Controversial Events and Legislator (Non)responsiveness in the Age of Multimedia Online Platforms

Keywords: political communication, social media, text analysis, sentiment analysis, causal inference

Extended Abstract

On April 6, 2018, United States Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the U.S. would be implementing a "zero tolerance" policy toward individuals who attempt to seek entry to the country through its southern border. Notably, part of this policy called for separating families that are caught attempting to cross the southern border, specifically by detaining parents and children in different facilities for an indeterminate amount of time while parents await prosecution by federal authorities.

News about this practice of separating families spread quickly. Two weeks after the announcement, the *New York Times* published an article stating that more than 700 children had been separated from their parents at the border. Several weeks later, Getty Images published a viral photograph of Honduran two-year-old Yanela Sanchez crying as her mother was being taken into custody at the border. Less than a week later, *ProPublica* released a widely-circulated audio recording of children crying for their parents while detained in a U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility. By mid-June, the Trump Administration's zero tolerance policy faced unrelenting news coverage about family separations and growing public outcry. On June 20, 2018, President Donald Trump issued an executive order directing the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to detain families together and, shortly thereafter, a federal judge ordered the end of some family separations. Within three months, the controversial policy was illuminated, generated public outcry, and was addressed by political leaders.

While the evolution of the 2018 family separation crisis seems extraordinary, we contend in this paper that this crisis represents how controversial events tend to unfold in the digital age. With the advent of multimedia online platforms, Americans are exposed to more news than ever before, quicker than ever before, and in more formats like text, image, audio, and/or video. But have these changes in news availability and mediums altered whether and how Americans and their political leaders respond to controversial events?

Although there has been extensive research on news and its effects on political behavior, this research has largely focused on traditional media (e.g., print media, television, radio) and the extent to which these findings apply to multimedia online platforms is unclear. For example, longstanding work in psychology (Chaiken and Eagly 1983; Braverman 2008) has consistently found that information is not a one-dimensional entity and that the medium through which information is conveyed matters in influencing the behavior of individuals. However, these findings have not been thoroughly tested with multimedia online platforms. There is promising recent research in political science on political mobilization via multimedia online platforms (e.g., Casas and Webb Williams 2019), but this work remains limited.

Moreover, it is especially unclear how the advent of multimedia online platforms affects political leaders and whether and how they react. Theories on when and how political leaders choose to communicate with their constituents and the general public have focused on more traditional types of interactions such as press releases and in-person visits to their

constituencies. This is particularly true of previous research about the strategic behaviors of U.S. Congressmembers (Fenno 1974; Mayhew 1974; Grimmer 2013). As a result, there is limited empirical knowledge about how political leaders and their staff are navigating this changing communication and political landscape brought about by recent advances in communication technologies.

Taken together, previous social science research on traditional news and political behavior suggests two testable hypotheses regarding how U.S. political leaders respond to news about controversial events in the digital age. Given that images and audio recordings have been shown to be more persuasive and evocative mediums for conveying information and that U.S. political leaders are strategic communicators who are more likely to respond to events that have generated public outcry, we can expect that (H1) U.S. political leaders will change *how much* they publicly talk about a controversial event depending on the format of the news coverage. U.S. political leaders will talk about a controversial event the most when news coverage involves audio recordings and the least when news coverage involves written articles, with news coverage involving images registering somewhere in-between. We can also expect that (H2) U.S. political leaders will change *how* they publicly talk about a controversial event depending on the format of the news coverage. When talking about a controversial event, U.S. political leaders will be the most emotional when news coverage involves audio recordings and the least emotional when news coverage involves written articles, with news coverage involving images registering somewhere in-between.

To test these hypotheses, we conduct a case study of how U.S. Congressmembers responded to news about the 2018 family separation crisis within the digital space of Twitter. We build a unique dataset of all tweets generated by all members of the 115th U.S. Congress during their term between January 3, 2017 and January 4, 2019 (n = approx. 1 million tweets from 529 accounts). We identify three salient news releases surrounding the family separation crisis that serve as our treatments. We evaluate the impact of the news release events on Congressional tweeting activity using automated text analysis, sentiment analysis, and interrupted time series analysis. We currently find that the news release events had significant and distinct effects on the quantity of tweet activity among Congressmembers during this time period. News about the crisis reported through text only spurred reticence and actually *decreased* tweet activity among Congressmembers, while news reported through images galvanized Congressmembers and *increased* their immigration-related tweet activity (see Figures 1 and 2). This pre-registered study demonstrates how causal inference and computational methods can be integrated to improve understanding of controversial events and political responsiveness in the digital age.

References

Braverman, J. 2008. "Testimonials versus informational persuasive messages: The moderating effect of delivery mode and personal involvement." *Communication Research* 35(5):666-694.

Casas, A. and N. Webb Williams. 2019. "Images that matter: Online protest and the mobilizing role of pictures." *Political Science Quarterly* 72(2):360-375.

Chaiken, S. and AH Eagly. 1983. "Communication modality as a determinant of persuasion: The role of communicator salience." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45(2):241-256.

Fenno, RF. 1974. *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts.* HarperCollins.

Grimmer, J. 2013. *Representational Style in Congress: What Legislators Say and Why It Matters.* Cambridge University Press.

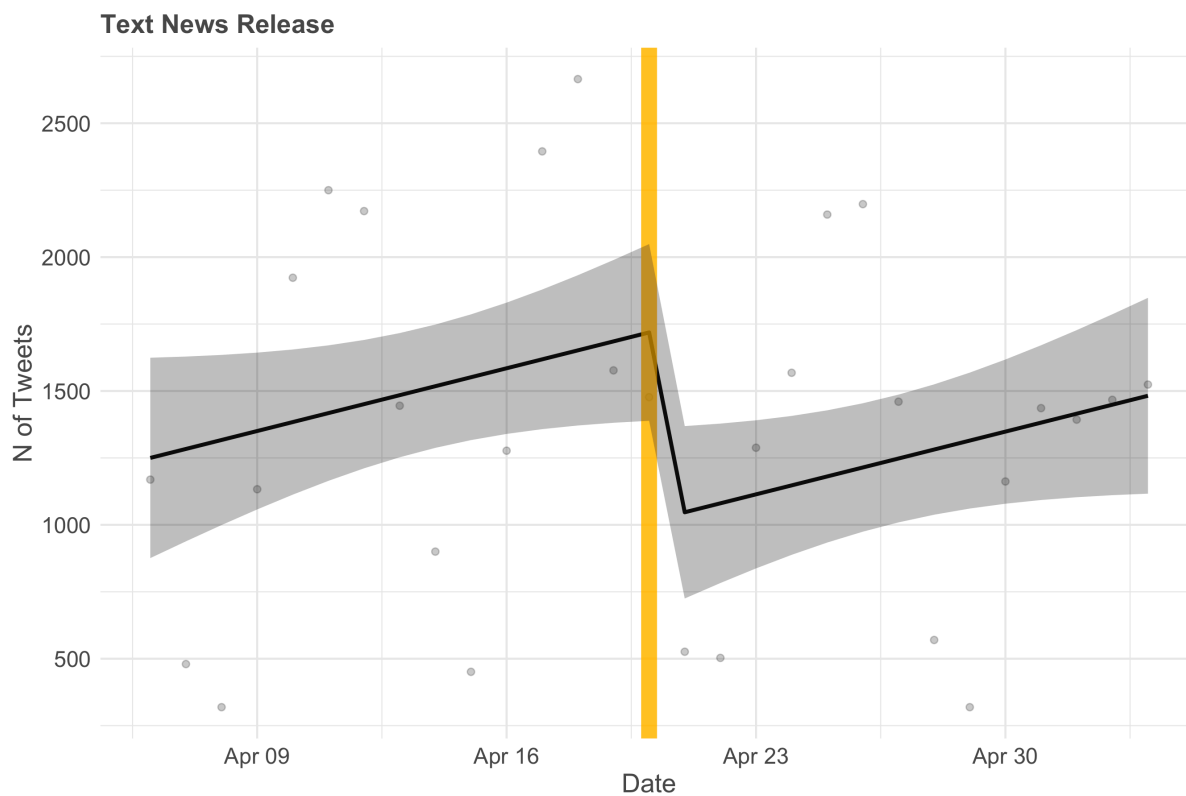Mayhew, DR. 1974. *Congress: The Electoral Connection.* Yale University Press.

Text News Release

Figure 1. Impact of text news release on daily number of Congressional tweets
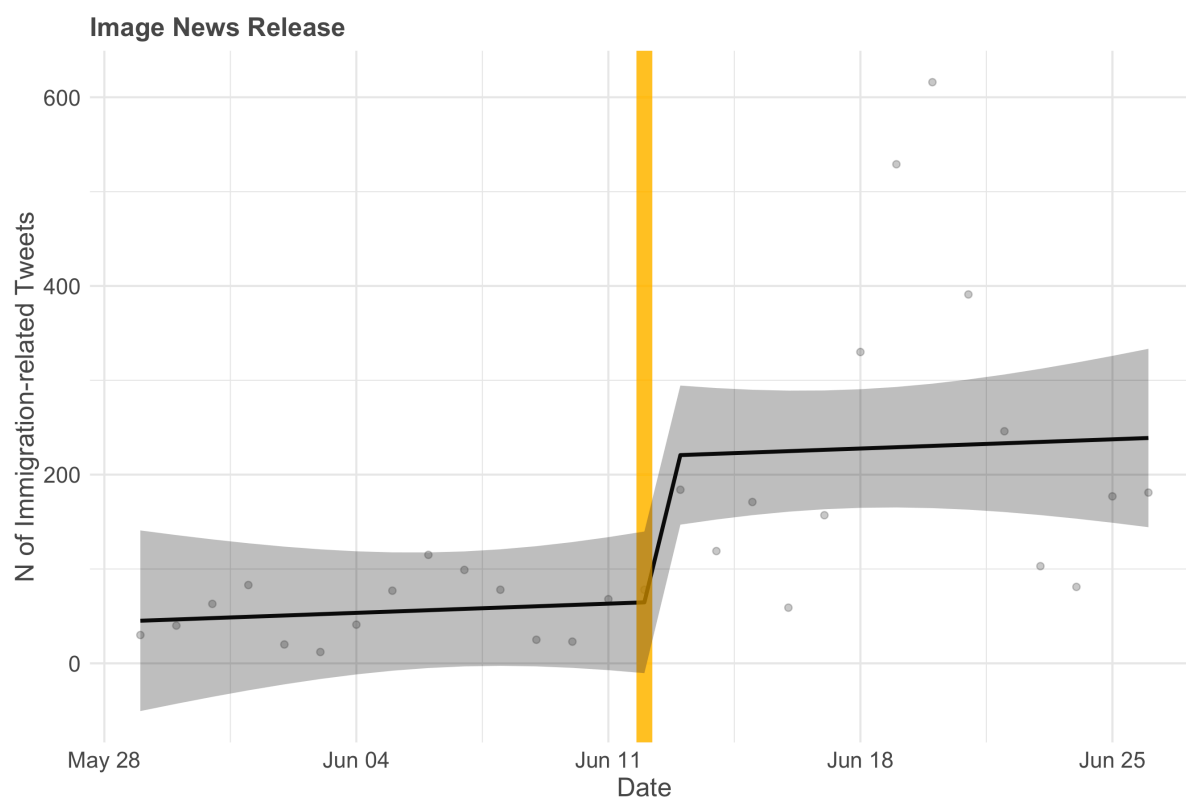
Image News Release

Figure 2. Impact of image news release on daily number of Congressional immigration-related tweets