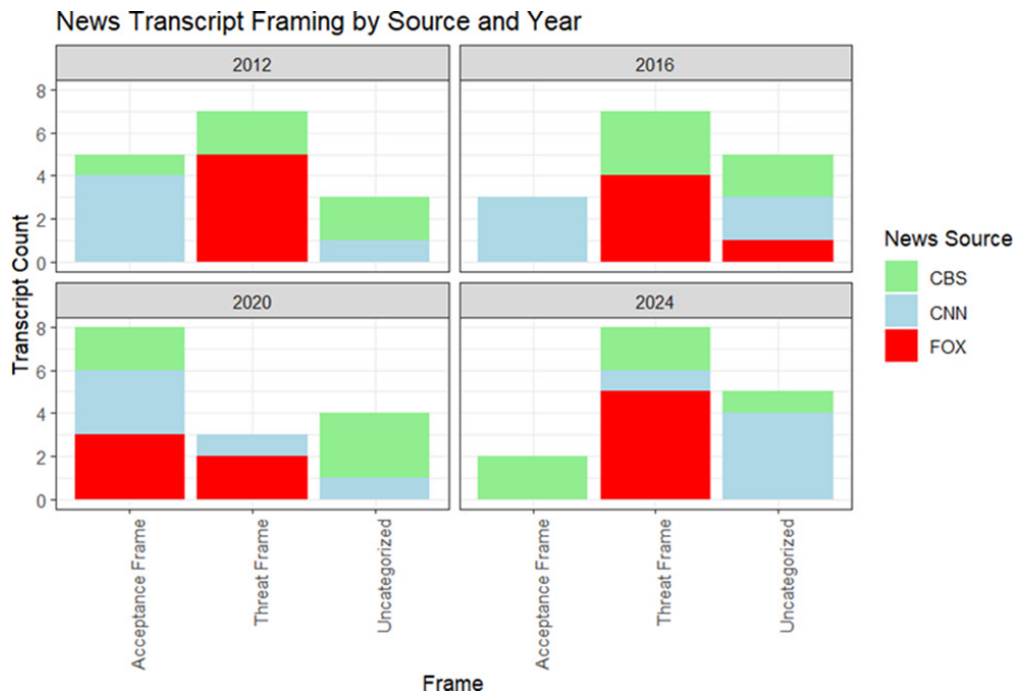


Figure 7. News Transcript Framing by Source and Year

These data visualizations illustrate trends in tone and framing, respectively, over the duration of the studied period across ideologically diverse television broadcast media outlets by means of a stacked bar plot. To complement these visualizations, Figures 6 and 8 disaggregate tone and framing trends by means of overlaid line graphs,

presenting each news source individually within specific tone and framing categories over time. This reinforces the lack of uniformity across networks regarding these conservative indicators, directly contrasting with my hypotheses.

This result fails to corroborate H1 and H2,

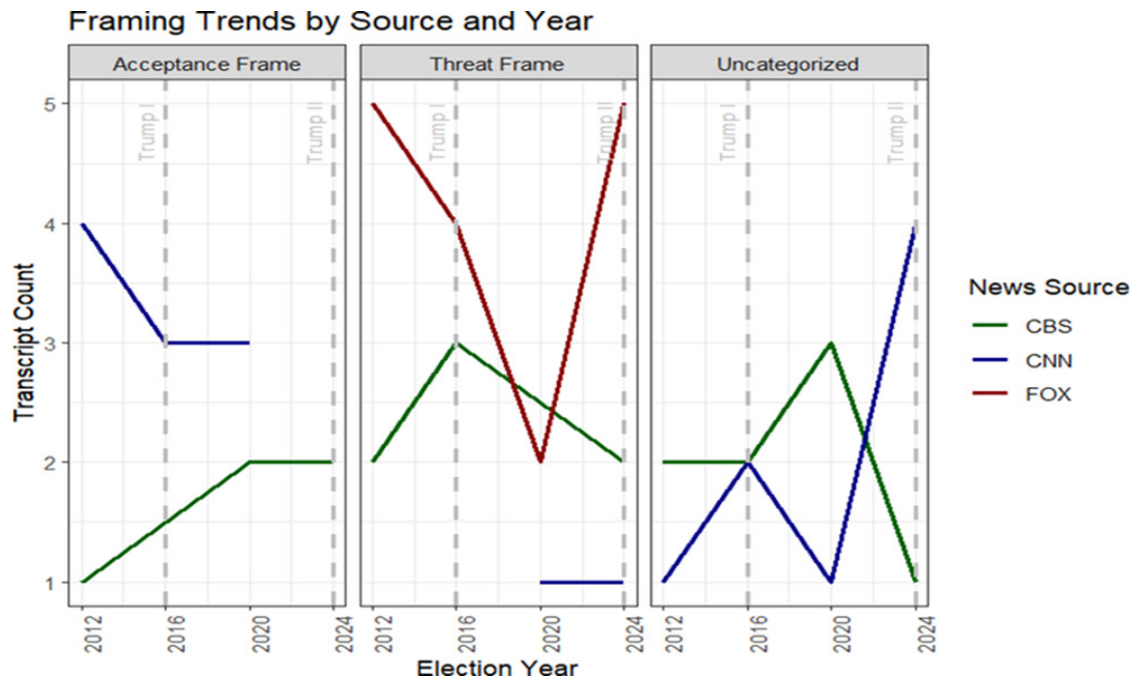


Figure 8. Disaggregated Framing Trends by Source and Year

as negative and positive coverage tone alike do not consistently trend in the expected direction over the period of interest in any gradual manner. Negative coverage rises by 60% over the period of interest, while positive coverage falls by 25%; however, substantial fluctuations of negative tone, a key conservative indicator, occur at the onset of each respective Trump administration, yet fail to endure Joe Biden’s presidential tenure.

$$\Delta tone_{neg} = \frac{neg_{2024} - neg_{2012}}{neg_{2012}}$$

$$\Delta tone_{pos} = \frac{pos_{2024} - pos_{2012}}{pos_{2012}}$$

Similarly, this result fails to corroborate H3 and H4, as neither acceptance nor threat framing trend consistently in the expected direction. Threat framing rises by 14% over the period of interest, while acceptance framing falls by 60%; however, threat framing dominates the subset of the media landscape under study as each respective Trump administration begins, yet the onset of the Biden administration marks a sharp increase in acceptance framing.

$$\Delta frame_{threat} = \frac{threat_{2024} - threat_{2012}}{threat_{2012}}$$

$$\Delta frame_{accept} = \frac{accept_{2024} - accept_{2012}}{accept_{2012}}$$

### 5. Discussion

As the results obtained fail to confirm the testable hypotheses of this inquiry, and thus the theory itself, I discuss possible rationales for this discrepancy. Firstly, it is distinctly possible that the selected sample of 60 transcripts, selected on the basis of relevancy as determined by the Nexis Uni search algorithm, is not representative of the true population of content that fulfills search criteria. Furthermore, while the benefits of content analysis lie in its ability to facilitate qualitative research by revealing trends and themes without mandating direct observation, this methodology is inevitably subjective in nature. Namely, the process of applying a coding protocol to a selected collection of content is inherently limited by human error and oversights, which may adversely impact the validity of resulting findings. Although an immediate resolution to these shortcomings is not readily available, content analysis nonetheless remains the most effective methodology for this research.

In the event that the validity of these findings is defensible, a possible explanation for evident fluctuations in conservative indicators across media sources in parallel to the onset of Donald Trump’s first and second administrations presents itself in that electoral popularity may feasibly be assumed by media platforms to translate to journalistic engagement and profitability. 2016 and 2024, election years marked by Donald Trump’s staunch commitment to a conservative immigration platform, might perhaps prompt a journalistic response across media platforms that attempts to best engage the electoral majority by

adopting tone and framing strategies that align with the immigration policy preferences of the elected presidential candidate. Nonetheless, a satisfactory explanation cannot be confirmed, however, without the invocation of further empirical analysis, particularly in terms of a potential causal relationship between presidential immigration platforming and immigration media coverage.

## 6. Conclusion

Historically, concerns have been frequently raised regarding the ways in which news networks portray issues, particularly in terms of the points of divergence along ideological lines of the coverage these networks produce. However, this prevalent focus in existing literature has neglected the study of general trends across networks over time. Addressing this substantial gap, my research investigates indicators of rising conservatism, derived from existing comparative immigration news coverage scholarship, chronologically across three major news networks with various partisan affiliations. I find, contrary to my initial hypotheses, that indicators of conservatism rise in parallel to the onset of Donald Trump's first and second administrations.

Research, including that associated with immigration news coverage, has long suggested that framing effects have several significant implications for public opinion and political behavior (5, 6, 7, 8, 9). Therefore, it follows that conclusive evidence regarding widespread ideological trends prompts further analysis as shifts in public opinion and political behavior may be reasonably expected to have occurred in greater proportions of the population than had formerly been understood or assessed. This phenomenon has the potential to impose sweeping effects on political outcomes and mainstream conceptualizations of controversial issues, including immigration.

However, while the contribution of this paper to the existing scholarly dialogue may spur a variety of novel contributions to the discipline of political science, I acknowledge the limitations of the methodological approach employed herein, and thus my findings. As discussed previously, the limited sample size included in this analysis and the uncertainty associated with the representativeness of the sample itself are of disservice to the validity and reliability of the resulting findings. In future investigations, I intend to resolve this discrepancy by expanding my sample on the basis of the existing criteria, while also potentially expanding the search criteria itself to include a more expansive array of news media sources. Additionally, I anticipate that the inclusion of additional ideological indicators may further concretize any resulting findings.

Notwithstanding evident limitations, this research meaningfully contributes to studies of immigration by

tentatively demonstrating that ideological shifts occur laterally with regard to a diverse body of media. This study consequently presents several avenues for further analysis, including those of other time frames, nations, news sources, and media categories, as well as those associated with any in-depth framing effects studies designed to chart widespread responses to generalized ideological shifts across a more nuanced selection of frames.

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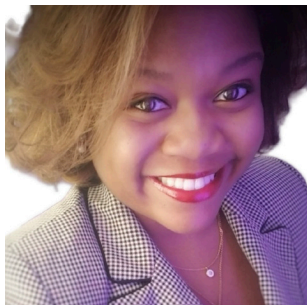
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