**TITLE**

Leslie J. Root and Monica J. Alexander

Extended abstract submitted to PAA 2019

**Abstract**

Previous research finds that public sentiment on immigration is influenced to a large extent not by changes in immigrant stocks and flows, but by specific highly visible events (e.g., a terrorist attack) and media coverage. However, public opinion data is available only at infrequent intervals, making it difficult to establish a clearer relationship between specific news events or changes in the news environments and migration sentiment. In this paper, we explore the utility of natural language processing in analyzing the U.S. migration discourse in the first two years of the Trump presidency, connecting national news coverage to public sentiment through the use of Twitter data. We suggest that this connection, and the polarized sentiment it engenders, could have significant implications for migration policy in the near future.

**Background**

Of the major types of demographic events – birth, death, and migration – the last of these is perhaps the most extensively influenced by the non-demographic. In addition to the social and economic determinants of migration, political fortunes such as changing visa regimes, border security measures, and natives’ attitude to immigrants influence the ability and desire of potential immigrants to cross borders. Natives’ attitude in particular can change migration patterns both directly (by changing the perceived appeal of the destination country) and, in democratic societies, by changing the government’s attitude.

Previous research finds that public sentiment on immigration is governed to a large extent by outside events and media coverage (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016; Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008; Dunaway, Branton, & Abrajano, 2010; Kim, Carvalho, Davis, & Mullins, 2011; van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, Vreese, & H, 2015; Zúñiga, Correa, & Valenzuela, 2012). However, nationally representative survey data on this issue, like much survey data, is not particularly granular, and the effect of specific events (and specific media coverage) is not known.

The Trump administration has created a new context for the immigration discourse, in that it has made immigration one of its key policy priorities and has created a news climate in which immigration is a constant subject of media coverage. Motivated by evidence of Democratic voters becoming more open to immigration (“Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration Into the U.S.,” 2018) and some survey data indicating that even Republican voters are significantly less negative on immigration than the current administration’s policies would suggest, the present research uses natural language processing to analyze large datasets of news coverage and social media to connect changes in public opinion to four major news events: the election of Donald Trump, Executive Order 13769 (the “Muslim travel ban”), the proposed end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, and the family separation policy.

First, we demonstrate that the Trump administration is indeed a new context for the immigration discourse, in that the administration’s focus on immigration and border security as a key policy priority and its high-profile attempts to restrict immigration have created a news climate in which immigration is a constant subject of media coverage.

We will then explore how patterns of public opinion about migration are linked to the news cycle and migration policy, by analyzing changes in sentiment and topics in covered a time series of Twitter data which covers the Trump era.

**Data**

We analyze articles from the ProQuest “U.S. Major Dailies” database, which includes *The* *Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times, The* *New York Times,* the *Wall Street Journal,* andthe *Washington Post.* Articles are drawn from the first two years of the Trump era, defined as beginning with Donald Trump’s formal nomination as the Republican candidate for president in late July, 2016 and ending on July 31, 2018. All articles containing the terms “immigra\*” (that is, immigrant, immigration, or other variants of these words) and “U.S.” were included in the sample, for sample size of 15,644 articles. (U.S. was included to narrow the focus by reducing the number of articles exclusively discussing non-U.S. migration topics such as Brexit and the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe.) For comparative analyses, the same search was done on an equivalent period in the early Obama era (7/29/2008 to 7/31/2010), yielding 6462 articles.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We will obtain immigration-related tweets during the Trump era from Twitter’s Historical PowerTrack API.[[2]](#footnote-2) This tool allows for the extraction of tweets that include a combination of relevant keywords (e.g. “immigra\*”), hashtags (e.g. #DACA, #Dreamers) and user accounts (e.g. @realDonaldTrump). We are also able to obtain the impressions of tweets (i.e. the number of retweets and likes) and the user’s location, where specified. Access to the API is available for a fee, based on the amount of data extracted. This data collection process will be set up in the coming months.

**Methods**

(Monica can you write a bit for this part?)

**Descriptive analysis and initial findings**

*Finding #1*

As a share of all news coverage, immigration was significantly more dominant in the Trump era than in the Obama era, indicating that the news climate has indeed changed. Table 1 gives the total number of articles in the database for each time period. Immigration is mentioned in nearly three percent of articles in the Trump era – 3.2 times as frequently as in the Obama era. Figure 1 shows the number of immigration articles per day. Although the raw number does not account for differences in the overall number of news articles each day, the large difference in overall numbers between the two periods indicate that, proportionally, the Trump line can be reasonably supposed to be even higher than the Obama line.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Articles on immigration | Total articles | Proportion of articles on immigration |
| Obama era | 6462 | 698457 | 0.93% |
| Trump era | 15644 | 528255 | 2.96% |

Table 1.



Figure 1. Number of articles containing immigration per day, by era. Note that the Obama era articles have been shifted by two years.

*Finding #2*

While day-to-day coverage of immigration is somewhat higher in the Trump era, a significant portion of the difference is driven by major news events. These include the election (large one-day spike in November 2016), the Muslim travel ban (gradual increase in early 2017 to a maximum around February 1, when Executive Order 13769 was published), the plan to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA, peaking with the announcement of the plan September 7, 2017 and dominating coverage again in January 2018 as the courts began to block the plan), and the family separation policy (peaking near the end of June, 2018).

One of the most obvious peaks in the Obama era, by contrast, on April 15, 2007, was due to a deportation stay granted to an accused former Nazi prison guard coinciding with the release of a report on undocumented immigrants by the Pew Hispanic Center.



Figure 2.

*Finding #3*

Sentiment analysis indicates, too, that the Trump era media environment on immigration is marked by unusual events. In this case, we see that sentiment is relatively constant, with the notable exception of coverage of the Muslim travel ban and the family separation policy. Other negative peaks occurred around two terrorist incidents (September 17-19, 2016 and October 31, 2017). (I feel like this might just be telling us how sentiment analysis works – things that are violent (or rhetorically violent) get coded as more negative.)

*Finding #4*

Topic modeling – what does it show us? What could it show us? I would hypothesize more topics in the Obama era

**Further research and expected results**

What will the Twitter link be? What kind of thing might we be looking for?

1. Obama wasn’t formally nominated until the Democratic National Convention on August 25-27. Not sure if it’s more worthwhile to have the same calendar months or the same temporality vis-à-vis nomination. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tutorials/choosing-historical-api.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)