

From Policy To Perception: Media Sentiment in The Wake of Immigration Policies

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Abstract

Despite extensive research on agenda-setting theory—which demonstrates how media shapes public perception and influences policy formation—there remains a gap in understanding how immigration policy changes influence media sentiment toward immigrants. Our study addresses this limitation by analyzing 23,164 immigration-related news articles from 189 media sources before and after five major U.S. immigration policies (2017-2021): Trump Travel Ban, TPS Termination, Public Charge Rule, Title 42, and DACA Reinstatement. Using LLM-based sentiment analysis with a detailed codebook (intercoder reliability $\alpha=0.816$), we evaluated sentiment changes across left, moderate, and right-leaning sources.

Paired-sample tests reveal sharp ideological responses: left-leaning coverage turned significantly positive after DACA reinstatement (+0.28, $p=.006$); the 2018 TPS rollback drove negativity across the political spectrum (left=-0.32, right=-0.18, both $p<.05$). Moderate sources showed a notably large shift, suggesting decreasing media neutrality. Sentiment changes correlate significantly with outlet political bias during DACA ($r=-.43$, $p=.047$), providing empirical support for a cyclic feedback loop between government policies and media sentiment.

These findings challenge traditional linear agenda-setting models and demonstrate that policy changes directly influence media narratives. The research reveals how immigration policies may create a feedback loop where policy changes increase media polarization, potentially influencing future public opinion and policy-making cycles.

Keywords: Agenda-setting, Immigration policy, Media framing, Media bias, Sentiment analysis