

Framing Effects in the Wild

How the News Media Shapes Public Opinion by Defining
Political Issues

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Presentation prepared for the 72nd annual ICA Conference in Paris

2022-05-30

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Does News Framing matter?

Classic Framing Study

Condition A

Would you increase welfare spending **in order to support the poor?**

External validity?

Sniderman and Theriault (2004)

Condition B

Would you increase welfare spending **even if it meant higher taxes?**

Evidence from Observational Studies

- Few observational studies with mixed findings and endogeneity concerns ([Jerit, 2008](#); [Jerit, 2009](#)) .
- Causal inference work not concerned with framing ([Durante and Knight, 2012](#); [Foos and Bischof, 2020](#); [Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017](#); [Spirig, 2020](#)) .

No observational studies assessing causal effect of framing!

Case

Bild's migration coverage following 2015



- Editorial change in the largest German tabloid newspaper, **Bild**.
- Reichelt increasingly **framed migrants as criminals**.
- Potentially exogenous timing.

Bild's migration coverage following 2015



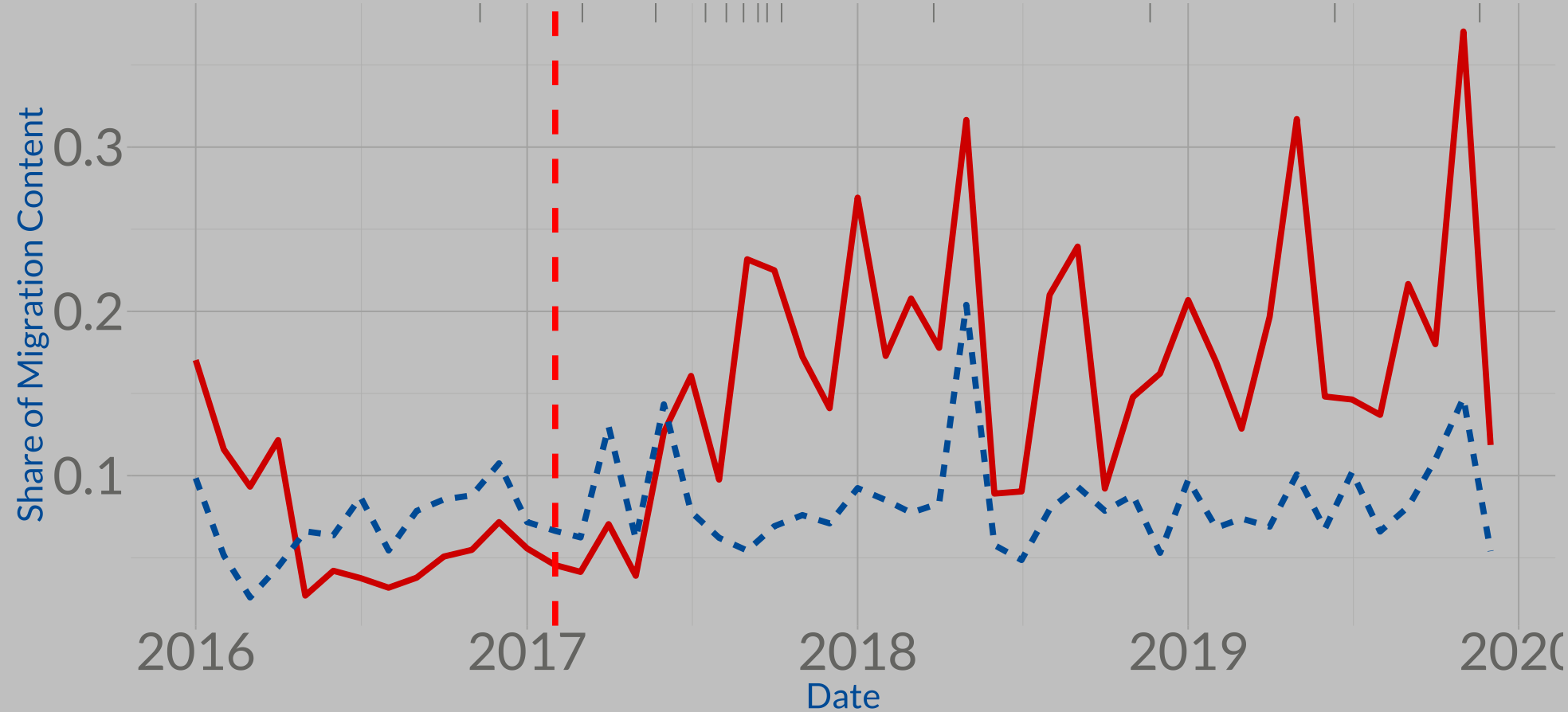
Interesting because:

- **Clearly identifiable short-term-change** in migration coverage.
- Clear expectations regarding impact.
- Change not debated in the media → **No co-treatment!** (Spirig, 2020).



Changing emphasis of crime in migration coverage

Monthly Share of Migration Content Devoted to Crime Frames
Bild vs. other major daily newspapers, 2016-2020



How does this affect migration attitudes?

Expectations I

H1: Individuals exposed to *more news* about criminal migrants will develop a *more conservative* attitude towards migration.

Expectations II

- Existing studies find ideological **inertia** and even **backlash** when individuals are exposed to content from opposing political outlets (Bail Argyle, et al., 2018; Guess Barberá, et al., 2021; Broockman and Kalla, 2022).
- In line with **motivated reasoning**

H2: Framing effect *stronger* for individuals with *more conservative attitudes*.

Estimating the Effect on Immigration Attitudes

Estimation

Difference-in-Differences Design

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \beta * Post_t * Treatment_i + \epsilon_{gt}$$

- Compare those reading *Bild* in W1 to *never*-readers.
- ATE = Δ attitude Bild readers - Δ control group.

Dependent Variable

- German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) Panel
- 7-point Likert-scale asking whether immigration to Germany should be
 - made easier (-3) or
 - restricted (3).

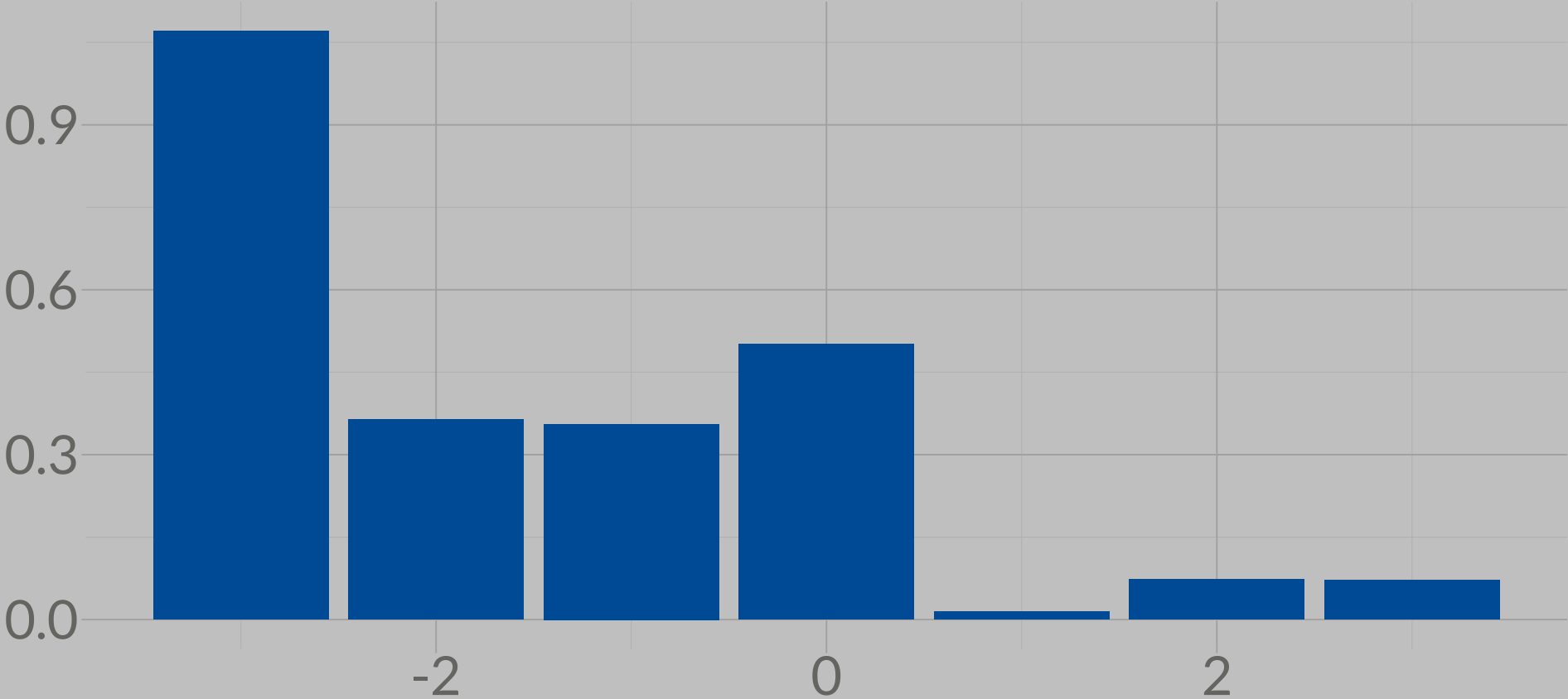
Results

Effect of Increased Exposure to Migrant Crime News

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
ATE	0.131*	0.048	0.348*	0.346*
	(0.057)	(0.041)	(0.066)	(0.060)
ATE X Initial Attitude			-0.104*	-0.121*
			(0.027)	(0.026)
Num.Obs.	84538	84538	84110	84110
R2 Pseudo	0.001	0.413	0.243	0.422
FE: Individual		X		X

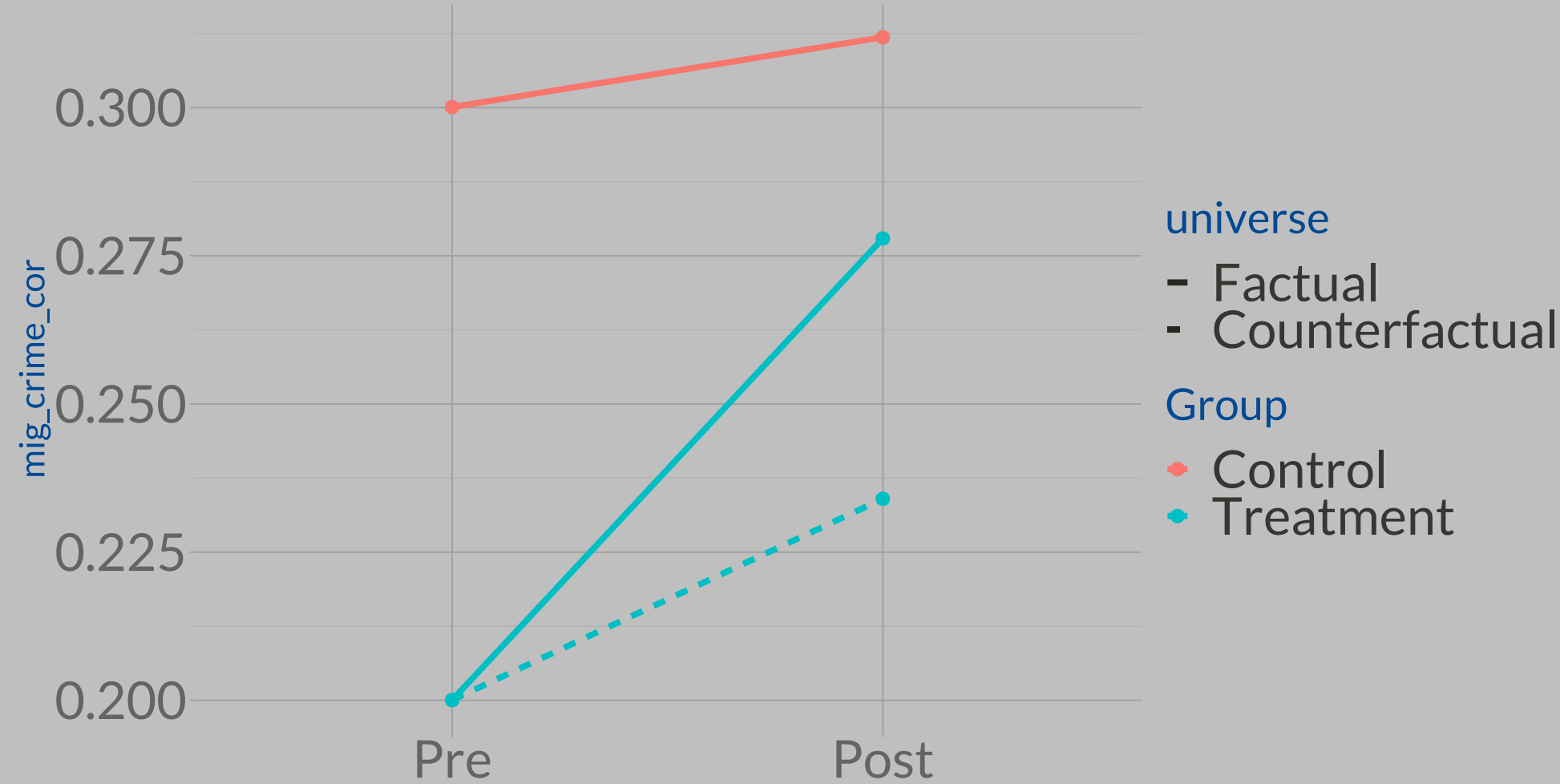
Subgroup effects

Pre-post differences of treated and untreated
by initial migration attitude



Mechanism, and Robustness, Interpretation

Association of Immigration and Crime Attitudes



Association II (following Nelson & Kinder 1996)

	Model 1
Crime Attitude	0.470*
	(0.014)
Crime Attitude X Post	-0.007
	(0.015)
Crime Attitude X Bild Reader	0.021
	(0.034)
Crime Attitude X Post X Bild	0.111+
	(0.057)

Robustness I

Holds in

- 2-way FE Model estimating direct exposure.
 - BERT and
 - STM estimates of crime exposure.
- Tobit model (still figuring out FEs).

Robustness II

Selecting out

- **Liberals *not* more likely to stop reading** Bild than conservatives (differs from across-outlet studies).
- Attrition is an issue → Lee and Manski bounds up next.

Why are conservatives *less* reactive?

Mechanism for Interaction Effect

- ~~Attentiveness/Political Knowledge~~
- ~~Partisanship~~
- ~~Values~~
- ~~Issue Importance~~

Likely ceiling effect.

Why is there *no* evidence for motivated reasoning?

- Citizens usually
 - do not hold consistent and stable attitudes (Converse, 1962; Zaller, 1992).
 - inform themselves via **cues** from political actors (Slothuus, 2010).
- Individuals infer political leaning from news as well (Baum and Gussin, 2008).
- **Consumers take cues from "their" outlet.**

Takeaways

1. Framing matters beyond the experimental context.
2. News outlets hold substantial power to shape audiences' political attitudes.
3. Consumers take cues from their preferred outlets.
4. Media effects literature should pay more attention to precise changes in *content*.

Fin

This research is generously funded by



Resources I

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Resources II

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