The interplay between refugee inflows and media coverage in determining attitudes towards immigrants in Germany

Keywords: refugee inflow, media salience, anti-immigrant attitudes, Gdelt database

Extended Abstract

Why do people have differential perceptions of population change caused by mass migration (Butz and Kehrberg 2019; Guia 2016; Jaret 1999; Lippard 2011; Smith 2016)? In past decades, the rise of anti-immigration attitudes in Europe has been attributed to the large number of immigrants who regard western European countries as their destination. Studies have found that media coverage of demographic change influences the political attitudes and behaviors of residents (Brosius, van Elsas, and de Vreese 2019; Gonzalez O'Brien et al. 2019; Koch et al. 2020; Vestergaard 2020). The media salience, specifically the salience of coverage of demographic change, provides people a cognitive framework for understanding changes in the surrounding areas (Hopkins 2010). In this study, we focus, in particular, on the moderating role of refugee-related news events in the local states. This study contributes to the literature by examining the relationships between local media's focus on immigrants and residents' views of immigrants in the German context.

This paper aims to explore the relationship between the refugee influx and anti-immigrant attitudes, and how this relationship is moderated by media salience. We combine three datasets—the German Socio-Economic-Panel (GSOEP, 2011-2017), data from the Federal Office of Statistics, and the Gdelt database of news events—and we utilize multilevel modeling. This paper pays particular attention to the different moderation roles of media in the previous East and West German regions. We also seek to show how regional news events play an essential role in politicizing changes in the surrounding population as threats. Through this study, we aim to better understand regional differences in the German political climate toward asylum seekers and to provide policy recommendation in terms of refugee resettlement and social integration.

Method and Data

This paper relies on the integration of three data sources. We combine data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), the German Federal Office of Statistics and the Gdelt database. The data is in longitudinal format from 2011 to 2017. We apply a mixed-effect approach, which is also known as the random slope model or a multi-level model. Our empirical strategy is to identify the effect of the interaction of the asylum application rate and the media coverage about refugees in one's living state on the anti-immigrant attitude of individuals with the geographic level 1 data of the whole Germany and the level 2 data of 16 German states.

The measurement of anti-immigrant attitudes comes from GSOEP and uses the question "How concerned are you about the following issues?" and the answer to one of the issues listed is: "Immigration to Germany" in the SOEP core study. There are three scales in this variable: "very concerned", "somewhat concerned", and "not concerned at all." Data on inflows of immigrants to Germany, in particular asylum seekers, comes from the German Federal Office of Statistics. We use the number of asylum seekers registered before the end of the year (e.g., before 31st Dec 2011 for year 2011) in each German federal states. We define the refugee presence as the share of asylum seeker applications in the total population in each state per

year, which can be a proxy for variations in the native population's exposure to refugees. The measurement of the media coverage comes from the Gdelt database. The Gdelt is a real-time open database that collects news from news media all over the world, digging into reactions and sentiments of news events. In this study, we use the Event 1.0 database for measuring media salience. For example, a sentence like "Some 800,000 Iraqi Kurds sought refuge in Germany last month" would be split into keywords "IRAQI KURDS, SOUGHT REFUGE, GERMANY" and with a CAMEO event code "1033: Demand Humanitarian Aid" and would be assigned into different attributes in the database (Schrodt 2012). Considering that people usually pay attention particularly to news events happening around them (Harnischmacher 2015), we define the number of news articles with the event location in one's living state as the salient media effect of region. As a normalization, we define "media salience" as the share of the article number of refugee news events to the overall news events.

Main Result

Figure 1 compares the predicted probabilities in the media effect on changing people's perception toward refugee influx across all states in former East and West Germany with two breaks of media salience at 0.01 and 0.04. These two breaks are the upper and lower bounds of the media salience ratio in most of German states from 2010 to 2017. We exclude Berlin in these two figures because it cannot be completely classified as East Germany or West Germany. From this figure, media effects between the former West and East Germany are different. In former West Germany, the media has almost no influence on the effect of the refugee influx on anti-immigrant attitudes while we observe a distinct media effect in former East Germany. Overall, on average, people in former East Germany are more likely to accept a threat frame about refugees from the media and thus negatively perceive the refugee influx than former West Germany. Beyond the German context, these findings suggest that the processes regarding the role of news theorized by Hopkins may be dependent on initial conditions of a particular region, such as the level of ethnonationalism and social marginalization.

References

Brosius, Anna, Erika J. van Elsas, and Claes H. de Vreese. 2019. "How Media Shape Political Trust: News Coverage of Immigration and Its Effects on Trust in the European Union." *European Union Politics* 20 (3): 447–67.

Butz, Adam M., and Jason E. Kehrberg. 2019. "Anti-immigrant Sentiment and the Adoption of State Immigration Policy." *Policy Studies Journal* 47 (3): 605–23.

Gonzalez O'Brien, Benjamin, Elizabeth Hurst, Justin Reedy, and Loren Collingwood. 2019. "Framing Refuge: Media, Framing, and Sanctuary Cities." *Mass Communication and Society* 22 (6): 756–78.

Guia, Aitana. 2016. "The Concept of Nativism and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments in Europe."

Harnischmacher, Michael. 2015. "Journalism after All: Professionalism, Content and Performance–A Comparison between Alternative News Websites and Websites of Traditional Newspapers in German Local Media Markets." *Journalism* 16 (8): 1062–84.

Hopkins, Daniel J. 2010. "Politicized Places: Explaining Where and When Immigrants Provoke Local Opposition." *American Political Science Review* 104 (1): 40–60.

Jaret, Charles. 1999. "Troubled by Newcomers: Anti-Immigrant Attitudes and Action during Two Eras of Mass Immigration to the United States." *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 9–39.

Koch, Caleb M., Izabela Moise, Dirk Helbing, and Karsten Donnay. 2020. "Public Debate in the Media Matters: Evidence from the European Refugee Crisis." *EPJ Data Science* 9 (1): 1–27.

Lippard, Cameron D. 2011. "Racist Nativism in the 21st Century." *Sociology Compass* 5 (7): 591–606.

Schrodt, P. 2012. *Conflict and Mediation Event Observations Event and Actor Codebook V. 1.1 B3*.

Smith, Heather Jane. 2016. "Britishness as Racist Nativism: A Case of the Unnamed 'Other.'" *Journal of Education for Teaching* 42 (3): 298–313.

Vestergaard, Karsten Tingleff. 2020. "The Battle for the Public Perception: How Increases in Asylum Seekers and Media Framing Affected the Perception of the Refugee Crisis and Support for Additional Measures across the Left-Right Spectrum." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 28 (4): 411–33.
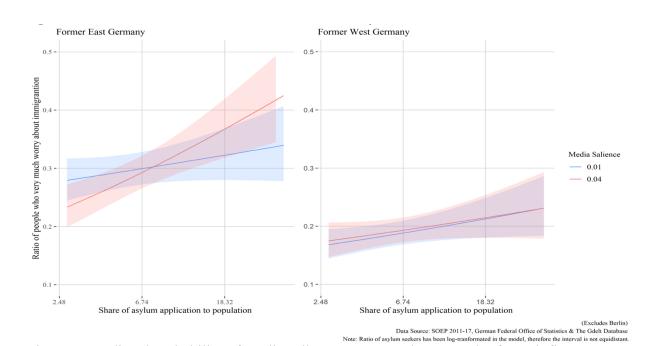
Figure 1. Predicted probability of media salience on perception toward refugee influx across former East and West Germany