

# THE TRIUMPH OF NO

## HOW THE MEDIA INFLUENCE THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

**ROBERTO SURO**

On the evening of January 7, 2004, ABC's "World News Tonight With Peter Jennings" opened its broadcast with a report that President Bush had announced a new immigration reform proposal during a White House speech that day. It was a remarkable, even historic speech, and Jennings framed it as such, saying, "We're going to begin tonight with an issue that has invigorated and troubled the United States since the very beginning: Who has the right to be here?" Later, Jennings invoked Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers to emphasize the weightiness of that day's news.

Speaking in the grand formality of the East Room with members of his Cabinet assembled before him, Bush had delivered one of the most expansive and detailed presidential statements on immigration in U.S. history. He spoke compassionately about "the millions of hardworking men and women condemned to fear and insecurity in a massive, undocumented economy." The nation "depends on immigration" to fill its labor force, Bush said, and yet "the system is not working." He offered a set of broad principles and several detailed proposals and asked Congress to start debate on a sweeping reform of the immigration system.

Like most of the other news accounts of the speech, ABC focused on just the most controversial element of the president's plan: his proposal for a temporary worker program. The coverage largely failed to note that Bush had proposed a fundamental redirection of immigration policy to emphasize the needs of the U.S. labor market. And, then, suddenly, the subject of immigration, so historical, so momentous, for one day, was gone.

The big newspapers wrote some reaction stories and then declared the Bush proposals politically

dead. The entire subject virtually disappeared from ABC's premier news broadcast for the rest of the year. From that night, January 7, until the end of 2004, "World News Tonight" never did another story on immigration policy. In fact, immigration was the central focus of only three stories over those 12 months, two about faltering efforts to control the illegal flow along the border with Mexico and the other about illegal migrants drowning in the Caribbean. Otherwise, the topic came up only peripherally in stories about subjects like anti-terrorism policy or a Cabinet nominee with an illegal nanny problem.

ABC's performance exemplifies the way major news organizations have approached immigration for the past 30 years. If immigration is associated with controversy or crisis, it makes headlines. The rest of the time, it gets token attention. And, in this pattern that fluctuates between flashy and meager attention, the reporting has often taken a narrow focus, emphasizing illegal behavior and political conflict. The breathless, on-and-off coverage has mischaracterized a massive demographic event that has developed over decades and mostly through legal channels. This mischaracterization is evident

both in the long narrative arc of news coverage of mounting immigration and recently when Washington tried but failed to come to grips with it.

*...the media played a very direct role in heightening the polarization on immigration issues during the most recent round of policy debate.*

One element of Bush's January 2004 speech drew near-unanimous agreement from the public and from policymakers in both parties: his conclusion that the immigration system is broken. Under pressure from across the political spectrum, Congress took up the subject of immigration in late 2005, in a debate that lasted some 18 months, through the summer of 2007. Bills passed in both houses, but ultimately no comprehensive legislation was enacted. In the 2008 campaign, both presidential nominees have promised to resume the effort, but the winner in November will have to start from scratch. Despite a great deal of effort, none of the major issues involving immigration is any closer to being resolved than on the day Bush spoke in the East Room in January 2004. If anything, the more the issues have been debated, the more polarized the positions about them have become.

This paper examines the media's role in the evolution of the current stalemate over immigration policy. Many actors in Washington and beyond have contributed to that outcome, and the intent here is not to argue that the media were the decisive player or to rank their influence relative to other players. The objective is to understand how the news media conditioned public opinion and the policy landscape and to assess whether the news coverage of immigration helped or hindered the development of policy. Making that assessment does not require taking a position on what kind of policy would be

desirable. On immigration, as with any number of other major public policy issues, advocates for radically different policies agree that stalemate is itself a sign of failure. Unless the upcoming elections dramatically change the partisan balance in Washington, finding a way to break the stalemate will be the first order of business when work resumes on immigration.

The research presented here shows that the media played a very direct role in heightening the polarization on immigration issues during the most recent round of policy debate. To the extent that successfully adopting new policies of any kind would have required a compromise solution, the media contributed to the failure of the policy process in 2006 and 2007. Some of the most recent developments in the media industry came into play as this congressional debate unfolded, but long-standing trends in American journalism also contributed to the outcome. To capture both factors, this paper examines coverage of the recent debate in considerable detail and also looks back over a quarter-century of journalism about immigration.

The current wave of immigration has developed slowly and steadily since the 1970s, a period in which American journalism has undergone a profound transformation. Sources of information have multiplied. Demand for headline-making dramas and easily defined controversies have increased exponentially. New kinds of media have become articulators and amplifiers of conflicting opinion. The way immigration is covered, however, shows considerable continuity. Even as they produced a journalism of strident advocacy, the relative newcomers of cable television and the blogosphere have shown the same basic tendencies that were evident decades ago in broadcast television and newspapers. The overall effect has been to heighten contradictions in public opinion

rather than to help resolve them. Over the course of many years, traditional journalism presented a distorted portrayal of immigration; when the new forms of media supercharged that portrayal, the search for policy compromises became more difficult.

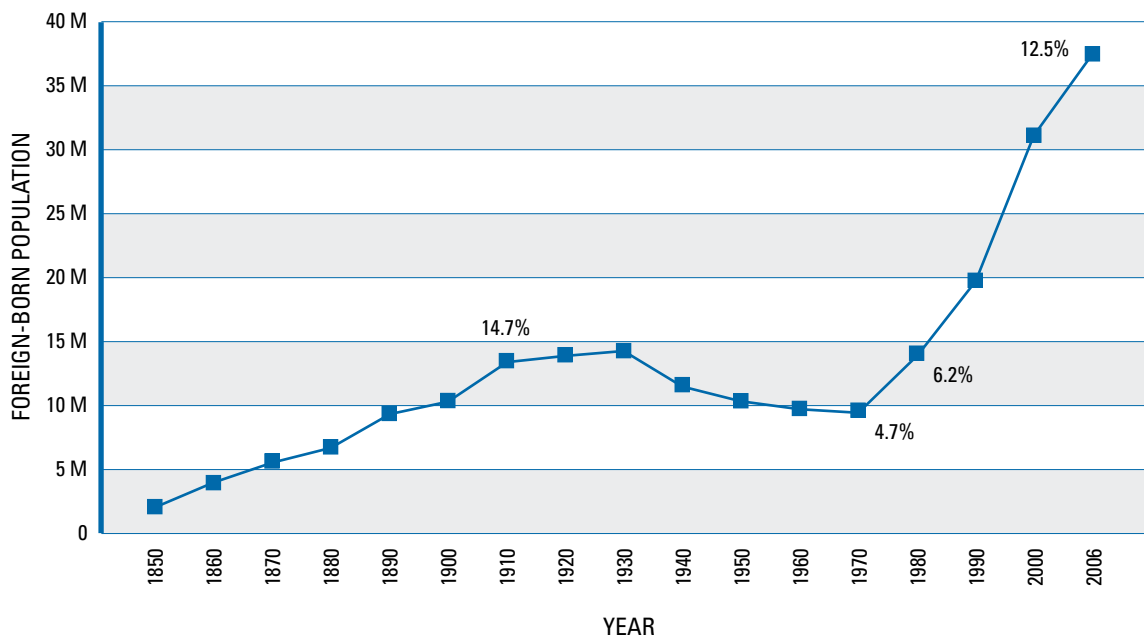
## NEW IMMIGRANTS, NEW MEDIA

In the mythology of America, this country has always been a nation of immigrants. But history tells a different story, one of migration that has ebbed and flowed in distinct phases. The iconic era of Ellis Island migration ended in the early 20th century because of the effects of two world wars, the Great Depression and federal policies designed to keep out nationalities judged undesirable. Thus by the 1960s, the Irish and the Italians, the Poles

and the Scandinavians and all the others who had come to America during the great trans-Atlantic wave were dying off, and no great numbers of newcomers had been coming from anywhere else to replace them. The golden door had stood closed for two generations. The U.S. census of 1970 reported a foreign-born population of 9.6 million, the lowest mark of the 20th century. By an even more important measure, the United States was less a nation of immigrants in 1970 than it had been at any time in its history. The share of the foreign born in the total population dipped to 4.7 percent, the lowest point ever recorded.

But at that very moment, new flows of immigrants from Latin America and Asia were developing and gaining momentum. By 1980 the number of

CHART ONE SIZE OF U.S. FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION AND AS A SHARE OF THE TOTAL, 1850–2005



Source: American Community Survey 2006, Census 2000, Gibson, Campbell and Emily Lennon, US Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 29, Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1999.

foreign born had shot to 14 million as a new era of immigration got under way. Then, over the next 25 years, the U.S. experienced the most intense influx of immigrants in its history, bringing the total to nearly 36 million in 2005. As of this writing, estimates put the U.S. foreign-born population at 39 million. That is close to 13 percent of the population, a share approaching the highest levels recorded a century ago. The United States is once again very much a nation of immigrants, and the current influx appears to have gained momentum and staying power. According to Census Bureau projections, migration will add more than a million people a year to the population for many years to come.

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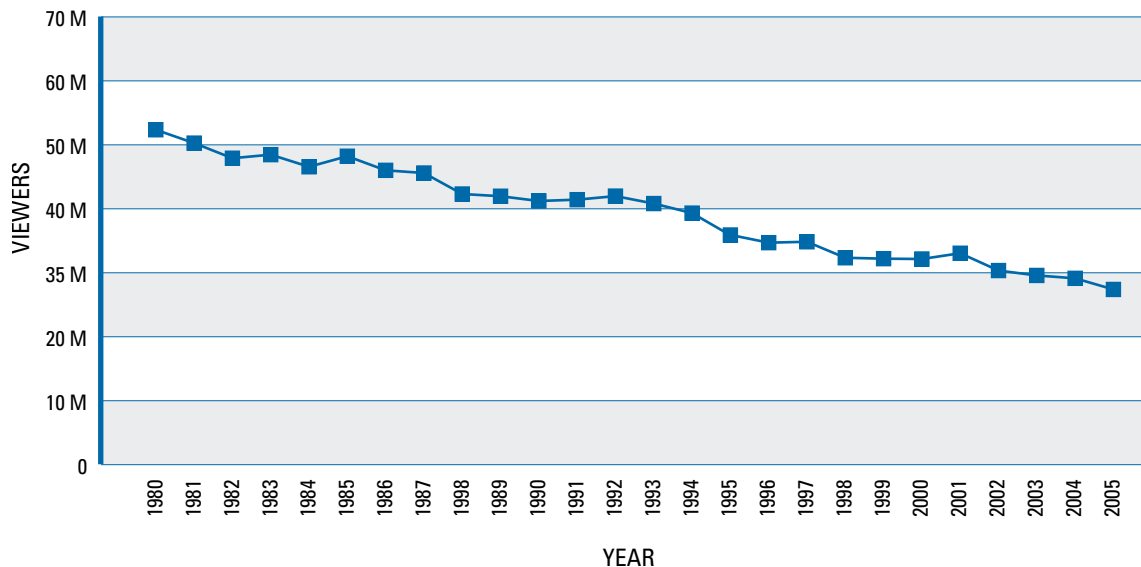
By any standard this has been a massive historical event, one that has been relatively continuous for a quarter-century, wide-reaching, transformative and challenging. As a demographic change, it ranks in magnitude with the black migration out of the South, the birth of the baby boom generation, the white migration to the suburbs and the rise of the Sunbelt. But, unlike internal migration or birthrates, the arrival of people from overseas is explicitly a matter of federal policy. No one is supposed to come into the country without permission, and there is a complex system of visa categories to determine how many people and what types of people are granted permission to visit or reside here. Nonetheless, the current era of migration is not the result of explicit policy decisions.

The idea of quadrupling the foreign-born population was never debated in presidential campaigns or on

Capitol Hill. No one voted for it—not the electorate, not Congress. And, until the past couple of years, the enormous fact of the demographic change under way for a quarter-century had drawn a disproportionately small share of attention from academic researchers, think tank experts and pundits who often inform policy debates. Furthermore, and despite the efforts of a few devotees to promote the “integration agenda,” the questions of what happens to immigrants once they get here—What is their place in American society? Is society responsible for promoting positive outcomes?—remain fairly obscure topics in policy circles. This was not inevitable. During the trans-Atlantic era, there was almost constant debate and policymaking over immigrant flows, their size and their composition, as well as the immigrants’ social status and the extent to which they were integrating into American society.

Explaining the many social, economic and demographic factors both here and abroad that produced the current wave of immigration is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes it suffices to note, first, that as a matter of constitutional doctrine since the 1870s immigration is supposed to be regulated by the federal government. And, second, that during the current era of migration the federal government has manifestly failed to carry out that responsibility. The presence of more than 12 million unauthorized migrants is prima facie evidence of policymaking that has been haphazard, episodic and ultimately ineffective. If more evidence is needed, one can search across the entire spectrum of political opinion without finding any major figures who argue that the immigration system as it stands is a success and should be left unchanged. Demands for change come from those who believe the current system is too generous and those who think it’s not generous enough; from those who see immigrants as an economic

CHART TWO EVENING NEWS VIEWERSHIP, ALL NETWORKS, 1980–2005



Source: Nielsen Media Research, used under license to the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Note: Ratings taken for month of November.

boon and those who see them as a burden; from those who worry about too much cultural change and those who extol it. Despite this near-unanimous verdict on the status quo, Washington was unable to enact a new immigration framework in 2006 and 2007; instead, the long, contentious congressional debate ended in deadlock. One need not favor any side of the issue to conclude that inaction constitutes failure.

The current era of migration has coincided with the sweeping transformation of the American news media. The trends are stark and accelerating. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, the network evening news broadcasts have lost roughly one million viewers a year for the past 25 years, circulation for Sunday newspapers dropped 11.4 percent between 2001 and 2007, and meanwhile 37 percent of Americans now regularly get some

news on the Internet and the audience for cable news prime time talk shows jumped by 7 percent in 2007 alone.<sup>1</sup> This paper explores how the failure of policymaking on immigration is related to the changes in the way Americans get their news. In particular our intent is to understand the news media's role in helping to engender the current policy environment, which is marked by acute polarization and stalemate amid widespread dissatisfaction with the existing system. As abundantly demonstrated in the congressional debates of 2006 and 2007, this environment is very poorly suited to developing policy.

## POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION AND GRAND BARGAINS

Throughout the current era, immigration has generated its own peculiar political dynamics. Both major political parties are internally divided.

There is also fragmentation among labor unions, business associations, and even ethnic and civil rights groups. This is not primarily a matter of two sides holding starkly differing views, pro and con, regarding basic principles (although there is some of that). Instead, much of the fractiousness involves advocates with narrow agendas: growers seeking seasonal farmworkers; high-tech firms seeking engineers; libertarians opposed to national identity documents; proponents of rigorous enforcement measures; Asian groups preoccupied with family visas, Latino groups preoccupied with legalization for the undocumented, others preoccupied with refugees and particular nationalities; unions wanting to grow by organizing immigrants and unions wanting to protect their existing members from competition with immigrants. And there are many other sides to the prism.

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Given this kind of political fragmentation, immigration is quintessentially the kind of issue that requires a nonpartisan, multiplayer compromise to produce successfully new policy in Washington. As such, understanding the media's role in the development of immigration policy—or the failure to develop policy—can have applications to other issues. The transformation of the media is still very much under way, but it is hardly too early to begin asking how it affects the nation's ability to resolve its most intractable problems.

Immigration is a particularly instructive case study because there has been a round of major policy debates in the middle of each decade since the 1980s, while the basic policy tools have changed very little. Border control and worksite enforcement have been constant themes, along with the manipulation of visa categories to control future flows. Legalization programs for the current population of undocumented migrants have also been considered repeatedly, as have temporary worker programs. And, for the most part, the political objective has also remained the same: forge an ad hoc coalition in which participants are all required to sacrifice something to get most of what they want. In each of the three rounds Washington tried to produce a grand bargain.

The first round of policymaking took place in the 1980s, when journalism was still dominated by traditional news organizations. Of the three rounds, that was the only attempt at a grand bargain to achieve substantial success. By the time immigration was debated again, in the mid-1990s, cable television had emerged as a powerful influence on journalism with the creation of the 24-hour news cycle. That attempt met with less success at reaching a compromise. During the most recent round, in 2006 and 2007, the Internet, partisan talk radio and politicized news programming on cable television were major factors. That attempt to forge immigration policy ended, as noted earlier, in stalemate. Over the course of this quarter-century, then, the scale of the policy challenge has grown exponentially, and the scale of actual policymaking has diminished.

This paper examines the media's contribution to that outcome. Our intent is to understand how immigration and immigration policy have been depicted by the American news media from 1980 to 2007 and how that coverage relates to public

opinion and policymaking during most of the current era of immigration. The research involved several forms of content analyses of more than 80,000 news stories or commentaries from print, broadcast and digital media as well as an examination of dozens of public opinion surveys.

## IMPEDING COMPROMISE

Our analysis concludes that the dominant approaches toward coverage of immigration have interacted with changes in the structure of the news media in a way that has promoted ineffectual policymaking. Thus, elements of both continuity and transformation need to be taken into account. The dynamics of news coverage described here are the products of epistemological frameworks for defining what constitutes news—frameworks that are deeply ingrained in American journalism. The cumulative effects of coverage by traditional news organizations over many years have conditioned public opinion and the policy environment in a manner that has distorted issues and undermined the possibility of compromise. Changes in the media landscape accentuated these effects in traditional news organizations while also creating additional forms of expression that emphasize an advocacy of protest, an advocacy that has proven more adept at blocking policy initiatives than promoting them. In the most recent immigration debates, specific elements of the media performance facilitated, and even encouraged, polarization and gridlock.

This interaction of persistent intellectual frameworks and revolutionary structural change has produced media coverage that impedes policy making on immigration and is likely to have the same impact on other issues. Although unique in many aspects, immigration shares some important characteristics with other issues, such as income security for the elderly, health care and energy. These are all issues

that develop gradually over long periods of time and that are impelled by many different private actors who are responding to a variety of social and economic factors. And, these are all issues that require difficult compromises to produce new policy.

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When the new migrant flows got under way, the media landscape was governed largely by journalistic norms that were developed in the mid-20th century and emphasized impartial reporting, nonpartisan independence and aggressive exercise of the press's watchdog role. The publication of the Pentagon Papers and the uncovering of the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s represented the apogee of this kind of journalism, emerging from a media industry with a healthy economic base. At the time, a handful of major news organizations defined the standards and set the news agenda. The three commercial television networks, major metropolitan newspapers and the national newsmagazine exercised extraordinary reach and influence.

Since then the media landscape has fragmented, and impartial journalism has been relegated to one of several common forms of conveying news. That is the result of continuous and accelerating transformation across many domains since the 1980s, and a detailed accounting of this evolution is not our objective here. In sum, though, technological developments have multiplied the means by which information is received and have created a continuous, highly competitive, 24-hour news



cycle via cable, satellite and the Internet. Policy changes, such as repeal of the fairness doctrine, have opened the public broadcasting airwaves to new, often more partisan, voices. Both new technology (the Internet) and old technology (radio) have enabled participation by audiences that were once passive recipients of information. Social and demographic change, as exemplified by hyper-suburbanization and gentrification, have challenged the high-penetration, mass-market business model for metropolitan news outlets. And, the media have mirrored developments in the political arena as well. Heightened partisanship and the proliferation of less structured, often polarized, interest groups have all made it more difficult for news organizations to present a coherent news agenda that attracts broad consensus as a representation of contemporary realities and policy choices.

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To understand how the news media covered the current era of immigration and how that coverage might have influenced public opinion and policy-making, we applied two well-established approaches to media analysis: assessments of agenda setting and framing.

The concept of an agenda-setting function for the news media dates at least as far back as 1922, when Walter Lippmann argued in his seminal *Public Opinion* that by creating mental images of people, places and events that are never experienced directly, journalism shapes the way its audience thinks about public affairs. Since then, extensive empirical work has shown that the prominence

awarded to a topic by the news media has a powerful influence on the importance given to that topic by the public.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, the more attention that is paid to a topic in the media, the more likely the public will regard that topic as important. This agenda-setting role does not necessarily influence attitudes toward the topic or judgments about proper policies, but it does have an effect on whether people consider the topic worthy of concern and attention. In one of the early formulations of the agenda-setting theory, Bernard Cohen stated, in a 1963 study of the media's impact on foreign policy formation, that the press, "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about."<sup>3</sup>

The framing function takes the media's influence another step. As W. Lance Bennett defines it, "Framing involves choosing a broad organizing theme for selecting, emphasizing, and linking the elements of a story. Frames are thematic categories that integrate and give meaning to the scene, the characters, their actions, and supporting documentation."<sup>4</sup> The framing function can be exercised within a single story, for example, when candidates' popularity is explained as a function of race or gender rather than by their positions on critical issues. Framing can have a cumulative effect; when stories about gang violence dominate coverage of crime, it gives the impression that gangs are primarily responsible for criminal violence. In addition, as Shanto Iyengar has demonstrated in studies of television news coverage, the media can portray events as singular and disconnected. "Episodic framing," as he put it, prevents audiences from accumulating a sense of context and long-term trends.<sup>5</sup>

This paper first examines news coverage of immigration from 1980 and 2007, to explore the



broad narrative of the immigration story, and then focuses on the most recent round of stalled policymaking in 2006 and 2007 to assess the media's direct impact on the policy process. This is not an effort to hunt out inaccuracies or bias in news coverage. It is not necessary for the news media to lean one way or another on an issue to have an effect on public affairs. Indeed, this study shows that if stalemate is a sign of failure in policymaking, the media can contribute mightily to the problem simply by making it more difficult to resolve the issues in any way. The evidence suggests that the transformation of the media has significantly strengthened this effect.

Even when this era of migration was just getting under way, the traditional news media covered it as a highly dramatic breaking story that would surge onto the agenda and then, just as quickly, recede. Illegal migration served as the issue's dominant frame. In the 1990s, these tendencies were heightened by the onset of the 24-hour news cycle and the suddenly fierce competition between traditional journalism and cable television. As has been noted elsewhere, the new and the old forms of journalism fed off each other. Many news organizations, for example, did not set out to differentiate their products from CNN's as much as they tried to compete directly by replicating what the cable network provided. This interaction became more pronounced as the Internet emerged as a major source of news dissemination, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, the result was even more episodic, crisis-oriented framing of the immigration story.

Certainly, the new media have a powerful influence on traditional news organizations, but influence flowed in the other direction as well. In the congressional debates of 2006 and 2007, new media in the form of partisan pseudo-journalism on cable television, the Internet and talk radio borrowed much of their approach from the way traditional journalism had covered immigration for decades. The agenda-setting mode of episodic, dramatic coverage and the framing concept focused on acts of illegality were merely exaggerated to suit the new media. The subject matter was largely the same even as shrill advocacy dominated the delivery and traditional journalistic norms of verification and fairness were shredded.

The most recent congressional debates did, however, highlight a new development in the media's social role, and the evidence comes from opposite sides of the issue. In 2006, the Spanish-language media found their political voice by stoking participation in the immigrant marches that took place that spring. Radio DJs suddenly found they could get thousands of people into the street and help block restrictionist policy proposals. Then in 2007, talk radio and the Internet were equally successful in rallying pro-restrictionist public opinion to block policy proposals that would have opened the country to more immigrants. In both cases, these media succeeded in exercising a veto over new policies by mobilizing highly vocal minorities. If these occurrences of media activism portend a new model for direct intervention in congressional debates by media commentators and interest groups, then policy making by way of a grand bargain, whether in immigration or any other realm, may be a thing of the past.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "The State of the News Media 2008," Project for Excellence in Journalism, Washington, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> McCombs, Maxwell. "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press," *The Press*. Ed. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Bernard Cecil. *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, W.Lance. *News: The Politics of Illusion*. New York: Pearson, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Iyengar, Shanto. *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

# THE IMMIGRATION NARRATIVE

## ALL ELIAN, ALL THE TIME

The year 2000 will be remembered in the United States in many ways: a disputed presidential election; the waning halcyon days between the Cold War and 9/11; the peak of an economic expansion that pushed unemployment to its lowest point in three decades. And 2000 should also be remembered as a milestone in the history of the American population. That year, more than 1.5 million people born abroad joined the U.S. population, according to the best available estimates. It was the largest single-year influx in the current era of migration and perhaps the largest in American history.<sup>1</sup>

Immigration drew a good deal of attention from the news media in 2000, but the saga of a single 9-year-old Cuban boy dominated coverage of the topic. The soap opera of Elian Gonzalez accounted for more than half (55 percent) of all the immigration coverage in *The New York Times* that year and about two-thirds (63 percent) of the immigration stories on the “CBS Evening News” and in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (66 percent).

By virtue of the attention it grabbed and the messages it conveyed, the Elian story is emblematic of the way American journalism has covered immigration across an entire era: The emphasis fell preponderantly on migration outside of authorized channels. Government actors emerged as inept and inconsistent. The most passionate voices in the public arena drew vivid representation. Public policy choices floundered in ambiguity. The overall

impression was one of chaos, controversy and contradictions. And that is the overall impression of migration that the media have delivered to the American public for nearly three decades. That is the perception that has shaped public opinion and policymaking. As we shall see, that perception—that misperception—derives from both the kinds of stories selected for coverage and the volume in which they were produced.

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While the media and their audiences focused relentlessly on Elian in 2000, a million and a half migrants entered the country largely unheralded and unnoticed. Taken altogether their many journeys changed the nation’s demographic destiny, while the Elian saga had no lasting impact.<sup>2</sup> The stories about Elian were accurate enough individually; that is not the issue here. And it is easy to understand why the saga was so compelling to journalists and audiences alike, loaded as it was with drama, suspense, wacky characters and colorful locales. But while the media and the public obsessed over an irresistible little story, they were missing the much larger, much less dramatic, story that made history and whose consequences are still playing out. Even more is at stake, though. In the larger

story of immigration, the Elian saga was exemplary of neither specific significant events nor public policy issues; it was far more an exception than the rule. And so the extraordinary attention focused on the Elian story created not only a distraction but also a distortion. Consumed by coverage of this uniquely weird little story, audiences could come away with very mistaken impressions about the enormous migration that was reaching a historic peak.

Although there has never been another story quite like Elian's, our analysis of immigration coverage since 1980 shows that it is emblematic of three trends that have characterized the way the media have presented the current wave of immigration to the American public:

- The coverage has been episodic, driven by dramatic and exceptional events even when history was being made by ordinary, day-to-day events. Evidence of this can be seen in the volume of coverage. It spikes for congressional debate or for episodes like the Elian saga or the discovery that a Cabinet nominee employed a nanny who lacked a green card. Then it recedes. As an exercise of the agenda-setting function, the media have conditioned the public and policymakers to think of immigration as a sudden event, often tinged with the air of crisis. In reality, the flow of the foreign born has evolved gradually, even predictably, over time.
- The coverage has focused overwhelmingly on acts of illegality. People entering the country without authorization; government efforts to halt them and debates over what to do about them; acts of criminality by immigrants; corruption and incompetence in government agencies—these have been the topics that have dominated the news of immigration. Much less

attention has been directed to problems with the legal immigration system, like massive backlogs in processing citizenship applications, the pace of assimilation among immigrants or the dependence of some high productivity industries, such as information technology, on immigrant workers. It is not a matter of whether stories cast immigration in a positive or a negative light—many stories about unauthorized migrants were sympathetic—rather it is a preoccupation with immigration as an illegitimate phenomenon that has characterized much of the coverage. As an exercise of the framing function, this pattern of coverage would logically cause the public and policymakers to associate the influx of the foreign born with violations of the law, disruption of social norms and failure by the public sector.

- Immigrants, in particular, but also policymakers and advocates, have dominated the journalistic narratives to the exclusion of other critical actors, especially employers and consumers. At the simplest level, this has deprived the coverage of essential context by underemphasizing the role of the U.S. labor market in determining the size and characteristics of immigrant flows and overemphasizing the role of government. More broadly, the immigrant emerges as the protagonist of the drama, exercising his will over the nation. Meanwhile, the public is rendered as seemingly passive. When their attitudes toward immigration turn negative, audiences exposed to this kind of coverage can readily view immigrants as villains and themselves as victims. Distrust of government, a seeming accomplice or an incompetent protector, is a natural byproduct.

These three tendencies in American journalism's approach to immigration have defined a narrative that has been told and retold for decades. It is a

narrative that emerges out of crisis and confrontation rather than everyday life. It is a narrative haunted by failures to obey and enforce laws. The media have thus conditioned the American public to see immigration through a particular prism. This kind of coverage has not produced drastic turns in attitudes. Instead, it appears to have primed many Americans to associate immigration with controversy and consternation. When Washington policymakers revisit immigration after the 2008 elections, coverage will increase again, and the public is likely to again react warily. It is a response to a story told thousands of times.

## OOZING VS. BREAKING NEWS

The individual stories that made up this overarching narrative were not inaccurate, and the events chronicled were not necessarily unimportant. But neither of these conditions is necessary to yield a body of coverage that progressively builds a misrepresentation of a historic development, especially one that unfolds gradually over the course of many years and that is the accumulation of countless small events. Migration, whether it involves African-Americans moving out of the rural South or middle-class whites moving to the suburbs, is just that kind of development, and portraying it accurately requires a particular commitment of attention and resources on the part of journalism. The distinction was expressed by Eugene L. Roberts, a former editor at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The New York Times* to whom the adjective “legendary” is often applied. “Many important stories don’t break,” he once said. “They seep, trickle and ooze. Let’s be sure we are covering the ooze.”<sup>3</sup>

Immigration oozes, but it has been covered primarily as a breaking story. Thus, the highly eventful breaking news of the Elian saga drew greater coverage in

2000 than the slow, gradual migration of more than 1.5 million people that same year. The broader effect is evident when examining the volume of coverage devoted to immigration over a long period of time. In this case, there are sharp peaks and steep declines because the coverage has been driven by a variety of highly dramatic events rather than the ongoing, epochal story of migration. Some of those events, such as enactment of major changes in immigration policy, have been of lasting importance; others, like flaps over the employment of illegal nannies by Cabinet nominees, have been sensational and short-lived. Even when such breaking stories are entirely newsworthy taken one at a time—which is generally the way they are assessed by editors—they are misleading when taken as a whole.

To measure the pace of coverage, researchers associated with this report examined more than 80,000 news stories produced by print, radio and television news organizations from 1980 to 2007 (See Note on Methodology). Across all news organizations and all platforms, the pattern is the same: from year to year, even month to month, the volume of coverage spikes in response to set-piece events and unexpected incidents, then it recedes. Even as the underlying migration kept mounting and Washington continuously debated policy responses, media interest faded in the absence of dramatic occurrences that met the simplest definition of breaking news. A similar pattern emerges in each of the past three decades: spectacular, atypical events call attention to illegal immigration early in the decade as the U.S. economy falters, and then Washington reacts with a policy debate in mid-decade.

The most recent of these cycles—the period that began with the Elian saga, continued through the September 11, 2001, attacks and their aftermath,

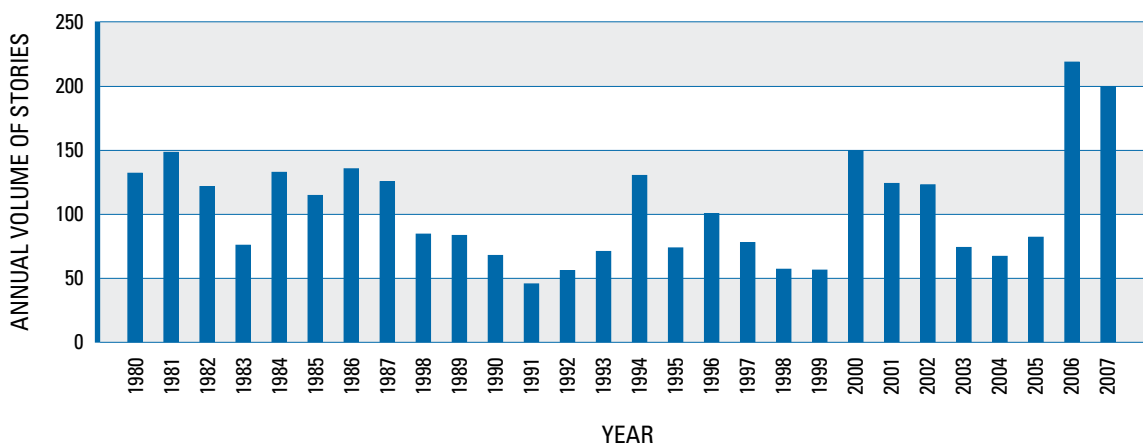
and culminated with the congressional debates of 2006 and 2007—produced the greatest volume of coverage as well as some of the wildest fluctuations in the volume of coverage. Media interest in immigration has grown, but the propensity to treat the topic like a man-bites-dog story has only become more acute. In this regard, the most recent transformations in the media, through the rise of cable television, talk radio and the Internet, have reinforced old journalistic norms by magnifying distortions already evident in the coverage.

To understand how traditional journalistic norms have influenced coverage of immigration, it is useful to start with a publication that acts as self-appointed guardian of those norms and that in fact exercises profound influence over news judgment in the entire profession. Although The New York Times has produced some of the most extensive and consistent coverage, the newspaper’s volume of coverage varies considerably. For purposes of this study, we examined only news stories produced in the paper’s Washington and

national bureaus. We thus excluded metropolitan coverage and stories in opinion and feature sections. Over the course of 28 years, the volume ranged from 43 stories in 1991 to 217 in 2006. While the size of the foreign-born population grew steadily over this entire period, the volume of coverage varied considerably (see Chart Three) from year to year. Another way of illustrating the fluctuation is to calculate the percentage variation each year off that 28-year average of 102 stories a year. In Chart Four, this method again produces a series of peaks and valleys. Examining the pace of coverage across this same period by the Associated Press, a key source of information for many newspapers and radio stations shows a similar pattern (See Chart Five).

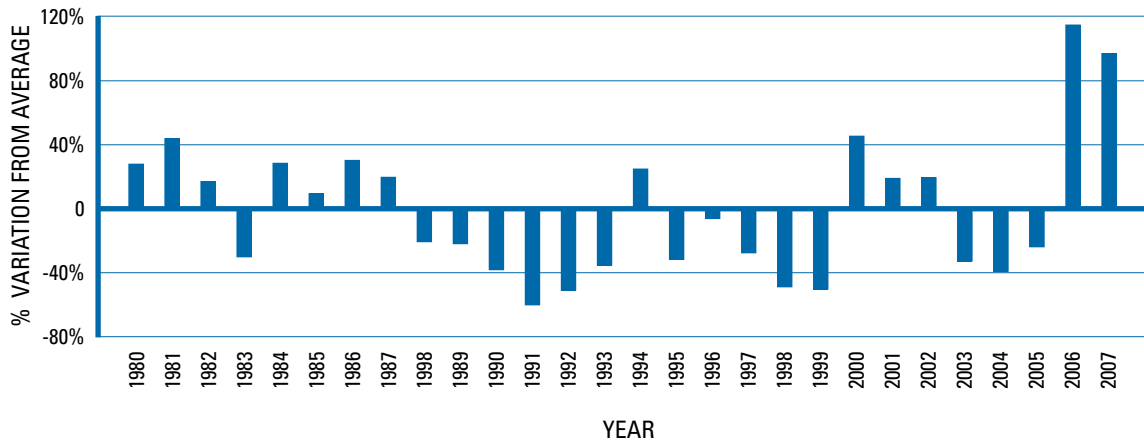
Archival material is less readily available and less complete for many other publications, and so the analysis of immigration coverage by other news organizations focuses on the years after 1990. Again and again a roughly similar pattern emerges from examination of coverage by the “CBS

**CHART THREE** NEW YORK TIMES COVERAGE OF IMMIGRATION, 1980–2007



Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

**CHART FOUR** NEW YORK TIMES COVERAGE OF IMMIGRATION, 1980–2007

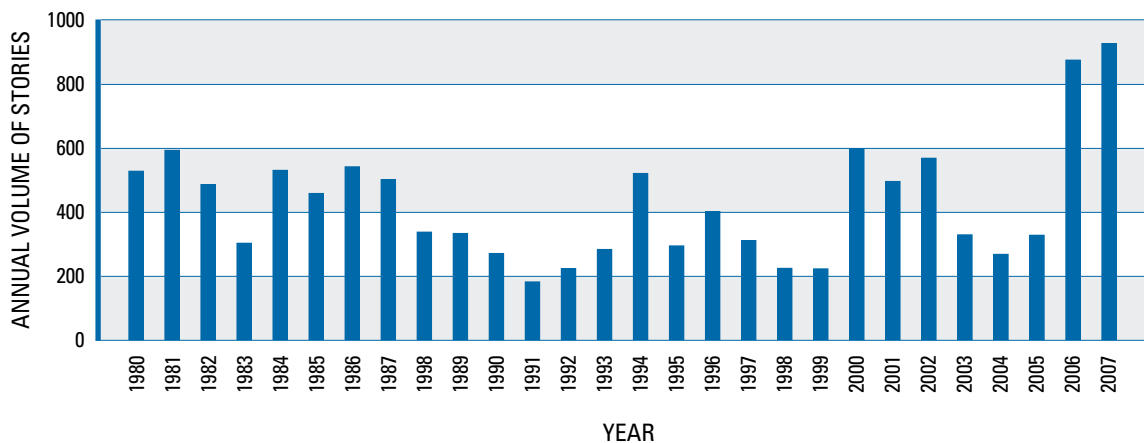


Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

Evening News” (see Chart Six) NPR’s “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered,” USA Today, four major regional newspapers in different sections of the country (see Chart Seven) and four news agencies servicing major newspaper chains.

The peaks in coverage are all readily explained by major news events. The chronicle of these events renders a histrionic narrative entirely at odds with the underlying story of steady, uneventful migration. For three decades, there has been far more opera

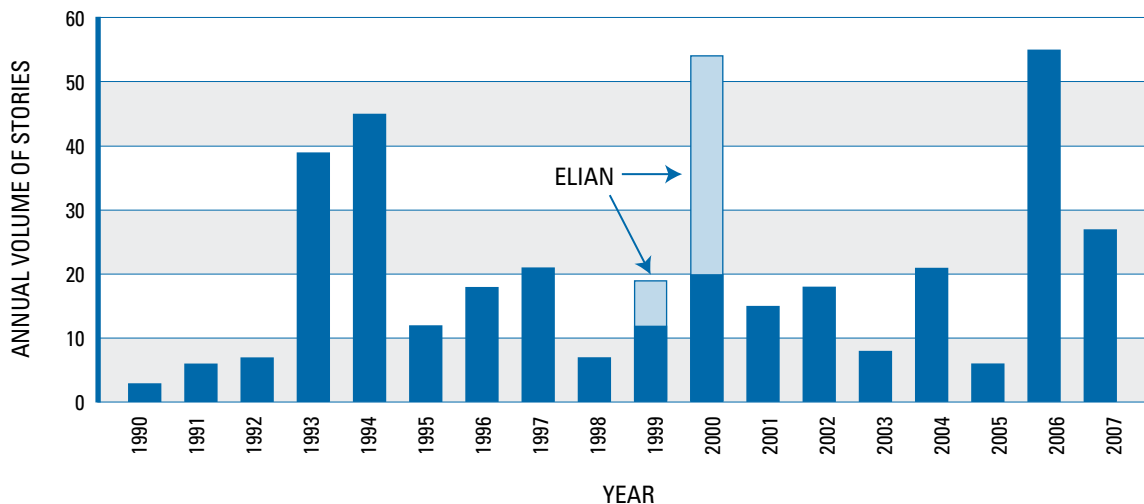
**CHART FIVE** ASSOCIATED PRESS COVERAGE OF IMMIGRATION, 1980–2007



Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.



CHART SIX CBS NEWS EVENING COVERAGE OF IMMIGRATION, 1990–2007



Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

than ooze in the way journalists have covered migration.

### The 1980s

Twenty years before the Elian saga, another seaborne migration from Cuba, the Mariel boatlift, dominated the news. Meanwhile, Haitians were illicitly floating to Florida. For the next several years, coverage perked up with periodic riots and disturbances by Cubans and Haitians held in detention centers and with the litigation that sought to get them freed. The chaotic migration in the Caribbean and its lingering consequences set the scene for an important and prolonged round of policymaking.

As the decade began, a congressional commission headed by the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame University, produced recommendations for a policy overhaul, and

Washington turned its attention to the issue soon after the Reagan administration took office in 1981. Repeated congressional debates stoked coverage until enactment of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, also known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act, a compromise formed of two major elements: on the one hand, it offered amnesty to most unauthorized migrants already in the country; and on the other hand, it sought to cut future flows by imposing, for the first time, sanctions on those who employ illegal workers.

After the enactment of the 1986 bill, media coverage slackened and then dropped off significantly. The real news, however, did not. Implementation of employer sanctions proved problematical, with consequences that still resound today. The newly legalized migrants transformed Latino communities across the country. New, largely unauthorized migrant streams began flowing into the United States

as a result of civil wars in Central America, and within a few years illegal crossings from Mexico began to mount again despite the law's enforcement provisions. Most important, the pace of legal immigration quickened as the U.S. economy accelerated its transformation from a manufacturing base into services and information. But in the absence of big set-piece events, media attention waned.

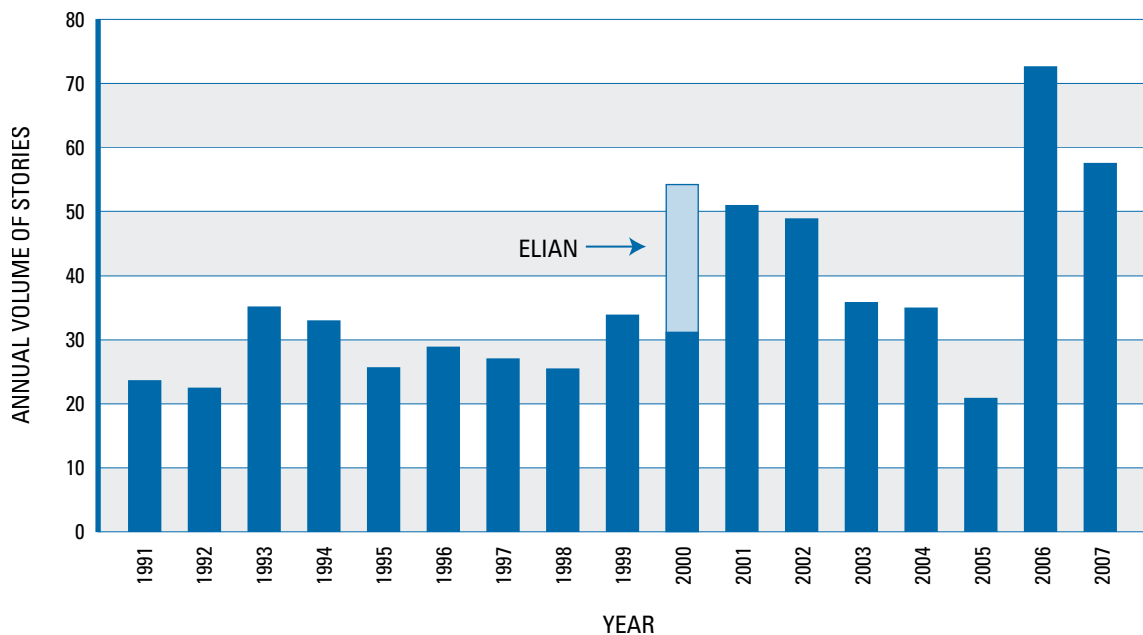
### The 1990s

As the decade began, the latest census demonstrated the underlying trends in the foreign-born population, which was up 40 percent to 19.8 million, compared with 14.1 million in 1980. Also in 1990, Washington enacted a law on legal immigration that would

further boost the flow, but the legislation was passed in the midst of a budget crisis and went almost unnoticed.

In the early 1990s, immigration coverage dipped to its low point for the entire quarter-century studied here until a series of unrelated, highly dramatic events in 1993 produced a spike in coverage. President Bill Clinton had hardly taken office before his first two nominees for attorney general were knocked out of contention because they had employed unauthorized migrants as nannies. In February, terrorists who had successfully gamed the immigration system struck the World Trade Center. In June, the Golden Venture, a freighter carrying nearly 300 illegal migrants from China, ran aground off Queens.

CHART SEVEN REGIONAL NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF IMMIGRATION 1991-2007



Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis.

Illegal entries across the border from Mexico and by sea from Haiti and then Cuba drew the media's attention in 1994 as the federal government struggled on multiple fronts to exert control. The two states most affected—California and Florida—mobilized to demand federal recompense for dealing with the unauthorized newcomers, culminating with California voters' passage of the Proposition 187 initiative in November 1994. (The initiative's denial of many taxpayer-funded benefits for illegal immigrants was quickly struck down by federal courts).

Responding to a public aroused by dramatic events and again acting in the wake of a recession, federal lawmakers took up immigration policy in mid-decade once more. In 1996, Congress adopted several immigration-related measures that together formed another bargain: the flow of legal immigrants remained untouched and no efforts were made to improve the enforcement of employer sanctions, in exchange for measures that reduced legal immigrants' access to social benefits and that made it easier to detain and deport foreigners who violated immigration laws.

Once again, media coverage dropped off after the laws were passed, and it remained essentially dormant until the next series of dramas brought immigration back to the front pages. In the meantime, however, the underlying trends were changing. While the media largely ignored immigration in the second half of the decade, the number of newcomers surged, partially as a result of increased illegal flows; meanwhile, the foreign-born population spread rapidly to areas that were benefiting from the boom times but that had no recent experience of immigration, such as the Southeast.

## The 2000s

As if on cue, little Elian arrived a month before the end of the millennium and brought immigration roaring back into the news until he finally was returned to Cuba in June 2000. A year later, census results again drew attention to the extraordinary growth of the foreign-born population (up 57 percent to 31.1 million), and serious work was under way on a new immigration deal to legalize the undocumented flow, culminating in a visit to Washington by the Mexican president, Vicente Fox, in early September 2001. But, with Elian gone, immigration coverage slacked off.

Then, on September 11, everything changed with immigration, as it did with much else. In one catastrophic stroke, the nation's immigration controls were shown to be a failure and the foreign born were indelibly linked with mortal threats against every American's well-being. These themes were pounded home in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks as federal authorities conducted a dragnet for young males from Middle Eastern countries, increased the scrutiny of foreign students and moved all aspects of the immigration process, including the granting of citizenship, into the newly formed Department of Homeland Security. There was a burst of coverage that lasted less than 18 months, and then the media lost interest again from 2003 to 2005. When the roller coaster soared once more, the public found Congress locked in yet another policy debate as hundreds of thousands of immigrants marched through the streets of the nation's cities.

The volume of Associated Press coverage of immigration in 1983 was almost a third lower than it had been in each of the prior three years before bouncing back in 1984 and 1985. The number of

editorials and opinion columns on immigration published by The Washington Post in 1993 was almost double what it had been the year before. News coverage by The New York Times in 2000 was almost three times as high as it had been 1999, and the number of immigration stories in 2004 was about half of what it had been in 2002. The combined output on immigration of the Cox, Copley and McClatchy news services in 2006 was nearly 2½ times the amount it had been in 2004. On the “CBS Evening News,” coverage of immigration in 1993 was nearly six times what it was in 1992, nearly three times as much in 2000 as in 1999.

A journalistic narrative that lurches brusquely between spikes in coverage is likely to create a forceful impression. Audiences will quite naturally come to associate the topic with the fast pace and high drama of breaking news. The larger truth of gradual demographic change can easily get lost when this pattern of coverage is repeated year after year, decade after decade. Such misimpressions not only apply to the way immigration and immigrants are perceived, but they also shape the policy environment. Primed by the pace of coverage, the public might logically assume that Washington is dealing with a crisis or a sudden threat when immigration debates make headlines. In fact, policymaking, like the growth of the foreign-born population itself, has developed slowly over the course of several years each time the subject has been addressed.

## THE SURGE

The tendency toward hyperbolic coverage of policymaking has become more pronounced as the transformation of the media industry has gathered momentum, and it was most obvious in the most recent round of policymaking. In 1986, for example, when Congress enacted immigration legislation, coverage of the topic in The New York

Times was 20 percent higher than the year before. In 1996, when Congress acted again, there was a 37 percent boost over the preceding year. But then in the most recent round, coverage in 2006 spiked 175 percent over the year before. The same pattern is evident in the coverage by many other news organizations. The combined coverage on National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered” programs jumped by 67 percent in 1996 versus the preceding year; in 2006, it more than tripled compared with the previous year. Associated Press coverage was up by 67 percent in 1996 over the year before and by 128 percent in 2006 compared with 2005.

A variety of factors were undoubtedly at play in producing this pattern, but it is so consistent across so many news organizations that it is tempting to look for structural factors. As we shall see in the next chapter, the most recent immigration debate took place in a restructured media environment featuring, as never before, influential participation by cable television, talk radio and bloggers. That structural change appears to have accentuated the traditional journalistic tendency to focus on immigration when it is a subject of breaking news. As the media environment has become more crowded and varied, competition to cover hot topics has increased.

In 2007, the Senate debated immigration over the course of six weeks, from May 17 to June 28. The debate was preceded by nearly six months of negotiations that involved a variety of interest groups and legislators and that were widely known in official Washington. That prelude drew scant attention from the media, and then the coverage skyrocketed when the action moved to the Senate floor. The debate was undoubtedly an important event; the legislation under consideration was massive and consequential as will be discussed in

more detail below. For now our focus is on the media's response as evidence of how much the coverage of immigration has come to be characterized by episodic spikes and how this tendency applies both to traditional news organizations and to the new voices of advocacy on cable television, talk radio and the Internet. However, in the realm of media advocacy, the volume of coverage differed significantly by ideology. Attention surged among conservatives and others who emphasized enforcement over any other policy concerns while there was comparatively little interest among liberal and progressive voices. As we shall see later in this report, that had a clear impact on the outcome of the debate.

*The spike in coverage during the six weeks of the Senate debate occurred in all media sectors, making immigration the number one topic in the news for that period.*

A detailed examination of media coverage of immigration in 2007, conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) for this report, shows that the volume of coverage across all media was roughly two to three times as high in May and June as it was the rest of the year. (Coverage increased less dramatically again in November when immigration briefly became a point of contention in the Republican presidential nomination fight.) The spike in coverage during the six weeks of the Senate debate occurred in all media sectors, making immigration the number one topic in the news for that period. In newspapers, for example, immigration accounted for 2 to 4 percent of front page stories in the first four months of the year and then jumped to 8 percent during the debate. By July, it was back to 2 percent and then disappeared in August and September. But, the surge was even more dramatic in two other sectors: cable talk and radio talk.

The PEJ analysis of coverage of prime time cable news shows on CNN, MSNBC and Fox News found that immigration filled 18.5 percent of the newshole during the Senate debate while it was in the 4 to 6 percent range for four months before and after. Even CNN's Lou Dobbs, after making immigration a major topic for several years, nearly doubled his pace of coverage. For the year as a whole, Dobbs devoted 22 percent of his airtime to immigration and that share jumped to 43.1 percent during the debate. The spike was sharpest for any media sector in radio talk. Immigration skyrocketed from a negligible presence—zero in some months—to 22 percent during the Senate debate.

Talk radio also starkly illustrated the ideological divide among advocacy journalists, and the divide was not so much in their positions on the issues as it was on their level of interest. The PEJ analysis found that, during the six weeks of debate, conservative radio hosts devoted 31 percent of their newshole to immigration while their liberal counterparts hardly mentioned it, giving immigration just 3.6 percent of their airtime. Over the course of the entire year, immigration received four times as much attention from conservative talk show hosts than from liberals. In fact, liberal hosts gave more attention in 2007 to the Sen. Larry Craig airport men's room imbroglio than to the topic of immigration.

The volume of coverage varied according to ideology on cable television as well during the debate. Fox has achieved ratings dominance with a strong following among Republicans and conservatives. Immigration was a major story on Fox in primetime with Bill O'Reilly giving it 19.4 percent of his show while Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes gave it 16.5 percent. On MSNBC, which has an audience less defined by partisan loyalties than Fox, there was no surge during the debate.

Chris Matthews, for example, gave it only 5.1 percent of his newshole compared to the 48.5 percent he devoted to campaign coverage.

In the worlds of cable and radio talk the surge only happened on the right. The same was true in the blogosphere.

Attention to immigration on five major blogs from across the political spectrum was assessed in a separate analysis conducted for this report at University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication (See Note on Methodology). The five blogs were chosen because they rank among the popular in the sector, are produced by a single author or a small group of authors and have a clear political orientation. Nearly 14,000 posts appearing in the six months from February to June were examined, and for the five blogs the combined share of posts relating to immigration went from an average of 1.5 percent in February, March and April to 6 percent in May and 10 percent in June. Attention then fell back to 3 percent in July. However the average is misleading because of stark difference according to the blogs' political point of view.

On the liberal side of the spectrum, "Talking Points Memo" barely took note of the debate while the "Daily Kos" did increase its coverage but peaked at 9 percent in June. "Instapundit," which is usually identified as libertarian in spirit, spiked coverage but only to six percent. Meanwhile on the right, "Michelle Malkin" showed a jump to 20 percent in May and then 40 percent in June. Similarly, another conservative blog, "Powerline," surged to 13 percent in May and 17 percent in June.

*Over the course of the entire year, immigration received four times as much attention from conservative talk show hosts than from liberals.*

As will be discussed in more detail below, the advocacy journalists on cable and radio talk and in the blogosphere mirrored what was happening in Washington's more formal political arena. Most liberals and progressives backed the Senate legislation but with a variety of reservations about its major provisions. Meanwhile, most conservatives opposed it adamantly. Weak support met fierce resistance and the bill was defeated.

**TABLE ONE** PERCENTAGE OF BLOG POSTS ON IMMIGRATION, FEBRUARY 2007 – JULY 2007

	DAILY KOS (LIBERAL)	TALKING POINTS MEMO (LIBERAL)	INSTAPUNDIT (LIBERTARIAN)	MICHELLE MALKIN (CONSERVATIVE)	POWERLINE (CONSERVATIVE)
February	3%	1%	0%	3%	1%
March	3%	4%	0%	5%	2%
April	2%	1%	1%	4%	1%
May	4%	2%	3%	20%	13%
June	9%	3%	6%	40%	17%
July	4%	1%	1%	23%	2%

Source: USC-Annenberg Content Analysis

The ideological differences in the coverage may also reflect another reality. Operating in a highly competitive atmosphere and still needing to build audiences, the new media of advocacy place a premium on attention-grabbing statements. The very nature of the media—broadcast talk and Internet posts—favor terse and intense expressions. As a result, these media sectors may be better suited for protest than for affirmation particularly when the subject is a complex issue that requires compromise in order to move forward.

In the middle of the 1980s, the 1990s and again in this decade, Washington has turned its attention to the same basic policy issues involving immigration controls and unauthorized migration. Each time, the political maneuvering and the formulation of policy options has developed quite openly for several years with relatively little attention from the media. Then, when votes are going to be cast, the media spotlight has turned to Congress. The evolution of the media, however, has helped produce wilder swings in the volume of coverage. Sudden spikes in coverage of the sort that occurred during the last round of policy debates are likely to alarm audiences rather than to inform them, conditioned as they are to associating surges in volume with short-lived, sensational events and illegality.

## THE FEEDBACK LOOP

In 1980, when the number of unauthorized migrants living in the United States was less than a fourth of what it is today, John M. Crewdson of *The New York Times* earned a Pulitzer Prize for stories about abuses suffered by illegal aliens. The abuses came at virtually every level, from smugglers who snuck them into the country, to employers who exploited them, immigration officials who were incompetent and corrupt, and policymakers in Washington who struggled ineffectually to develop policies that

would control the illicit flow. Of the 12 other Pulitzer Prizes in journalism awarded since then for coverage related to U.S. immigration, all but two focused on illegal migrants or malfeasance in the way government dealt with the foreign born. As we shall see, these topics have dominated immigration coverage for nearly three decades, producing an overarching narrative of illicit acts and government's failed efforts to contend with them.

Like the penchant to ride waves of breaking news rather than cover the steady flows of demographic change, age-old predilections drive coverage to crime and malfeasance. Distraction and distortion have accumulated inexorably as these journalistic reflexes are applied to migration coverage decade after decade. As with the spikes in coverage described above, these tendencies in news coverage have become even more pronounced in recent years as the media have undergone a profound structural transformation. Since the rise of the penny press in the mid-19th century, crime has been an essential element of mass-market journalism. Even while taking a less sensational approach than down-market tabloids, the traditional mainstream news organizations that set norms in the 20th century made crime a regular and prominent topic in their news coverage. As new media forms developed, cable television in particular leaned heavily on crime, and in the competition for audience, this in turn influenced mainstream news. The continuous, breathless coverage of the O.J. Simpson saga on cable television in the mid-1990s was in the most egregious traditions of mass-market journalism, for example, and it prompted expansive coverage in newspapers and broadcast television. Thus, the old media and the new media sometimes appear to be operating in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop. Lines of causality are difficult to draw, but the increasingly episodic coverage of immigration as a whole and the emphasis on illegality may be examples of this process at work.



CNN's Lou Dobbs describes himself as an "advocacy journalist" and he makes no bones about disregarding the traditional norms of journalistic neutrality while hosting CNN's evening news broadcast.<sup>4</sup> Since November 2003 when he launched his "Broken Borders" series, Dobbs has crusaded on the issue of illegal immigration with increasing intensity, reaching a crescendo during the 2006 and 2007 congressional debates with daily coverage. His focus on the illegal aspects of immigration is in keeping with tendencies evident in coverage by traditional news organizations over many years even if his explicitly biased approach to the subject, his lapses in verification and his haranguing style of presentation are obvious departures from the standards of journalism. Nonetheless, his agenda seems to have influenced coverage in traditional news organizations. Dobbs and other advocacy journalists on cable television, talk radio and the Internet have uncritically promoted fringe groups espousing get-tough policies on immigration, most notably the Minuteman Project.

Periodically over the years, going back at least to the early 1990s, irate citizens have protested illegal immigration with watchdog actions along the border with Mexico, sometimes shining car headlights on illicit crossers, or calling in sightings to the Border Patrol or actually trying to detain the migrants in some cases. Most have come and gone, attracting no more than passing notice. The Minuteman Project was one such group with no apparent base of support in any community or track record of political action when they suddenly began to draw national attention. Jerry Seper, a veteran reporter for *The Washington Times* who writes extensively about the restrictionist side of the immigration debate, seems to have given the group its first publicity with a story on January 24, 2005 about plans for a border protest in Arizona in the spring. Dobbs immediately picked up on the Minuteman

Project, giving it favorable, sometimes extensive coverage on twelve broadcasts over the next two months. Rush Limbaugh and others in conservative talk started paying attention as well, and before the Minuteman Project had actually done anything President Bush expressed his worries about "vigilantes" on the border stoking more talk.

When the protest was actually staged on April 1, turnout was below the promoters predictions—scores rather than hundreds turned up according to eyewitness press accounts. Nonetheless, the event generated a bounty of coverage by the traditional media, more than 100 stories in national and regional newspapers, airtime on evening television, the spectacle of satellite trucks lined up to see angry people in combat fatigues waiting, often vainly, for someone to run through the brush from south to north. Absent the attention and controversy generated by Dobbs and other advocacy journalists, it seems unlikely that traditional news organizations would have given so much coverage to a relatively small symbolic protest.

## THE NARRATIVE OF ILLEGALITY

Unauthorized migrants accounted for a fifth of the foreign-born population in 1980. By the early 1990s, that share dropped significantly because the 1986 immigration reform law had provided amnesty for some 3 million of them, about 60 percent of the total. Since then, the unauthorized population has grown rapidly but so has the number of legal immigrants. As a result, the unauthorized now account for less than a third of the foreign-born population in the U.S. and that is a peak reached only in recent years.

However, the unauthorized segment of the foreign-born population has drawn an outsized share of the news coverage. Migrants who have

arrived outside of legal channels, whether it is by foot across the Mexican border or by raft across the Straits of Florida, have drawn much more coverage than those who have arrived with passports in hand. As a result, the cumulative portrait drawn by nearly 30 years of American journalism emphasizes illegal or uncontrolled migration rather than the much larger movement of people that has been legal and orderly. This emphasis on illegality applies not only to the means by which people enter the country but also to their activities once here. From prison riots by Marielitos in the early 1980s to murders committed by the Mara Salvatrucha street gangs in this decade, criminality by migrants has been another recurring and pervasive theme. People who break the law inevitably draw more attention from journalists than the multitudes who obey the law, and when those lawbreakers are identifiable as members of a group by virtue of national origin, race or nativity or all three, stereotyping is equally inevitable.

In addition, coverage of the government's role in regard to immigration has been dominated by efforts to devise and implement policies to control unauthorized migration. This coverage has overshadowed important legislation and policy processes in the realm of legal migration that have had much larger and longer-lasting effects on the nation. Like the overall emphasis on illegal migration, this has produced a distraction. Scant coverage of the laws, policies and bureaucracies governing legal migration has meant that the public has been less attuned to government's role in the epochal changes legal immigration has brought to all realms of American society. Instead of focusing on the policies and practices that have had the greatest impact—those regarding legal migration flows—the news media have been preoccupied, in both their breaking news coverage and in their enterprise and investigative reporting,

with efforts to control illegal flows. Thus, an element of distortion has also developed from coverage of government's role.

These conclusions are based on a content analysis that examined coverage by a variety of news organizations across the full time period under discussion here (See Note on Methodology). That coverage is very clearly dominated by various forms of illegality: unauthorized entry to the U.S. and efforts by the government to control it; criminal behavior by immigrants; and malfeasance or incompetence by immigration officials. For example, an analysis of 1,848 Associated Press stories on immigration topics from 1980 to 2007 showed that 79 percent fit into the framework of illegality. Of 2,614 stories on immigration in *The New York Times* over the same period, 86 percent dealt with illegality in various forms, and that included 83% of the coverage in Washington and 88% of the stories from elsewhere in the country. Of 381 stories about immigration on the "CBS Evening News" from 1990 to 2007, 87 percent fit the framework of illegality. And results from other news organizations show the same pattern.

One flaw in this body of coverage stands out: The story of legal immigration has been underplayed relative to the illicit flow. The arrival of tens of millions of foreigners over the past three decades through legal channels—their success and failures, their contributions and costs—has received only a fraction of the coverage accorded to the much smaller number of unauthorized migrants. Government policies and practices regarding legal immigration have also received a scant share of media attention. Even government failures have received less attention when they relate to legal immigration, such as persistent backlogs in processing citizenship and visa applications, than those involving illegal immigration. For example,

in 1990 Congress passed the first major revision of legal immigration statutes in 35 years, substantially increasing migration flow and changing its composition. It is legislation that from the start altered the face of America, and it continues to do so today. The Washington Post covered the debate leading up to enactment with a total of 2,078 words of news copy in four routine Capitol Hill stories; the bill's potential impact was not examined in Washington's newspaper of record until a week after it was passed. In contrast, when Congress produced a law dealing exclusively with illegal immigration in 1986, the Post published ten stories about the deliberations in the month prior to passage and seven follow ups in the immediate aftermath.

Our analysis shows that the framing on illegality in the traditional news media has been highly consistent going back nearly three decades despite substantial fluctuations in volume. In the pages of The New York Times, for example, the share of immigration stories focused on illegality held with a range of 76 to 96 percent for 24 of the 28 years examined, and in those four other years it never fell below 63 percent. The results were similar for the Associated Press, 24 years between 77 and 93 percent of stories related to illegality and four outliers.

A new element was added to the narrative of illegality early in this decade, and Lou Dobbs on CNN was its most notable proponent. Advocates of tougher enforcement measures have long castigated illegal migrants as a drain on public services, as economic opportunists willing to undercut wages, and as eroding the rule of law. Dobbs led the way in characterizing illegal migrants as threats to the health and safety of ordinary Americans, as a category of people who are not merely undesirable but who need to be expelled in order to preserve the nation. Dobbs is by no means an original thinker. He has aped some of

nativism's oldest tropes, but he has done it as the anchor of the flagship broadcast on a network that promotes itself as "the most trusted name in news." He has frequently used the language of conquest, an "army of invaders" to describe the migrants, and has described native-born U.S. citizens as "anchor babies," alleging incorrectly that having a child here will protect an illegal immigrant from deportation. Dobbs has accused unauthorized migrants with infecting the American population with a variety of diseases, including leprosy, and when confronted with factual errors on such accounts, as he was by Lesley Stahl during an interview for "60 Minutes" on CBS, he has been defiant, telling Stahl, "if we reported it, it's a fact." Dobbs, who has generated notable ratings gains for CNN, was subsequently given a slot by CBS doing weekly commentary on "The Early Show."

And, Dobbs has not stood alone. Bill O'Reilly on Fox News has repeatedly recounted crimes committed by illegal migrants as evidence of failed immigration policies, growing melodramatic at times as in an infamous shouting match with his colleague, Geraldo Rivera, in April 2007. "You want open-border anarchy; that's what you want," O'Reilly shouted when Rivera tried to argue that a drunk driver's immigration status was not relevant to his crime. Michelle Malkin, a prominent conservative blogger and Fox commentator, took the same tack in a January 2008 post that was headlined, "Twice-deported illegal alien criminal is Arizona serial rapist suspect: The bloody consequence of open borders, part 9,999,999."

This rhetorical assault on illegal immigration has been directed not only at migrants but also at the government and often in more vociferous terms. For example, in an April 2007 broadcast, O'Reilly framed illegal immigration as a massive betrayal by the public sector: "The founders created

government to provide that protection. But our governments generally have bowed to political correctness and are failing to protect us.” This argument has proved highly successful both in attracting audiences and arousing them in ways that has affected policymaking. Dobbs again offers a way to illustrate the development of this line of advocacy journalism.

As anchor of CNN’s “Moneyline” in the 1980s and 1990s, Dobbs played the sycophantic host to big business executives. When he talked about immigration, which was not very often compared to his more recent obsession, Dobbs often acted as transmitter for the business community’s general view of immigration as a necessary source of new workers. Then after the era of corporate scandals made it hard to treat corporate chieftains like glamorous and admired celebrities, Dobbs reinvented himself as a populist. As anchor of “Lou Dobbs Tonight” since 2003, he has made illegal immigration just one aspect of a broader critique of greedy businesses and failed government. In addition to “Broken Borders,” his running diatribes come with titles like “War on the Middle Class,” “Exporting America” and “The Best Government Money Can Buy.” As with other advocacy journalists, Dobbs uses the pose of a reporter uncovering facts in the public interest as a rhetorical device. His stories on illegal immigration often come with the suggestion that it suits hidden interests with conspiratorial schemes. He has repeatedly argued, for example, that the unauthorized flow is tolerated, even encouraged, because powers in Washington and in the corporate world have plans to surrender American sovereignty in a “North America Union” with Mexico and Canada. The absence of any evidence for this claim has not hindered its frequent repetition.

This kind of framing has a direct bearing on the way policy options are portrayed. When a bipartisan group of senators announced that they would propose a compromise bill on immigration in May 2007, thus opening the most recent round of congressional debate, Dobbs started his broadcast with this bulletin: “The pro-illegal alien and open borders lobby today winning what is an apparent major political victory. A bipartisan group of senators announcing a deal to give as many as 20 million illegal aliens amnesty. There are rising concerns tonight that that amnesty compromise could threaten national sovereignty and security, opening U.S. borders even further with Mexico and Canada.”

Washington has manifestly failed in its stated aims of controlling, let alone ending illegal migration. The size and continued growth of the unauthorized population attest to that. The key question about the framing of immigration coverage is not a matter of accuracy but of attitudes. Specifically one has to ask whether the coverage has heightened skepticism about immigration policy in a way that makes the enactment of new policies more difficult. As we shall see later in this report, there is abundant evidence from the most recent congressional debate that doubts about the government’s ability to control immigration became one of the major arguments against enactment of comprehensive reforms. Sen. John McCain put it simply, explaining why Congress failed to formulate a new policy in 2007: “Many Americans did not believe us when we said we would secure our borders, and so we failed in our efforts.” There is no ready means to measure how much journalism has contributed to this perception through the way it has framed a narrative of illegality. But it certainly has been a factor. So, too, has been another characteristic of the immigration coverage: misplaced protagonism.

## MIGRANTS AS PERPETRATORS

A rich body of historical and social science literature has amply demonstrated that large-scale, continuous migrations almost always results from the interaction of many factors. These include individual will and motivations, but the causes of migration go far beyond the individual. At the simplest level, migration is the product of push factors—political, social, economic and environmental factors that cause people to want to leave their communities of origin—and pull factors—those that attract them to a given destination such as local demand for a particular type of labor. When a migration has developed over years, it can also generate its own momentum as migrants seek to reunite with their families and as economic ties develop between sending communities and their diaspora. Suffice to say that beyond oozing, immigration is multidimensional. And American journalism is no better suited to covering stories that are multidimensional than it is to those that develop gradually.

All storytelling, whether factual or fictional, is easiest when narratives can be constructed around the actions of a single person or a group of people. Narratives beg for protagonists, whether they are heroes or villains, victims or perpetrators. This imperative can have particularly perilous consequences when applied to a phenomenon like migration, and yet migration lends itself to simple narratives in which the migrant is the obvious protagonist. After all, moving from one country to another provides a clear plot with a beginning, middle and end. It is the kind of dramatic action that readily drives narratives, especially when it involves physical peril or acts of illegality or both. But, even though the migrants attract the spotlight, an excessive emphasis on them tends to obscure the many social forces that impel their actions. The result can be a deceptive oversimplification.

Taking account of all the factors that produce migration is, of course, beyond the scope of any single news story, but over an extensive body of work, one could hope to see a balance of the individual and societal factors. Instead, the impulse to develop narratives with migrants as the protagonists has proved irresistible for an entire generation of journalists. The story told repeatedly, until it has become a cliché, is of the individual migrating to seek a better life. Whether portrayed sympathetically or not, the migrant is the protagonist who determines the arc of the narrative. The nation or the community at the end of this arc—the destination for the migrant's journey—is a fundamentally passive party. When that narrative is repeated over and over again, an audience in that nation or community will come to see itself as a bystander. When migration is portrayed as the migrant's doing, then all the consequences of migration befall the migrant. And when perceptions turn negative, those consequences are all the migrants' fault and the receiving community will come to see itself as a hapless victim.

## THE AGENTS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

The predominant role given to immigrants in the journalistic narrative is evident in stories about demographic change, particularly those dealing with change in the racial and ethnic makeup of the U.S. population. Headlines regularly shout that the foreign born and Hispanics are becoming ever bigger shares of the U.S. population and that the nation is undergoing a fundamental shift in composition that could render whites a minority by mid-century. These statements are undeniably true, and they are the result of two distinct but equally important phenomena: the size of the newcomer groups is growing, and the historical populations are not. That is the dual dynamic that

is producing social change; it is important to take a moment with the demographic data to underscore this point. According to the Census Bureau estimates, the American population grew by 20 million between 2000 and 2007 and Hispanics accounted for half the growth.<sup>5</sup> That is the story that generates coverage. But, there is another important statistic in those estimates that is essential to understanding the story. Non-Hispanic whites, numbering nearly 200 million only contributed 2 million people to the population growth by an excess of births over deaths. In fact, immigration by non-Hispanic whites was almost an equally significant factor, producing growth of 1.4 million people. But, in repeatedly reporting that Hispanics or the foreign born are becoming an ever greater share of the population, journalists have usually declined to mention that the share is increasing both because these populations are growing and because other populations are not. The coverage has focused only on the first factor, depriving this news of an essential element of context.

*But, in repeatedly reporting that Hispanics or the foreign born are becoming an ever greater share of the population, journalists have usually declined to mention that the share is increasing both because these populations are growing and because other populations are not.*

Increases in the numbers of Hispanics and foreign born have made a lot of news especially since the 2000 census captured a spurt of rapid growth in late 1990s. By contrast, a declining birthrate among whites and African-Americans is an old story, but it is just the kind of phenomenon that

oozes, accumulating impact relentlessly over long periods of time. By emphasizing only one of the two factors, the American media have given the false impression that the newcomers alone are bringing about the demographic change. Americans uncomfortable with this shift will naturally lay blame on those portrayed as the protagonists.

We examined coverage of three census reports that quantified the change in the nation's mix of peoples: the initial data releases from the 2000 census documenting the growth of the Hispanic- and foreign-born populations; a 2003 report showing that the number of Hispanics had outstripped the number of African-Americans to make Latinos the nation's largest minority; and a 2005 report projecting that non-whites would become a majority of the nation's population by 2050. The analysis examined stories produced by The Washington Post, The New York Times, USA Today, a sampling of 23 regional and local newspapers, the Associated Press, National Public Radio and the three broadcast networks. Of a total of 71 stories about the growing shares of newcomers, only 12 mentioned higher birthrates relative to the historical populations and none of them noted this fact any higher than the fourth paragraph. None of those 12 mentioned that birthrates among whites and African-Americans have declined over the period in which the immigrant population has been growing. And, in these number-heavy stories, only two of the 12 cited actual birthrate statistics. Fifteen other stories noted that the newcomers have high birthrates, adding to their population growth, but they made no mention of the lower birthrates among whites and blacks. The remaining 44 stories did not mention births as a factor in any way. The message in this body of coverage is that immigration is changing the face of the nation and that "they" are doing it to us.



## LEAVING EMPLOYERS OUT OF THE PICTURE

Changes in the composition of the population relate to the effects of immigration. The same kinds of misimpression have been generated in coverage of the causes of immigration.

The migration narrative produced by American journalism has significantly undervalued the role the United States itself has played in stimulating and shaping the influx. In particular, media coverage has underplayed the importance of the U.S. labor market in determining the size and content of migration flows over many years. The foreign born in general, and especially the young males from Latin America who make up the bulk of the illegal flow, have among the highest labor force participation rates of any group, given that work is often their primary reason for being here.<sup>6</sup> And, not surprisingly, the actual size of that flow varies from year to year according to demand for these kinds of workers. When employers need more workers during economic expansions, the flow increases; during economic downturns, fewer migrants come.<sup>7</sup>

Washington policymakers of both parties and across several administrations have recognized these realities—at least symbolically—since the onset of the new migration. The need to make the “jobs magnet” less attractive had been a prominent feature of federal debates about the control of illegal immigration since the mid-1970s. In 1986 Congress enacted sanctions against the employers of unauthorized migrants as the centerpiece of an enforcement strategy. Worksite enforcement has remained a central tenant of U.S. immigration policy, even though business lobbyists ensured that the 1986 law was written in a way that makes it impossible to enforce.<sup>8</sup> In 1990, business associations played a highly influential role in shaping legislation to boost the flow of legal

immigrant workers, and in 1996 they helped defeat efforts to toughen employer sanctions.<sup>9</sup>

During the most recent debate, agricultural interests, the hospitality industry, builders and others worked hard to shape the various proposals considered by Congress. With support from the Bush administration, employers insisted that measures to crack down on the hiring of illegal workers be balanced by a program providing a substantial new flow of immigrant temporary workers. The efforts to strike a grand bargain collapsed in part because of disputes over the rules that would have governed the wages, freedom of movement and ultimate immigration status of these temporary workers. Following the breakdown of the debate, when the Bush administration launched an enforcement campaign to show it was serious about immigration control, the target became the migrants rather than the employers. Dozens of worksite raids have resulted in thousands of deportations, but as of this writing no major prosecutions have been brought against the employers who flaunted the law when they gave the workers a reason to come to the United States and the means to live here.

So employers play two important roles in the migration drama: in their individual, everyday decisions on whom to hire, employers exercise as much control over migration flows as federal immigration authorities—more control, actually, if you consider the illegal flow that circumvents the authorities. And, America’s employers, acting both directly and through lobbyists, have explicitly influenced the development of immigration policies over the past three decades to ensure a supply of foreign workers, including a sizable number outside the legal immigration system. Despite their importance, however, employers have been largely offstage and unseen in the migration drama as it has been portrayed by the U.S. media. Of course,



there have been important exceptions—excellent stories on specific industries, employers and the role of work in attracting immigrants—but our intent here is to understand the broad narrative that emerges from the bulk of the coverage. From that perspective, American journalism at best has not fully informed the public and at worst has misled it.

As with all media, the three broadcast networks ramped up their coverage of immigration in 2006 and 2007 when it became the subject of congressional debate. But even during this spike, employers drew little attention. An analysis of the 201 stories about immigration that were aired on the three broadcast networks' flagship evening news shows in 2006 and 2007 found that employers were quoted in only 12 stories. In contrast, immigrants were interviewed or made statements in 58 stories. On the policy side, only seven stories made mention of employer sanctions, and it was a minor element in most of them. Meanwhile, 29 of the stories on the evening news broadcasts were about the border and the federal government's failed efforts there.

This same distorted narrative, however, is also apparent in coverage that is set in the American communities and focuses on local issues.

Over the past two decades, a burst of extraordinary economic development and population growth in Northern Virginia has coincided with the rise of a new immigrant population, mostly from Central America. Established white, middle-class, suburban populations found themselves contending with rapid population change. In several communities, this produced widespread anxieties and some public displays of animosity toward the newcomers. In response, local governments have attempted to impose their own immigration controls with a variety of measures such as closing down day-labor hiring sites or denying public services to unauthorized

migrants. A similar course of events has played out in many other communities across the country.

An analysis of a sample of 312 articles published by The Washington Post from 2004 to 2007 on immigration controversies in Northern Virginia found that only 14 focused on the employment of immigrants or their economic impact, and only four out of the total that actually quoted individual employers. This omission from the vast majority of the coverage is all the more extraordinary because much of the controversy was about day laborers, and thus the migration issue was framed specifically as a matter of employment. Nonetheless, two lengthy stories charting the demographic and social impact of the new immigration on different communities failed to make any mention of migrants' employment at all. As the home construction industry collapsed, the Post ran a telling piece about how immigrants were leaving the area because their jobs were vanishing. The story quoted four migrants talking about their experiences, but it did not quote a single employer. The Washington Post had never paid much attention to the link between a booming economy and a sudden increase in the immigrant population before it found that economic hard times were causing some of the newcomers to leave. And along the way, attention was never focused on the people who hired the immigrants.

When employers are absent from migration narratives like the Post's coverage of the Northern Virginia controversies, a critical element of context is missing from the story. It is as if the audience was hearing only half of a conversation, or more appropriately, half of a transaction. The missing half is the part that explains the role that the audience, the community itself, has played in bringing about the migration to the extent it has benefited from the immigrants' employment. But

the coverage was focused elsewhere. While only 14 stories focused on employment, 62 focused on the reaction—most of it negative—that the immigrant influx and attendant controversies had provoked among residents, and 54 stories focused on the political impact. The bulk of the coverage—142 stories of the 312 assessed—focused on debates, decisions and actions by public officials. Thus, the policy disputes as they were worked out in governmental settings were the overwhelming focus of the coverage, outstripping employment, the primary cause of the influx, by a factor of 10 to 1.

Whether intended or not, the message of this narrative is that immigrants have provoked a crisis in public policy that is disassociated from any underlying social, demographic or economic

trends. Moreover, it is framed as a crisis that can be resolved by policies aimed primarily, if not exclusively, at the immigrants without addressing the larger dynamics that produced the migration. This kind of framing would be almost inconceivable on other issues. Imagine, for example, coverage of a policy debate over energy that did not prominently feature oil and automobile companies or coverage of a health policy debate that did not delve into the roles of hospitals, doctors and pharmaceutical companies. In the case of immigration, the media's failure to adequately provide context for the policy challenges has produced both lack of understanding and frustration with government's inability to resolve them. As we shall see, this dynamic contributed directly to the failure of the most recent efforts to produce new immigration policies.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Passel, Jeffrey S. and Roberto Suro. "Rise, Peak and Decline: Trends in U.S. Immigration 1992–2004." Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, DC, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Elian Gonzalez did help make history tangentially. George W. Bush benefited in the November 2000 election from anger among Cuban-Americans in Florida over the Clinton administration's decision to take the boy away from his Miami relatives so his father could take him back to Cuba.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Bobbie Bowman in "The 'Ooze News' Behind the News," Poynter Online, Diversity at Work, Poynter Institute, 2008, downloaded at <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=58&aid=135770>.

<sup>4</sup> Dobbs stated these views during an interview on "60 Minutes" by CBS News, which was broadcast on May 6, 2007. He used similar language during a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, DC on June 26, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Cumulative Estimates of the Components of Population Change by Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2007 (NC-EST2007-05). Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, Release Date: May 1, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the Pew Hispanic Center's series, "Latino Labor Report" for 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2008, available at <http://pewhispanic.org/topics/index.php?TopicID=32>.

<sup>7</sup> Passel, Jeffrey S. and Roberto Suro. "Rise, Peak and Decline: Trends in U.S. Immigration 1992–2004." Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, DC, 2005; Kochhar, Rakesh, "Latino Labor Report, 2008: Construction Reverses Job Growth for Latinos," Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, DC, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, Betsy and Kevin O'Neil. "Lessons from the Immigration and Control Act of 1986." Policy Brief, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Suro, Roberto. *Strangers Among Us: Latino Lives in a Changing America*. Vintage: New York: 1999.



# THE ROAD TO STALEMATE

## GRAND BARGAINS AND A WEAKENED WASHINGTON

Using an extraordinary forum often associated with foreign crises, President Bush addressed the nation from the Oval Office on the evening of May 15, 2006, to press his case for immigration reform. Sitting behind the great Resolute desk hewn from the timbers of a British navy ship, he announced the deployment of 6,000 National Guard troops to help patrol the border with Mexico. Although it was a rare use of an Oval Office address on a matter of domestic policy, and the first ever on immigration, an air of crisis prevailed nonetheless. Despite progress, he said, “we do not yet have full control of the border.” But the emergency Bush faced that night was not along the Rio Grande or in the deserts of the Southwest, but on Capitol Hill.

“Tonight,” the president said, “I want to speak directly to members of the House and Senate.” Nearly two-and-a-half years had passed since Bush had unveiled his proposals in the East Room speech of January 2004. In the meantime, conservatives in his own party had gone into open revolt against his plan, with the House Republican leadership ramming through a tough enforcement-only bill in December 2005. That prompted hundreds of thousands of demonstrators to march through dozens of U.S. cities in the spring of 2006 in protest. And then, as Bush spoke, the Senate was considering a broader set of measures that included a version of the temporary worker program he had originally proposed. The legislative calendar required the Senate to act within a few weeks for there to be any

chance of reconciling the House and Senate bills and getting final passage before that Congress ended its term following the November elections.

Like many in Washington before him, Bush was trying to strike a grand bargain on immigration. In addition to sending troops to the border, he proposed several other enforcement measures aimed at mollifying conservatives—more high-tech sensors and Border Patrol agents to catch illegal crossers and more facilities for detention and deportations to send them home. To keep those on the other side of the debate onboard, he endorsed plans to offer a path to citizenship to unauthorized migrants of long residence in the country if they had jobs and clear criminal records and if they paid fines as penance for their wrongdoing. Border enforcement had gotten token attention in his initial proposals, and in 2004 he had not offered a legalization plan that clearly led to citizenship. In trying to forge a compromise, the president and his allies had to satisfy the vociferous factions on each side of the debate. Indeed, the political strategy behind comprehensive immigration reform was to create a big legislative package that included measures that separately would satisfy opposing factions with strongly held views rather than building a centrist proposal that would win majority support for all its elements. Each side had to get enough of what it wanted to let the opposition get what it wanted. But that has been the nature of U.S. immigration politics for a long time.

In its broad outlines, what Bush proposed was not unlike the bargain struck in 1986 or even the

deal-making behind the legislation passed in 1996. It was basically the old “close the back door, open the front door” strategy proposed by the Hesburgh Commission in 1980 when the new era of immigration was still young. But by 2006, much had changed. The migration had grown large, and over the years the illegal flow that had gained great momentum despite repeated proclamations from Washington that it would be brought under control. Moreover, the American public had been primed by events—from Elian to the post-9/11 roundups—and by media coverage to associate immigration with chaos and controversy. Finally, the media themselves had changed in ways that make it more difficult for Washington to resolve a public policy issue that requires a grand bargain. When views harden among opposing factions, striking such a deal can become impossible even if a majority wants to take action of some kind. That night in May 2006, Bush was trying to soften the hard edges.

*... during the immigration debates of 2006 and 2007, key forms of alternative media—talk radio, ethnic media, partisan television and the blogosphere—played an outsized role.*

As is customary, the White House scheduled an event the day after the president’s speech to try to build some political momentum. In this case, however, there was no town hall meeting in the heartland, no Rose Garden photo op with congressional allies. Instead, Vice President Dick Cheney made an appearance on “The Rush Limbaugh Show” to promote the immigration plan. The White House was aiming at the heart of the opposition within its own ranks and was using the forum most likely to communicate with credibility. Limbaugh was hardly a new phenomenon; he had

been a powerful influence within the Republican Party for more than a decade. But during the immigration debates of 2006 and 2007, key forms of alternative media—talk radio, ethnic media, partisan television and the blogosphere—played an outsized role. During those crucial days in May 2006 when Congress was debating the nation’s demographic destiny, President Bush used the most bully of all pulpits to make his case—an Oval Office address in prime time—knowing that the verdict would be rendered on AM radios in the middle of the day, through high-decibel punditry on dinner hour television and in late-night computer postings. And, it would all happen again, following the same script, almost exactly a year later during the 2007 debate.

The immigration debates of 2006 and 2007 starkly illuminate the rising influence of new media in federal policy deliberations, and the lessons learned are potentially applicable to other areas of policy as well. Talk radio, partisan cable TV and Internet punditry undoubtedly played a far greater role in this round of policymaking than in any previous immigration debate, and so this episode serves as valuable case study. It is historically convenient because the points of contrast are 10 and 20 years in the past, across technological horizons. And, while the media had changed, the public policy issues had not. The dilemmas facing policymakers were roughly the same as they had been in 1986 and 1996, albeit on a much larger scale. In 1986, for example, with newspapers and the broadcast networks as unchallenged sources of news, Washington wrestled with the terms of a legalization program for a population of about 5 million unauthorized migrants. Twenty years later, with the new forms of media exercising new kinds of influence, Washington debated another legalization program, this time with a target population of 12 million.

The recent immigration debates are also a ripe specimen because the political context accentuated the power of noninstitutional political players. Like so much else in Washington, immigration policy has been subject to aggressive intervention by a variety of interest groups with divergent aims. But on immigration, and much else, competing interests traditionally were mediated by institutional players in the executive and legislative branches and very often these competitions were resolved behind closed doors. During the immigration debates of 2006 and 2007, the institutional players were in a weakened condition, thus creating greater opportunities for some of the new players emerging on the media landscape.

The political figure most obviously in a diminished state was President Bush himself. Between the time of his East Room speech on immigration in January 2004 and the Oval Office address in May 2006, Bush's job approval ratings had dropped from 58 percent to 33 percent in Pew Research Center polls. There were many reasons for this decline. But even when he was a popular president, Bush had never been in a strong political position on immigration. Many Democrats and immigrants rights advocates attacked his 2004 proposal because it lacked a path to citizenship for unauthorized migrants. Moderate Republicans were largely indifferent to it, and conservatives decried it: The cover of the *National Review* rendered a simple judgment: "Amnesty, Again." In the midst of a re-election campaign, Bush could not risk alienating his base. The administration never proposed any specific legislation, never mounted a lobbying effort behind the plan. By spring, the temporary worker proposal was a dead letter.

When the second term began in 2005, Bush made an overhaul of Social Security his top domestic priority and utterly failed. The White

House then took aim at immigration in the summer of 2005, developing a proposal for a comprehensive bill and extensively briefing major players on its provisions. The goal was to launch a bipartisan legislative initiative shortly after Labor Day so a bill could be enacted before the end of the year. Events intervened, however. At the end of August, Hurricane Katrina produced a spectacle of death and destruction on the Gulf Coast and, with them, a lasting impression of government ineptitude. A few days later, William H. Rehnquist, chief justice of the United States, died at his home, setting off a nomination scramble over two slots because Justice Sandra Day O'Connor had earlier announced her retirement. Bush eventually nominated Harriet Miers, his personal lawyer and the White House counsel, to O'Connor's seat, but the nomination was rejected by the conservative wing of his own party. Meanwhile, the investigation over who leaked the identity of a covert CIA operative was reaching into the White House.

Congress, too, had a diminished capacity to control the policy debate on immigration. Republicans were riven by ideological infighting with the White House and a perceived political need to separate from a weakened lame-duck president as the off-year election approached. Moreover, a leadership transition was under way after the indictment in September 2005 of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay on campaign finance charges; "The Hammer" had been the party's disciplinarian in the chamber. Among congressional Democrats, meanwhile, caution was the watchword. The Democrats still ached over their party's narrow loss in the 2004 presidential election and looked forward to the 2006 vote as a chance for vindication. After they took control of both houses in that election, Democratic leaders had another worry: House freshmen from swing districts had to be protected from unpredictable controversies like immigration.

## NEW MEDIA VOICES AND THE FIRST STALEMATE

Weakness in Washington opened a space for other political actors to define policy choices, and potent voices in the media began driving the immigration agenda among conservatives. As Bush began his second term, Rush Limbaugh, the self-appointed guardian of the conservative movement and host of the most popular show on talk radio, warned that immigration had the potential to split fatally the Republican Party. Like many other commentators on the right, Limbaugh did not attack Bush directly, even as the president tried to revive his temporary worker plan; instead, Limbaugh emphasized the need to secure the borders. A week after the inauguration, for example, Bill O'Reilly, the Fox News commentator, decried the "border chaos," threats to national sovereignty and identity posed by Mexican immigration, and the dangers of terrorist infiltration from the south. All were familiar themes to his viewers, but he essentially excused Bush for not taking action. "Well, you know, it's so politically charged that the Bush administration certainly is not going to do it, even though they've been re-elected," he said, "because ... the future of the Republican Party, according to their strategists, lies with Hispanic-Americans, and what they're doing."

As 2005 passed, stances toughened. In April, Limbaugh repeatedly praised a demonstration by the Minuteman Project and by August he was warning congressional Republicans that they would suffer politically if they did not take action on immigration enforcement. By October, Dobbs was criticizing Bush for, "21 months of silence on the issue of immigration reform," and chastising the Republican-led Congress for not taking up the issue. It was, he said, "a do-nothing Congress on the issues that really matter most to middle-class Americans." At the end of November, Bush took a

two-day trip to Arizona and Texas in which he promised more border enforcement, but O'Reilly painted the visit as a political effort to shore up his standing with conservatives and questioned his commitment to get tough. "The president has been intimidated by the far left," he said. And casting a wider net, O'Reilly declared, "You're going to have to take very drastic action against poor, pitiful people to stop this [illegal immigration]. And no politician in the country at this point is willing to do so."

House Republicans heard the message coming from conservative media and rushed through an immigration bill composed exclusively of enforcement measures just before they adjourned in the final days of 2005. The bill called for building 698 miles of additional border fencing at a cost of \$3.2 million a mile. It also would have broadly authorized local law enforcement officers to enforce immigration laws and get federal pay for doing it. Employers would be required to verify the immigration status of all workers, but bowing to pressure from business lobbies the bill did not require full enforcement of this provision for six years. The most controversial aspect of the legislation would have made it a felony to be in the country illegally and would have criminalized giving any assistance to an unauthorized migrant—even a meal from a soup kitchen. The author of the bill, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Sensenbrenner, a Republican of Wisconsin, belatedly realized the enormous costs to the criminal justice system of providing jury trials for illegal migrants who are easily deported under existing law. He tried to remove the criminalization provision with a floor amendment but was blocked by Democrats who saw this outlandish feature as a poison pill that might eventually kill the bill.<sup>1</sup> What the Democrats had no way of foreseeing was just how provocative criminalization would be for the nation's immigrants and their allies.



On March 10, 2006, a crowd estimated variously between 100,000 and 300,000 people marched through the streets of downtown Chicago to protest the House immigration bill. Latino immigrants, their U.S.-born children, labor unions, church groups and immigrants' rights advocates massed together and demanded that the legislation be defeated. "We are not criminals!" marchers incensed by the bill's criminalization provision chanted repeatedly. And their accompanying threat—"Today we march, tomorrow we vote"—was aimed not only at Republicans but also at any Democrats who might want to avoid tackling the immigration issue. By May 1, similar scenes had been repeated in more than 120 U.S. cities with protests that involved more than 3.5 million people, according to estimates by the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.<sup>2</sup>

The marches represented not only one of the largest civic mobilizations in American history but also one of the least structured and most spontaneous, having been coordinated only loosely on a national level and having involved a variety of ad hoc coalitions in individual cities. The most powerful evidence for the spontaneity and lack of structure is that after the spring of 2006, several efforts to organize other marches failed to produce substantial crowds. No clearly identifiable leaders, organizations or political agendas emerged from all that activity. However, one enduring and growing institution played a central role in the immigrant marches: the Spanish-language media. The national television networks Univision and Telemundo, as well as dozens of local affiliates and hundreds of radio stations, promoted the marches and even offered explicit instructions to participants on how to behave. White T-shirts were the dress of choice, and U.S. flags were far preferable to those of the home country. In Los Angeles, for example, three

hugely popular radio hosts, Eddie "El Piolin" (Tweety Bird) Sotelo, Ricardo "El Mandril" (The Baboon) Sanchez, and Renan "El Cucuy" (The Boogeyman) Almendarez Coello, set aside rivalries and their penchant for raucous, often off-color humor to join forces behind the protests. They appeared together on the steps of City Hall to announce the date of the march, conducted repeated on-air interviews with organizers and then marched at the head of a crowd that stretched for 20 blocks.

*... one enduring and growing institution played a central role in the immigrant marches: the Spanish-language media.*

Just as conservative media powers outside of traditional journalism helped propel restrictionist legislation, the equally untraditional ethnic media helped block it.

Several major immigration bills had been introduced in the Senate in 2005, but serious maneuvering did not get under way until just after the immigrant marches began. As Washington was immersed in weeks of negotiations and debate, the protests gathered momentum around the country. Though many political factors were at play, the marches kept attention focused on the issue and kept up the pressure on Democrats to block the Sensenbrenner bill. In the midst of the debate, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat who was co-author of one of the major bills with Sen. John McCain, the Arizona Republican, addressed marchers who had filled the National Mall to assure them he would not back down. Weeks later, on May 25, 2006, a bipartisan coalition of 23 Republicans, 38 Democrats and one independent passed a comprehensive immigration bill through



the Senate. It included a legalization program that would cover most undocumented migrants, a temporary worker program and a series of enforcement measures. The ultimate fate of these provisions was uncertain because Republicans, who then controlled both houses of Congress, would dominate the conference committee where differences between the Senate and the House bills were to be reconciled.

*... anxiety over illegal immigration increased during the Bush presidency much more among conservatives than among liberals or moderates.*

The Latino radio hosts had countered the conservative talkers. The Senate had countered the House. In both realms, however, there was more rhetoric than reality. The day after the Senate passed its bill, Sensenbrenner rejected its key provisions. “The president is not where the American people are at,” he said at a news conference. Echoing the conservative media, he said the Senate’s legalization plan amounted to “amnesty,” and he predicted—correctly, as it turned out—that the House would never consider it. No conference committee ever attempted to work out the difference between the Senate and the House bills, and both eventually died. The House had said “no” to Bush, and then the Senate said “no” to the House. The result was a stalemate until the November 2006 elections produced a new Congress with fragile Democratic majorities in both houses. That set the stage for the next round of the debate.

## **STOKING ANXIETY AND DEFINING THE DEBATE**

As discussed in E.J. Dionne’s accompanying essay on public attitudes toward immigration (See “Migrating Attitudes, Shifting Opinions: The Role of Public

Opinion in the Immigration Debate”) anxiety over illegal immigration increased during the Bush presidency much more among conservatives than among liberals or moderates. A March 2001, Gallup Poll found that 31 percent of conservatives said they worried a great deal about illegal immigration; by March 2005, it was up to 41 percent. This anxiety among conservatives continued to mount steadily, rising to 51 percent in 2006 and 54 percent in 2007, as Washington focused intensely on the subject. Anxieties among moderates increased as well, though less dramatically, from 27 percent who said illegal immigration caused them a great deal of worry in 2001 to 45 percent in 2007. Opinion among liberals changed less over the same period, with the share expressing a great deal of worry increasing from 23 percent in 2001 to 31 percent in 2007.

The nature of that anxiety, however, is fairly well focused. For most Americans, any problems with immigration lie with the policy, not the phenomenon. Their unhappiness is directed more toward government than toward immigrants. Consider that in a CBS–New York Times survey taken in May 2007, 49 percent of respondents said the immigration system needed to be completely rebuilt and 41 percent said it needed fundamental change<sup>3</sup>—that’s 90 percent favoring significant change. But in the same survey, most respondents held positive views of immigrants: 57 percent agreed that “most recent immigrants contribute to this country,” compared with 28 percent who said they “cause problems.”

When it comes to the options for changing the immigration system, public opinion surveys consistently show support for a combination of policies, in effect, a grand bargain. The May 2007 CBS–New York Times survey found that 62 percent of Americans favored a legalization program that would allow illegal immigrants living in the country

for two years to keep their jobs and apply for legal status, while 33 percent said such people should be deported. Opinion split by a similar measure in favor of a temporary worker program. At the same time, three-quarters (75 percent) of the respondents favored increasing enforcement on employers and raising fines against those who hire unauthorized migrants. Given a choice, two-thirds (68 percent) said that increasing the Border Patrol would be the most effective means to control illegal crossings, while 15 percent favored more fences instead. (The only immigration control legislation actually enacted during the debates of 2006 and 2007 called for building more fences and little else.)

Dionne's analysis shows that talk radio may have been a potent influence in strengthening resistance to legalization measures among conservative Republicans. This apparent influence from the new media landscape extended beyond simply underscoring the importance of immigration controls; it also encompassed the framing of the issue and the terms with which it was discussed. Moreover, the radio and cable TV hosts and the bloggers on the right helped boost organizations that promoted an agenda of more enforcement and less immigration by giving frequent favorable exposure to the leaders of such groups as Numbers USA, the Minuteman Project, the Federation for American Immigration Reform and the Center for Immigration Studies. These organizations, particularly Numbers USA, then mobilized their members to bombard Congress with faxes, e-mails and letters. Thus the conservative commentators and the pro-restriction groups created a highly effective echo chamber that reverberated on Capitol Hill.

The use of the term "amnesty" to describe a proposal that would grant any kind of legal status under any conditions to any individual who had entered the country illegally is perhaps the single most obvious

and successful tactic of pro-restriction advocates and their allies in the media in defining the terms of the debate. As noted above, the term was invoked as soon as Bush proposed his temporary worker program in 2004, even though the plan would have allowed only a limited number of unauthorized migrants to remain for a limited period of years and only so long as they were employed in jobs left unfilled by native workers. "Amnesty" was also wielded to brand the far different proposal in the final Senate debate of 2007 that would have provided a path to citizenship for unauthorized migrants of long tenure in the United States who met a number of conditions including payment of a fine for having violated the law on entering the country. For example, during the months of May and June 2007, at the height of the Senate debate on immigration, "Lou Dobbs Tonight" on CNN featured 42 lengthy stories on immigration, hammering the subject every day the show was broadcast. The term "amnesty" was used in every story. Over at "The O'Reilly Factor" on the Fox News Network, "amnesty" was applied to the Senate legislation on 18 of 34 stories about immigration broadcast during those critical months.

*... radio and cable TV hosts and the bloggers on the right helped boost organizations that promoted an agenda of more enforcement and less immigration.*

Bush and other proponents of a comprehensive bill were left to plead that their proposals did not amount to amnesty. In his Oval Office address to the nation, Bush said, "Some in this country argue that the solution is to deport every illegal immigrant, and that any proposal short of this amounts to amnesty. I disagree." He tried to convince the public that the Senate bill had struck "a rational

middle ground” between mass deportation and blanket amnesty. But for those Americans, primarily conservatives, whose opinions had been formed by the pro-restriction voices of the new media, Bush was posing a false distinction. It was also a losing proposition.

A UPI-Zogby Poll taken during the 2007 Senate debate found that 65 percent of respondents agreed that the legislation under discussion—a version of Bush’s middle ground—“represents amnesty for illegal immigrants.”<sup>4</sup> Mississippi Republican Sen. Trent Lott said of the 2007 bill as it was headed for defeat: “Talk radio defined it without us explaining that there were reasons for it, and the good things that were in it.” Another Republican who supported the 2007 legislation, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina was even more pointed in describing how harsh voices in the media and elsewhere set the terms for the policy discussion, “there’s racism in this debate,” he said. “Nobody likes to talk about it, but a very small percentage of people involved in this debate really have racial and bigoted remarks. The tone that we create around these debates, whether it be rhetoric in a union hall or rhetoric on talk radio, it can take people who are on the fence and push them over emotionally.”

The power of defining the legislation in these terms was evident in a Pew Research Center survey taken about the same time.<sup>5</sup> Among Republicans, a solid majority of 62 percent said they would favor dealing with illegal immigrants already in the country by “providing a way to gain legal citizenship” if they met certain conditions such as passing a background check, paying a fine and having a job—essentially what the Senate legislation proposed. When the policy was described under the same conditions but using the term “amnesty,” only 47 percent of Republicans

said they favored it. Nonetheless, it is important to underscore that even with the amnesty language, Republicans were split evenly with 48 percent saying they opposed the idea. Moreover, among the public as a whole, clear majorities favored legalization regardless of how it was described, with 63 percent supporting a path to citizenship and 54 percent supporting the amnesty formulation. Allowing conservative commentators to define the issue was a significant tactical setback for proponents of comprehensive immigration reform, though the reasons for their ultimate failure were more complex.

## STALEMATE, ACT II

After the Democratic victories in the November 2006 elections, quiet work got under way in Washington to revive comprehensive immigration reform by forging yet another grand bargain. By early spring 2007, intensive talks were taking place on detailed provisions. Kennedy and Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) led a bipartisan group of legislators who often met on a daily basis with Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. The political strategy, conceived largely by Kennedy, was to negotiate behind closed doors, free from the influence of the media. Then, once a deal had been reached by senators representing a broad spectrum of opinion, the bill would be taken directly to the Senate floor without hearings or a campaign of public persuasion. Kennedy hoped to minimize debate and amendments so as to produce a quick vote for enactment before outside forces could interfere.

On May 17, a Thursday, Kennedy, Kyl and their allies unveiled what would have been the most massive reform of immigration policy in more than two decades. It not only addressed all the pending

issues involved with unauthorized migration—guest workers, legalization and increased enforcement—but also proposed a profound change in the legal immigration system, introducing a “merit-based” system that would weigh potential residents according to their economic utility. The plan was to begin debate the following Monday and have a vote on passage before the Memorial Day recess at the end of the week.

The bill’s authors confessed its limitations as they presented it at a news conference. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, the California Democrat, pleaded with her colleagues, “Please, please, please don’t let ... the perfect be the enemy of the good.” And, Kennedy, still confident that he could harness the Senate to compromise as in years past, said, “politics is the art of the possible and the agreement we just reached is the best possible chance we will have in years to secure our borders [and] bring millions of people out of the shadows and into the sunshine of America.” But, Kennedy also knew that the politics of immigration as they had evolved in a new media environment required him to move quickly.

Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.), an opponent of the legislation, said Kennedy and his allies wanted to get the legislation passed, “before Rush Limbaugh could tell the American people what was in it.” As noted above, Limbaugh and others in the conservative talk media launched an unprecedented campaign to tell their audiences what they thought was in the bill and to rally opposition to it. Some of the figures from the Project for Excellence in Journalism report bear repeating: while the Senate debate was under way, Dobbs devoted 43.1 percent of his broadcasts to immigration, O’Reilly gave the topic 19.4 percent, and for conservative talk radio hosts it was 31 percent of their airtime in a relentlessly negative portrayal of the bill as a

reward to lawbreakers, and the corporate interests that thrive on cheap imported labor and elites bent on changing the nation’s identity.

Just ten days into the debate, Bush tried to respond to the media voices that had once been among his most loyal supporters. “If you want to scare the American people, what you say is the bill’s an amnesty bill,” he said May 29 during a speech in Glynco, GA. “That’s empty political rhetoric trying to frighten our citizens.” But it was already too late.

The quick-vote strategy fell apart almost immediately as it became apparent that the doubters in the Senate were as numerous as the bill’s provisions. The major attacks came from pro-labor Democrats who opposed the temporary worker program and from pro-restriction Republicans who immediately raised the specter of “amnesty.” Amendments proliferated, and advocates from every sector entered the fray. Restaurant owners, agricultural producers, high-tech businesses, unions, churches and ethnic advocates all pounded the Senate with pleas for their particular interests. Comprehensive reform failed on one vote June 7, and then staggered back to life a week later. In between, some provisions were altered in an effort to make the package palatable to conservatives, but the changes failed in that regard and caused further unease among some Democrats and immigrant rights advocates. On June 28 a motion to end debate was 14 votes short of the 60 necessary to move toward final passage, and the bill was dead. In the end, 15 Democrats joined 37 Republicans and one independent in killing it.

The grand bargain of 2007—so carefully crafted in private—died a death of a thousand cuts when it was debated in public. In trying to address virtually all aspects of immigration policy, it

became not a single defining compromise but a stack of compromises that had too many cross-cutting dynamics. Individual legislators and advocates found themselves trying to fix one or two provisions even as they tried to defend one or two others from alteration. Preventing the debate from devolving into running skirmishes over details would have required strong leadership in Washington. But Kennedy failed to hold key unions, especially the AFL-CIO, which opposed the temporary worker provisions, and Bush failed to hold key Republican moderates.

*While the conservative talkers and bloggers roared, liberal commentators showed little appetite for the subject.*

The battle for public opinion, however, was entirely one-sided. While the conservative talkers and bloggers roared, liberal commentators showed little appetite for the subject. Moreover, powerful interest groups that supported comprehensive reform, such as the major business associations and the Catholic bishops, largely confined themselves to Washington lobbying rather than aggressively promoting their own messages to counter Limbaugh, Dobbs and the others. The media blitz by the anti-amnesty, pro-restriction voices did not succeed in persuading a majority of Americans to embrace their views. As Dionne's analysis demonstrates, most Americans have consistently favored both tougher enforcement and some kind of legalization program for unauthorized migrants already in the country. In addition, most Americans express generally favorable views toward immigrants and reject the xenophobia that sometimes surfaced among opponents of comprehensive reform. But in 2007, the strident voices of opposition were not trying

to enact legislation; they were trying to block it, and in that they succeeded.

With the passage of the House bill in December 2005, the forces of restriction took the initiative and then they were stopped in the spring of 2006. A year later, proponents of generous immigration policies took the initiative, and then they were stymied. Both cases represented a triumph of "no" that resulted in stalemate. Although the circumstances differed significantly, common themes could be traced back to the way the media have covered immigration. One of those themes was articulated, albeit somewhat histrionically, by Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), a diehard opponent of comprehensive reform, in the closing hours of the 2007 debate: "This immigration bill has become a war between the American people and their government. The issue now transcends anything related to immigration. It's a crisis of confidence."

Over the course of three decades, successive administrations and successive Congresses have failed to deliver on promises to control the border and to maintain a fair and orderly immigration system. So a certain lack of confidence on the part of the American people is justified. But getting past that skepticism to enact new policies that can remedy the situation has been made more difficult by a media narrative that episodically creates a sense of crisis that emphasizes illegality as the dominant characteristic of the migration story and that casts the public as hapless victims of immigrant newcomers, policy-makers and advocates. Add to that narrative the new forms of media that have the capacity to mobilize niche audiences in opposition to policy proposals that are characterized in the direct terms. Stalemate would seem to be the inevitable outcome unless political leaders are first able to

regain credibility on immigration and to restore, or at least to begin to restore, that lost confidence. This is the dilemma that will confront the new

administration and the new Congress when they tackle immigration. They should not expect any help from the media in any of its forms.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See interview with Rep. Tom Tancredo, "The Charlie Rose Show," May 8, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *Invisible No More: Mexican Migrant Civic Participation in the United States*, Bada, Xochitl, et al, editors, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington DC, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> CBS–New York Times Poll, May 25, 2007, findings accessed from CBSNews.Com, "CBSPoll: Most Support Immigration Reform."

<sup>4</sup> UPI–Zogby Poll, June 25, 2007, findings accessed from UPI, "Analysis: Poll data back talk-radio claim." United Press International, Washington, DC.

<sup>5</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Democratic Leaders Face Growing Disapproval, Criticism on Iraq, Mixed Views on Immigration." Washington, DC, June 7, 2007.



## NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

### USC-ANNENBERG CONTENT ANALYSIS— TRADITIONAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

This study employed content analysis to identify how immigration and immigration policy were framed in the U.S. news media between 1980 and 2007, and if the framing of these subjects changed over time. News media considered in the analysis included newspapers, news agencies, National Public Radio and the three national broadcast networks. A full listing of the news organizations and the periods for which they were studied is below.

The LexisNexis Academic Universe database served as the source for all of the analyses. The full body of coverage by individual news organizations over specific periods was searched using different combinations of search terms to generate the fullest possible sample of stories that primarily dealt with the subject of immigration. For example, the sample of coverage by The New York Times was selected based on a search specifying that the term “immigration” appeared at least five times in a search of the headline, the text of the article and the indexing of the subject matter by LexisNexis. Further filters were applied to limit the kind of publication. For example, coverage by the Associated Press was limited to stories published in the AM cycle only.

Stories from all news organizations were examined in the analysis of the volume of immigration coverage. All stories from The New York Times, the Associated Press, USA Today, the CBS Evening News and the three television broadcast networks’ evening news shows in 2006 and 2007 were further analyzed in

detail to determine whether illegality was the frame of the story. Each story was filtered to determine whether the dateline was from the U.S. and if not whether it related directly to immigration to the U.S. Stories were individually examined and coded to determine whether the primary focus fell into the category of illegality according to the following criteria: The major topic of the story related to unauthorized entry into the United States by persons from abroad, government efforts to control unauthorized entries, crimes alleged to have been committed by foreign-born persons or by immigration officials, or the activities of illegal migrants in the United States. In the case of large samples drawn from regional newspapers and news services automated searches utilizing keywords and NexisLexis indexing terms were used to determine whether stories were coded as having a framework of illegality.

Subsamples drawn over limited time periods were further coded to determine whether a specific subject was involved such as the Elián González saga during 1999 and 2000. Articles published by a selection of news organizations in 2006 and 2007 with an illegality frame were further coded for the use of one of the following illegality “sub-frames”: policy development by the executive branch, Congress, or the courts; federal policy implementation; state and local policy development and implementation; pro-, anti-, or mixed public opinion; electoral politics; and migrant experiences. Additional analysis was conducted on coverage by the broadcast networks to categorize the persons quoted.



**TABLE ONE** IMMIGRATION COVERAGE BY TRADITIONAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS EXAMINED IN THE USC-ANNENBERG CONTENT ANALYSIS

NEWS ORGANIZATION	PERIOD EXAMINED	ELIGIBLE SAMPLE SIZE	FILTERS
The New York Times	1980-2007	2,859	National Desk
Associated Press	1980-2007	1,939*	AM Cycle
Regional Papers:	1991-2007	6,370	Atlanta Journal Constitution, Boston Globe, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, San Francisco Chronicle
News Services:	1997-2007	3,760	Copley, Cox, McClatchy
USA Today	1992-2007	715	
CBS News	1990-2007	381	CBS Evening News
National Broadcast Networks: CBS, NBC, ABC	2006-2007	201	Evening news broadcasts
National Public Radio:	1992-2007	1,288	Morning Edition and All Things Considered

\* Because of the large volume of content drawn from the Associated Press, a sample was constructed by randomly selecting 25% of the articles, or 1,939, from the total population of 7,757.

In addition, the coverage of several specific episodes such as the Minuteman Project protests in Arizona in 2005 and policy-making on immigration by local governments in Northern Virginia from 2004 to 2007 were examined by drawing samples from selected news organizations and by searching with terms related to the specific stories in question.

### USC-ANNENBERG CONTENT ANALYSIS— POLITICAL BLOGS

The data for this analysis came from all blog posts made in the six month period between February 1, 2007 to July 31, 2007 on five, well-known political blogs: Daily Kos, Instapundit, Michelle Malkin, Powerline, and Talking Points Memo. The blogs were selected according to three criteria: They are among the most popular political blogs. The primary posts are generated by a single author or a specific group of authors. Together the five represent the spectrum of public opinion. A total of 13,769 posts were

examined and of these 545 were identified as discussing issues relating to immigration.

First, a word search was conducted for each post to determine whether the words “immigration” or “immigrant” appeared in the post. If the words did appear, the number of times they occurred in the post was recorded. Post length (number or words), time, author, and title were also recorded. Once a post had been identified as containing the words “immigration” and/or “immigrant”, it was more closely examined to see whether immigration was a central topic of the post of just a passing reference. If one of the terms appeared in the title or first paragraph of the post it was automatically coded as an “immigration post”. If the terms did not appear in the title or first paragraph, the post was more closely examined to determine whether or not immigration was a key theme. Examples of posts that were not coded as pertaining to immigration are posts where the term immigration

was used as a descriptor with no further elaboration of the term (i.e. John Smith, an immigration lawyer....) or references to immigration policy in countries other than the United States. However, the majority of posts containing the words

“immigration” or “immigrant” were coded as “immigration posts.” A total of 571 posts contained the terms “immigration” or “immigrant” and of these 545 were coded as “immigration posts.”

**TABLE TWO** USC-ANNENBERG CONTENT ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL BLOGS

	DAILY KOS (LIBERAL)	TALKING POINTS MEMO (LIBERAL)	INSTAPUNDIT (LIBERTARIAN)	MICHELLE MALKIN (CONSERVATIVE)	POWERLINE (CONSERVATIVE)
Total Sample	2594	2799	5547	1132	1697
Immigration Posts	109	55	101	176	104