

THESIS

BRAKING FOR IMMIGRANTS? ANALYZING THE EFFECTS OF NEWS COVERAGE ON
IMMIGRATION POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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What role does the media play in the policy process, and is there a meaningful relationship between bill passage and the media? Building on previous work investigating the relationship between media attention and bill passage time, this paper uses an issue-specific lens on one of the US's most polarized issues, immigration, to examine media attention as a contributor to friction and policy stasis. Results indicate that high media attention on illegal immigration slows passed bills and can kill bills in the introductory and committee stages. Contributions to media attention, framing, and punctuated equilibrium theory are offered.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Lu, the most wonderful three-legged cat there ever will be.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The relationship between media attention and the policy process is largely discussed in theories of agenda setting, namely at the systemic and public levels earlier in the policy process (Baumgartner and Jones 1991). However, there is reason to believe that media also plays an important role in the policy process beyond these levels, including on the institutional and decision agendas. Media attention is often understood as an accelerating force in bill passage, and can cause legislation to move through the policy process faster (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The opposite, though, is also true, in that media attention can also attenuate bill passage (Wolfe 2012; D. P. Carpenter 2002). While media attention is often studied in contexts of advocacy coalitions and issue framing (Henry et al. 2022; Gabehart and Weible 2023), a punctuated equilibrium analysis can provide an analysis of friction throughout the policy process when frames and agendas are in contention.

In addition, many previous studies of punctuated equilibrium and media have focused on how media can contribute to punctuations and policy feedback loops rather than friction and stasis (Baumgartner and Jones 2010; Jones and Baumgartner 2012). The purpose of this paper, thus, is to understand media as a method of stasis extension and friction building in the area of immigration policy. How does increased media attention on the issue of immigration affect immigration legislation's likelihood of passage? Is media attention an agent of friction, punctuation, or both? By studying the relationship between TV news coverage and immigration bills' time to passage, I aim to contribute further knowledge to the role of media in a punctuated equilibrium lens and understand if the issue of immigration in the policy process differs across policy issues and public saliency of policy issues.

Punctuated equilibrium theory informs our knowledge of the policy process both with regard to the speed of legislation and the potential effects of media attention. Given that media can be an agent of friction building, we can also infer that this friction can contribute either to punctuations or stasis (Wolfe 2012). In addition, understanding that the public agenda punctuates at faster rates

than the decision agenda (Yildirim 2024), it would be reasonable to expect that a policy issue maintaining salience in the public agenda would eventually coincide with a policy punctuation. This is because policy punctuations are ultimately the result of built-up external pressures, such as public opinion shifts, controlling events or exogenous shocks (Jones and Baumgartner 2004). But for immigration policy, this has not been the case. In spite of public opinion polling demonstrating that most Americans view immigration as one of the most important issues in the United States, immigration policy has seen minimal changes and no structural change that would be defined as a punctuation (Doherty 2018; Gallup 2021).

The importance of this misalignment comes from previous research in both PET and public opinion. In general, policy priorities of the public and of Congress are aligned, and become more aligned over time (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This is also true of public priorities and lawmaking, albeit this relationship is more attenuated (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). As aforementioned, structural changes come when there is rapid change that occurs external to the policymaking space, and policymakers must respond. Immigration as a policy issue has seen both controlling events and continual engagement from the public. This means, theoretically, the built-up pressure of public opinion shifts coupled with an exogenous shock, in this case the discovery of family separation at the Southern border in 2018, should have provided adequate momentum for a policy punctuation. But that punctuation is yet to come.

This paper focuses solely on immigration policy because it is one of the most polarized issues in the United States (Sanderson, Semyonov, and Gorodzeisky 2021), therefore presenting an ideal case for understanding the relationship between media coverage and Congressional behavior. The importance of polarization in this relationship is twofold. First, greater polarization is tied to exaggerated patterns of punctuation and stasis (Brock and Mallinson 2024). Secondly, moral “panic” and similar social outrage contribute to increased polarization (J. Carpenter et al. 2020), which in turn contribute to punctuations (Jennings et al. 2020). It is also true that immigration is considered to be a largely partisan issue, in which increased partisanship and increased polarization among

the public are inextricably linked (Abou-Chadi 2016). Both polarization and media coverage can be catalysts of policy punctuation (Baumgartner 2013).

In addition, the issue of immigration has remained salient among the public, and maintained an average of 500 minutes per year on cable TV news from 2010-2020 (Gallup 2021; Hong et al. 2021). Congress is generally responsive to public opinion, especially if a focusing event has taken place (Ford, Jennings, and Somerville 2015). But Congress has not responded to this building. Because of this contradiction, I expect that increased media attention on immigration is causing further friction, thus slowing or stopping proposed immigration legislation altogether. I believe that a combination of media socialization and a broadly defined public agenda are contributing to friction among policymakers, thus elongating the period of stasis. Lurching policy change comes as an overcorrection in an attempt to respond to a changing agenda, but these lurches come after a period of stasis and non-deviation from the status quo (Fagan 2023). Though this paper does not interrogate how deviant these issues are from the status quo, it does investigate the length of policy passage and its confounding factors.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

2.1 Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

Punctuated equilibrium theory asserts that periods of policy stability create a status quo (stasis) that is interspersed with moments of volatility and policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1991). Because of the status quo's resiliency, policy punctuations are infrequent, and their sizes are often dependent on how long the period of stasis has been. In other words, the longer the time between policy punctuations, the larger the punctuations we might expect (Baumgartner 2013). This means that policies that contradict the status quo are not just more difficult to pass, but also have fewer policy windows than those that align with the status quo (Lang, Weir, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2021; Brock and Mallinson 2024). As a result, issues that are publicly salient but do not align with the status quo may not result in policy punctuations. While salience does not necessarily translate to status quo opposition, it does provide a measure for public awareness and potential engagement. There are numerous factors that can lead to policy punctuations, including shifts in public opinion or issue framing (Baumgartner and Jones 2015). However, these are both variables that can influence and be influenced by media attention. This brings us to the heart of this inquiry: if these pressures are all present, why is punctuation not taking place?

Media attention has the ability to reinforce the status quo, thus prolonging periods of stasis and increasing friction (Jones and Baumgartner 2012). Alternatively, the media can also challenge the status quo, pushing a given policy issue toward punctuated change (Baumgartner 2013). In other words, the media is a framing tool, hence its importance in the agenda-setting process (Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano 2010; Rose and Baumgartner 2013). However, this accelerating power is understood to be most effective at tipping points where there is a clear policy window and changing public opinion (Baumgartner, Boef, and Boydston 2008; Birkland and DeYoung 2012). The question of this paper is not to determine when and how media attention causes these punctuations, but

rather to interrogate if the traditional understanding of media's role in the punctuated equilibrium lens as an accelerating agent still holds true given the increase in political polarization throughout the last decade (Druckman and Levy 2022). Therefore, if a policy is proposed, punctuated equilibrium theory would expect that media attention on that policy would accelerate its passage due to existing friction and pressure on lawmakers resulting from public attention (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; D. P. Carpenter 2002; O'Heffernan 1991). I aim not to contest the theory as a whole, but to add the nuance that this attention can also be a source of friction and contribute to longer periods of stasis.

Some previous research in PET and media attention has found and argued that media attention is an accelerant in the policy process, thus leading to a theoretical assumption that the most salient issues should pass the fastest (Amri and Drummond 2021). For example, when the New York Times published the headline "Hundreds of Immigrant Children Have Been Taken From Parents at the Border" in April of 2018, a punctuated equilibrium lens would expect that sweeping immigration reform would have come quickly through the policy process. This article was regarding family separations taking place at the United States' southern border, where it had been discovered that hundreds of unaccompanied minor children had been taken to detainment centers separate from their parents (Amuedo-Dorantes and Bucheli 2024). The issue of unjust treatment of immigrants by the US government quickly gained salience, and protests erupted throughout the country in the months following, with a peak in protests seen in June (Arango and Cockrel 2018). The issue of family separation was clearly present at the public and institutional levels of the agenda and even saw bipartisan support for the reunification of separated families (Baker 2018). The issue received continuous news coverage from several mainstream TV and traditional news sources, even prompting members of Congress to go to the border detention facilities throughout the next year (Bump 2018; Bernal 2019).

In 2018, there were 5 bills proposed to combat the family separation executive order. None of these bills made it past the introductory stages¹. In fact, there were no immigration bills passed at

¹From the 115th Congress: H.R. 6232, H.R. 6135, H.R. 6195, S. 3091, S. 3263, and S. 3036

all in 2018, and only 2 were passed in the following year (U.S. Congress). There were several injunctions from immigration and civil rights advocacy groups (Southern Poverty Law Center 2024), and a new executive order was signed for the purpose of ending family separation (Parks 2018). As of 2024, family separations at the Southern border were still taking place (Burgess 2024). This was a case in which public backlash was strong enough to warrant an executive order, but not strong enough to warrant legislative change in Congress.

The media environment and public opinion were clear reflections of the issue's salience. The words "family separation" received an average of 16 minutes of coverage in June of 2018, compared to less than 30 seconds in the months previous (Hong et al. 2021). In addition, a 2018 poll found that 73% of Americans supported legal status for children brought to the United States illegally, as well as 61% of Americans in 2019 opposing or strongly opposing the deportation of all individuals in the US illegally (Doherty 2018; Gallup 2021). This example shows two things: first, media attention alone may not be enough to cause a punctuation. Second, the public agenda and the decision agenda are not always aligned. Despite broad support for immigrants and opposition to family separation, and extensive media coverage, the policy process remained in a period of stasis. In spite of the president being motivated enough to reverse the original executive order, the pressure was still not enough to get Congress to act. This shows that media coverage, while not the exclusive factor of policy change in a PET understanding, clearly plays the role of a double-edged sword in the policy process space. While having the power to influence changes in public opinion and prompt a reaction from both the public and policymakers, media still may not be able to cause a policy punctuation on its own. Clearly the revocation of the executive order was a correction, but no legislative overcorrections or structural changes followed.

2.2 Agenda Setting and Policy Beliefs

Agenda setting is the method through which policy problems gain and lose attention from the public and political elites (Birkland 2007). As noted earlier, media attention functions as a key piece in the agenda-setting process (Boynton and Richardson 2016). In earlier media and agenda-

setting studies, media is sometimes seen as a framing and public agenda monopoly (Boynton and Richardson 2016; Fryberg et al. 2012). In essence, this is a monopoly on information sharing and processing in which the scope of policy conflicts can be expanded and engaged at any time (Grossman 2022). However, journalistic news media and TV news have seen structural changes, leading to changes in the agenda-setting dynamics of both the political and media spheres (Langer and Gruber 2021). These changes include 24-hour cyclical coverage, an expansion of partisan news sources like Fox and MSNBC, and the growth of social media and podcasting for official news outlets and individual journalists. This is relevant because this combination of public and media agendas can now reshape narratives and socialize issues. It can also potentially lead to a place on the decision agenda (Boydston 2013; McCombs and Guo 2014; Wlezien and S. Soroka 2024).

The process of setting the media agenda is a cyclical one, in which public opinions on an issue that contest with the status quo will cause a rapid media response, or an “alarm” to gain attention quickly (Boydston 2013). This means that the media agenda is set by and constantly interacting with the public agenda. It is both dependent on and independent of the public agenda, and the two are constantly cycling as issues come and go (Boydston 2013; Boydston and Glazier 2013). Coming back to the PET understanding of the status quo and systemic bias toward maintaining it, it is also true that protection of the status quo can be obtained through conflict expansion (McLaren, Hoorn, and Fein 2023; Olofsson 2022). This leads to an important discussion of how media can socialize and the distinction of targeted audiences in the media agenda. PET also assumes that agenda setting is a non-partisan process at the public level, and public opinion shifts do not always directly translate to policy problems (Jones and Baumgartner 2012).

This tie between public opinion and media attention has been studied in both areas of literature, prompting the study of the opinion-policy link (Wlezien and S. N. Soroka 2012). These studies argue that public opinion functions thermostatically, meaning that policy opinions change when policies change, and institutions react to opinion changes. This highlights an additional cyclical relationship between public opinion and policy change, similar to the relationship between public

opinion and media attention. However, coming back to the example of family separation, policy beliefs changed and policy did not. Thus, there is the possibility that media attention on immigration policy cannot fully be explained by one framework.

2.3 Media Framing and Socialization

Immigration and media coverage of immigration are notable in the sense that increased coverage of immigration correlates with increased polarization toward the issue (Schneider-Strawczynski and Valette 2025). This may be due to how American media specifically visually and linguistically frames immigrants, which is generally negative and often racialized (Farris and Silber Mohamed 2018; Silber Mohamed and Farris 2020). The specific media mechanism of attributing visual and values-based judgments on immigrants themselves and the issue of immigration to the United States poses a question of the media and public opinion relationship, and if and how it translates to policy change.

Policy problems are shaped by preexisting issues (Amri and Drummond 2021). With that said, this does not mean every policy solution has a long problem history. Policy problems and their solutions are often limited in scope (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). As a result, many policy areas remain in periods of stasis rather than significant change, especially those lacking public salience (Baumgartner et al. 2009). However, the growth of accessible media, such as social media and online newspapers, has changed what the relationship between policymaking and media influence looks like.

Media can be a framing tool and a source of new, potentially influential information (Chong and Druckman 2007; Baumgartner, Berry, et al. 2009). In the case of immigration policy, the Stanford TV Cable News Analyzer estimates that just the topic of immigration received an average of 491 minutes, or 8 hours of coverage per year. The maximum amount of coverage was in 2018, when it received 928 minutes, or 15 hours, of coverage (Cook 2010). But there were 0 immigration bills passed by Congress in 2018, and just two passed in 2019. This begs the question: if not a push

for punctuations, what role does the media play in the policy process, and is there a meaningful relationship between policymakers and the media?

An additional aspect of the media's role in punctuated equilibrium, and more generally, is the nature of its function. The core function of the media is to sell, and the way to sell is through simplifying complex issues (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). Boydston defines this functionality as utilizing a lurching system of sounding an alarm and sustaining focus until another issue arises, and the system repeats (Boydston 2013). Major media outlets, especially in the 21st century, must mimic each other's patterns despite limited information to be able to sound that alarm in time to gain the attention of the public (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). This cycle, again, contributes to the growing public salience of problems and can create policy windows (Kingdon 1984). However, these windows are short-lived because of the nature of the media's constantly shifting focus, making it a futile endeavor for policymakers to pursue them before another more pressing issue arises. This means that media attention on bills that are going through the legislative process is not as likely to gain the same traction as a social issue that challenges or contends with the existing status quo. (Baumgartner and Jones 2010; Wolfe 2012). Policy change, as a result, is not necessarily a goal of media attention; rather, it can be a side effect or occasional consequence (Baumgartner and Jones 2002; Boydston and Glazier 2013; Bailey 2022).

This system has a few implications for the question of this paper. First, the media typically do not cover a bill unless they believe it will capture the attention of a specific audience - most often, the general public (Boydston 2013). While media may not have the institutional power to introduce legislation, their coverage can influence public awareness and, in turn, the public and systemic agendas.

Secondly, this relationship between media and public opinion highlights the relevance of Schattschneider's theory of socialization and privatization in the policy process. This theory argues that when a policy issue becomes more salient to the public, more stakeholders become involved, and the scope of the issue expands (Schattschneider 1975; Hacker and Pierson 2014). In especially contentious issues, policy stakeholders will make strategic decisions as to whether it is necessary to expand or

contain a policy conflict (Olofsson 2022). This engagement of non-policymakers is the socialization process in action and takes place most often when one side feels it is “losing” (Schattschneider 1975; Olofsson 2022). In turn, the conflict expansion slows the policy process and can even halt it altogether. In the case of immigration legislation, I am arguing that media is an overt socializing tool by covering a proposed policy.

Finally, the policy process is biased toward the status quo (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Lang, Weir, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2021). In the case of the media’s effect on attenuation in the policy process, greater attention alters the issue’s scope. However, policymakers have a bias toward the status quo and media has a bias toward recency and newness, which means that conflict expansion is an inherent tool for maintaining the status quo (Rasmussen, Binderkrantz, and Klüver 2021). Again, highlighting the fact that attention is a scarce resource among policymakers, an expanding conflict scope forces the consideration of new interests, leading to an issue that is too broad for consideration and slows the process for policymakers to think and act (Baumgartner et al. 2014).

Chapter 3

Empirical Analysis

3.1 Data

For this project, I merged three datasets from two sources to create a master dataset of bill information and media attention. Beginning with the first dataset, I conducted a filtered search of the Congressional archive database with “immigration” as the key term. I set the timeline from 2009-2020 to include all proposed bills throughout the Obama administration and the first Trump administration. I included the introduction date and date of last action with each bill, which allowed me to code both duration variables and staged binary variables for each step of the policy process. This means that each bill received a 1 for the stage of the legislative process to which it was able to go and a 0 for all the others. Each bill was given a 1 for where it stopped in the policy process, which ranged from introduction to being signed into law. There were 7 total staged binaries, which also allowed me to create a distribution of bill passage. The counts are shown in Table 3.1:

	Stage	Count
1	Introduction	40
2	Referred to Committee	1509
3	Floor Vote	5
4	Ordered to be Amended	17
5	Signed into Law	24
6	Total Bills	1595

Table 3.1: Number of Bills by Policy Stage

As shown, the vast majority of bills failed in the committee stage. It is possible that some bills may have been ordered to be amended in committee, but for the purpose of avoiding duplication, I made certain that each bill was only in one category. The dataset also included the partisanship

of the introducing member of each bill, bill title, bill number, and which Congress the bill was introduced in.²

The second and third datasets came from the Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer for the media variables. I am operationalizing media attention as seconds per day on major TV news outlets CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. This allows for an aggregate measure of news attention that can then be filtered by key terms. For the first attention variable, I filtered the term “immigration” and set the measure as seconds per day for the same timeline through which I searched legislation. This gave me a media attention variable with matches for each day of a given bill’s introduction and duration. I repeated this process in a separate search with the term “illegal immigration”, which serves as a more polarized and political frame of the policy issue. This gave me both a generalized and politicized measure for media attention, which I called “Total Media Attention” and “Illegal Immigration Media Attention”, respectively. In order to ensure that any coverage of “Illegal Immigration” was not being counted twice (once in the Total category and once in the Illegal category), I made sure to filter out stories about illegal immigration from the Total category in my data cleaning process. For initial analysis, I aggregated the categories “Total” and “Illegal” into a combined variable called “Joint Attention”, also measured in seconds, and plotted it against bill duration, which is my dependent variable serving as a proxy for friction. Figure 3.1 indicates a positive relationship between these variables.

The cluster of short durations and low attention is largely due to two things: the timeline of the study and the nature of the legislative process. Because the timeline of this project is 11 years, there were many days in which immigration was mentioned for just 60-180 seconds per day. Secondly, the vast majority of bills in this dataset died in the committee stage, and the time between introduction and committee referral is relatively short; bills were referred to committee on the same day as their introductions or within the same week. In addition, there is a clear outlier in both duration and media attention. This particular observation is that of H.R. 887, which was a proposed amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 2017. This bill did not pass,

²Descriptive statistics of these measures are included in Appendix A

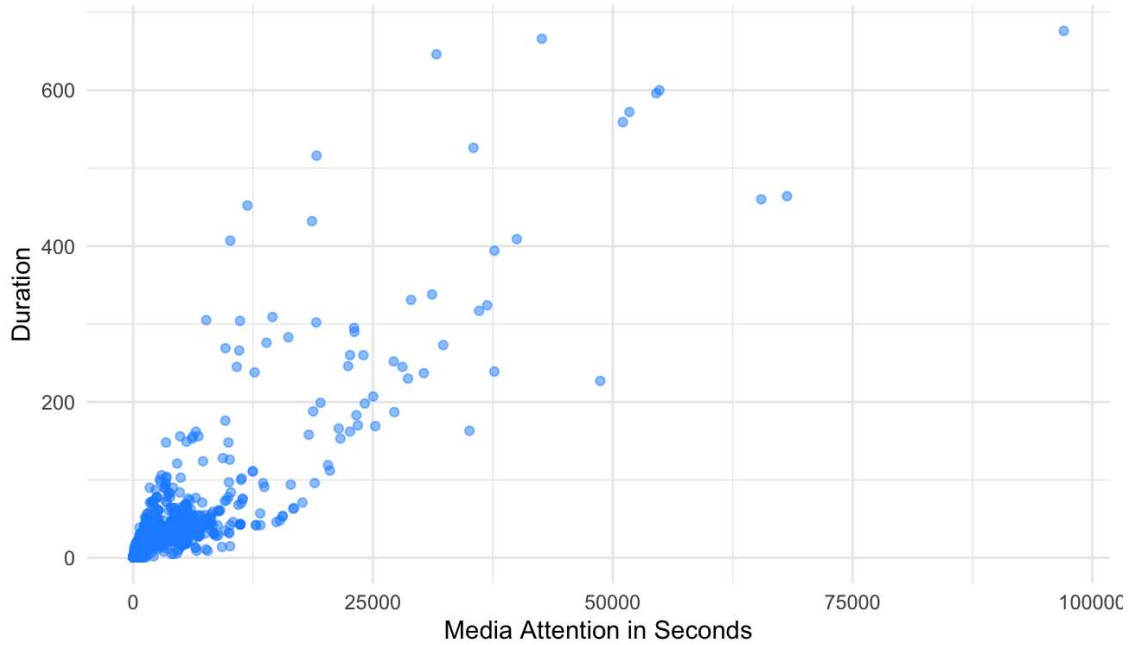


Figure 3.1: Bivariate Analysis

but because it was in the process for 675 days, it has the highest corresponding amount of media attention. I elected to include this outlier in the statistical model, but omitted it from two of the scatter models for the sake of visual clarity.

As an additional measure of media attention, I again called on the “Joint Attention” variable and sorted each bill as having “high” media attention or “low” media attention based on their distance from the mean of Total media coverage (3,223). This means that bills with “low” attention had less than 3,300 seconds in a given month, and bills with “high” attention had more than 3,300 seconds in a given month.

3.2 Empirical Model

For this project I elected to use an event history analysis (EHA). Because I am concerned with bill survival and the amount of time bills spend in the legislative process, an event history analysis allowed me to compare both passed and failed bills with the same confounding variables. This model also provided the best method for measuring the variable of time. Not all bills in this model become law, so I am concerned with investigating the differences between the few that do and

the many that don't. Holding all else constant, I hypothesize that increased media attention in both total media attention and illegal immigration media attention will slow the duration from bill introduction to date of last action.

The key to event history analysis is the separation of observations based on whether a given "event" has happened to them. All observations have a distinct "start" and "end" time; in this case, the start time is introduction and the end time is the date of last action. In this case, a bill being signed into law is the event, and all bills that were not signed into law are thus censored via a dummy variable. This tells us how long it took for passed bills to pass, and how long failed bills were actively in the legislative process before stalling and/or failing. Event history analysis and survival analysis have the distinct advantage of a process called "censoring", which filters cases by whether or not the event happened to them. In this case, bills that pass are the "censored" bills, and bills that stall or fail are analyzed by their time to "death".

In order to estimate the effects of the independent variables, I chose to use a Cox proportional hazards model, also known as a Cox regression. This is because Cox regressions measure duration, instantaneous risk, relative timing, and account for bill censoring, all of which are necessary measurements for this investigation. For coefficients, Cox regressions produce hazard ratios given an observation's survival time. The terminology associated with Cox regression is counterintuitive to this research question, as in this case "survival" actually translates to bill death and the "death" or "event" is bill passage. Regardless, the model allows me to estimate the "risk" of bill passage occurring given varying levels of media attention. Additionally, the Cox regression provides estimates of how long bills go on average before stalling and/or failing, thus ensuring that I can accurately compare the passed and failed bills. I am also able to investigate any potential effects of partisanship or specific congressional configurations, as these could have theoretical and empirical implications.

The Cox regression will give us the hazard ratios as coefficients, which are interpreted based on how close they are to 1. The hazard is also known as an instantaneous risk; in other words, it is the risk that the event occurs in any given instance. For example, if a bill has been in committee for 14

days, the hazard ratio tells us its probability of passing on day 15. Because the “event” in this case is bill passage, a hazard ratio greater than 1 indicates faster passage time and a hazard ratio that is less than 1 indicates slower passage time. The closer the hazard ratios to 1, the weaker the effect on the passage. This means that a hazard ratio of 1.3 would indicate a 30% increase in the speed of passage, while a hazard ratio of 1.03 would indicate a 3% increase in speed of passage. Because I am measuring media attention, this would mean that a hazard ratio of 1.3 for the independent variable of Total Media Attention indicates that a bill receiving high media attention is 30% more likely to pass than a bill receiving low media attention.

3.3 Results

Through the Cox regression, I found that general media attention about immigration did not significantly affect the likelihood of bill passage. The hazard ratios are shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Cox Proportional Hazards Model Predicting Bill Passage

Predictor	Hazard Ratio	95% CI	p-value
Total Media Attention	1.0001	[0.9999, 1.0003]	0.375
Illegal Immigration Media Attention	0.9987	[0.9975, 0.9999]	0.035*

Note:(N = 1459; Events = 20). A hazard ratio below 1 indicates a lower likelihood of bill passage. * $p < .05$.

The first predictor, media attention on immigration as an issue (denoted as “Total Media Attention”), does not indicate a causal link between media attention and immigration bill success. As noted in the empirical model section, hazard ratios indicate the likelihood of the event of bill passage. Hazard ratios closer to 1 indicate weaker effects of the independent variable. Therefore, Total Media Attention has a very weak effect on bill passage. In addition, the confidence intervals of this relationship are an additional indicator of the weak effect of Total Media Attention on bill passage. In this case, the confidence intervals provide a 95% confidence that the hazard ratio falls between the two values listed. For Total Media Attention, the confidence intervals are 0.9999 and 1.0003. This means we are 95% confident that the hazard ratio falls between 0.9999 and 1.0003,

which serves as another indicator that the effect of Total Media Attention on bill passage likelihood is weak, given the proximity of these confidence intervals to 1. Finally, the relationship would be statistically significant if it had a p-value of less than 0.05. Because the p-value of Total Media Attention is 0.375, we can conclude that the relationship between Total Media Attention and bill passage time is both weak in its effect and not statistically significant. In non-statistical terms, this means that total media attention does not affect the likelihood of immigration bill passage.

Moving to Illegal Immigration Media Attention, the results tell a much different story. For this variable, the hazard ratio of 0.9987 is close to 1, meaning that the effect of Illegal Immigration Media Attention is relatively weak. However, it is less than 1, meaning that there is a decreasing effect on the likelihood of bill passage of at least 1%. The confidence intervals are between 0.9975 and 0.9999, which means we are 95% confident that the hazard ratio is not only between these values, but less than 1 altogether, additionally indicating a decreasing effect in bill passage probability. Finally, the p-value of 0.035 falls below the threshold of 0.05, which indicates a statistically significant relationship between illegal immigration media attention and bill passage. These results clearly demonstrate a small but significant effect on the likelihood of immigration bill passage. In non-statistical terms, this means that more illegal immigration media attention slightly decreases the likelihood of immigration bill passage.

In order to gain a clearer and simpler understanding of the effect of media coverage on bill duration, I also conducted a Cox regression with each bill categorized as having “high” media attention (more than 3,300 seconds in a given month) or “low” media attention (less than 3,300 seconds in a given month). To do this, I utilized the “Joint” attention variable that I used for initial bivariate analysis. On average, this shows that bills had the highest probability of failure or stalling when they had “high” media attention. Conversely, the probability of stalling or failing goes down with time, indicating that longer duration does not necessarily correlate with decreased likelihood of passage. In addition, the plot shows that the failure or stalling of these bills takes place within 100 days of introduction. Thus, the probability of a bill remaining unpassed decreases over time for both groups, but high-attention bills consistently show higher probabilities of remaining unpassed.

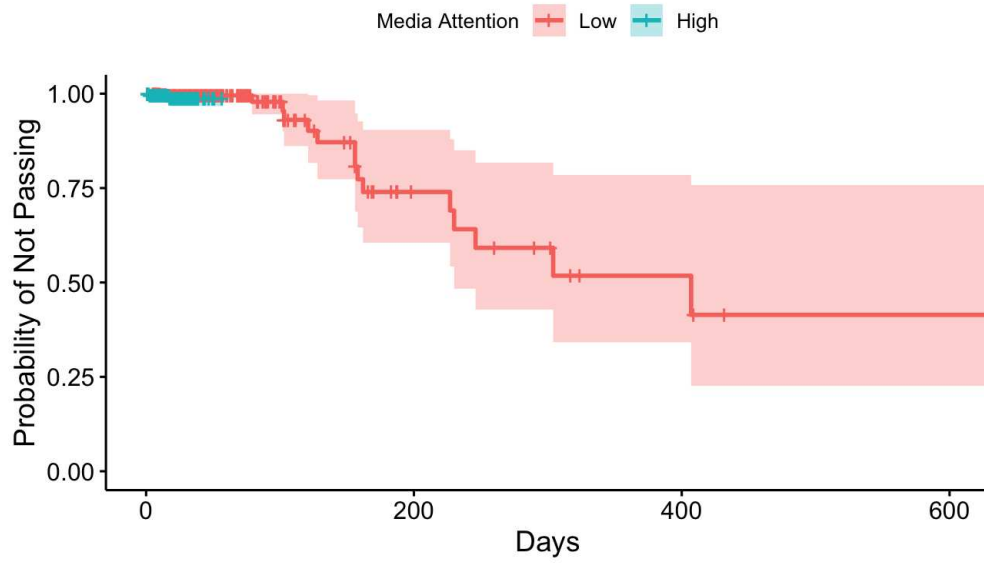


Figure 3.2: Cox Regression filtered by Attention Level

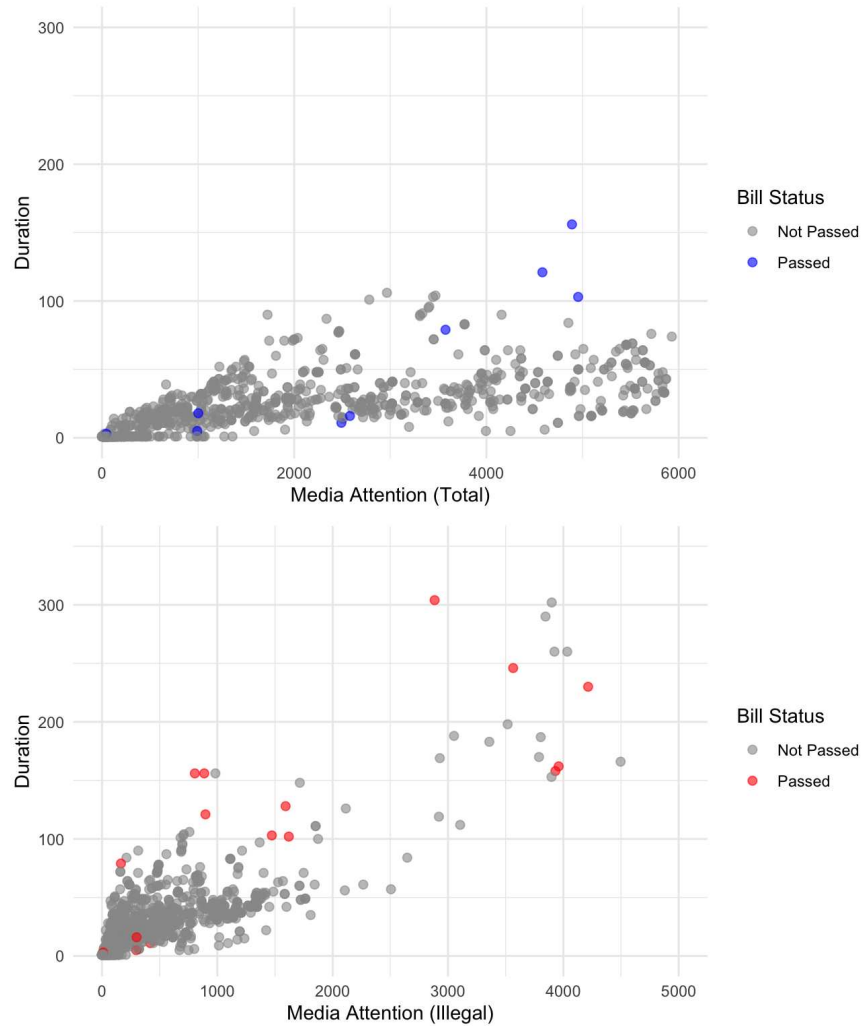


Figure 3.3: Passed and Failed Bill Durations by Media Attention

Note: Top panel uses general media attention; 19 failed bills and 1 passed bill omitted from plot. Bottom panel uses “illegal” media attention; 8 failed bills and 0 passed bills omitted from plot. Missing observations dropped due to lack of matches in one or both media attention variables. Axes rescaled from Figure 1 for visual clarity.

Figure 3.3 visualizes the results of the Cox regression through contrasting bivariate plots. There is a stronger linear relationship between illegal attention and duration than total attention. The plots clearly show that duration of passed bills is longer than those of failed bills (on average), and that there is a clear clustering pattern of low attention and shorter duration. Again, given that duration is the proxy for duration, we can clearly see that illegal immigration attention is correlated with greater friction than general attention.

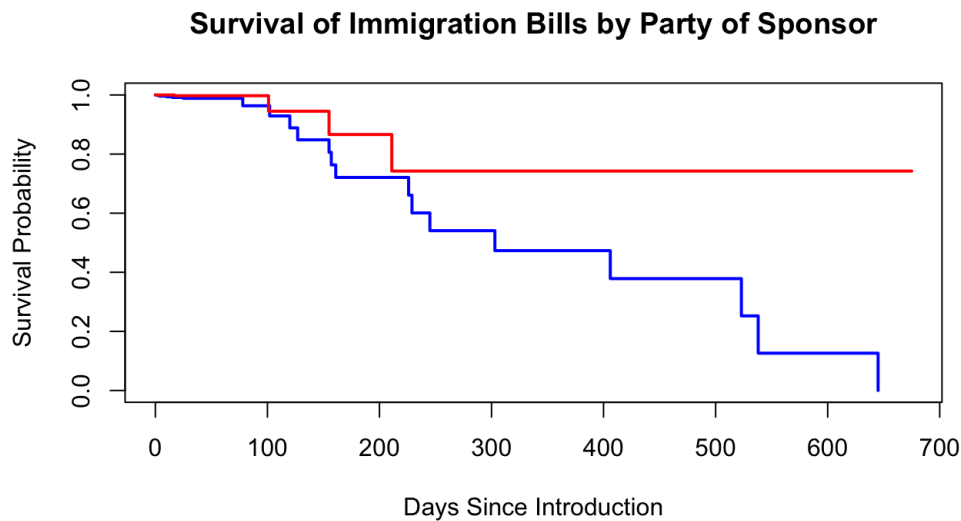


Figure 3.4: Cox Regression: Partisan Filter

Note: Red line indicates Republican, Blue line indicates Democrat.

Finally, partisanship of bill sponsorship was a confounding factor in passage and duration. The partisan split in proposed bills was about equal; 858 bills were proposed by Democrats and 825 were proposed by Republicans. Of the bills that were passed, however, 21 were proposed by Democrats and just 3 were proposed by Republicans. The survival curve in Figure 3.4 shows that Republican bills are much more likely to stall than Democratic bills in the same time frame. The differences here could be explained by further studies of partisanship in the arena of immigration, or a more in-depth textual analysis of the passed bills as opposed to the failed ones. There were two executive orders related to immigration that received large amounts of media attention during

this time: the “Deferred Action for Child Arrivals” (DACA) order that was enacted under the Obama administration, and the “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” act, more widely known as a travel ban that was enacted under the Trump administration. While DACA is still in effect as of 2025, Trump’s executive order was lifted less than two months after it was signed. These orders likely affected how legislators approached writing immigration bills, and may have created stronger partisan polarization which in turn affected voting and bill passage. Nonetheless, this contrast in partisan passage further supports the theory that polarization can exacerbate punctuation and stasis patterns.

Chapter 4

Conclusion and Discussion

The main purpose of this project was to understand media as a method of stasis extension and friction building in the area of immigration policy. The results indicate that while the effect size is small, it was nonetheless consistent throughout the 11-year time frame. Increased media attention on the issue of immigration can and does affect immigration bill passage when the attention focuses specifically on the frame of illegal immigration, therefore indicating that attention on illegal immigration builds friction. This is an especially important result given that the sample size of illegal frame stories was notably smaller than the total immigration stories. In short, substance matters more than quantity. Therefore, my hypothesis that media attention will slow legislation is partially correct, but will require further research to determine any causal effects.

My conclusion and contribution to punctuated equilibrium and media studies can be boiled down to three key findings. First, immigration is a high-friction area of policy. This is abundantly clear given the 99% bill failure rate and stark partisan differences in bill passage. Although time and duration are not the only descriptors of legislative friction, previous work demonstrates that longer periods of stasis cause greater levels of friction. In this case, when duration of bill passage is used as a proxy for stasis, longer bill durations equate to more friction. And, because the results show that more attention on illegal immigration increases bill duration, we can conclude that greater media attention using the frame of illegal immigration is one factor of friction building in immigration legislation.

Secondly, media and policymakers are not and cannot be independent of each other. The fact is, media does not make policy. At the same time, policymakers are unable to create and pass legislation that is free of external influence and issue framing. This study cannot conclude whether or not issue framing is intentional; the term “illegal” is used by policymakers and news anchors regardless of partisanship or ideological persuasion. This means that there can never be frame-free media, and that some frames will have stronger influence than others. The frame of illegal

immigration may have been strengthening partisanship, activating advocacy coalitions, inviting existing social constructions, or mixing all three. Whether or not this is the intention of media can be debated. Regardless, the clear conclusion is that frames matter, and undoubtedly require more study. Furthermore, it is likely that the stories without the illegal frame used alternative frames that were not filtered for or labeled in this study. This provides an additional avenue for framing research in immigration policy.

Finally, media can create both punctuations and stasis. I was expecting to find evidence of at least one policy punctuation in this time frame, but do not feel that any of the passed bills would be considered structural change or contrary to the status quo. Of course this could be argued and would again require further, more substantive analysis of both bill text and status quo. But the results of this project show that high media attention on a framed issue and bill stasis are indeed correlated. This time frame, as noted in the theoretical framework and results, did contain focusing events related to immigration and immigrants as a whole. The evidence, however, does not show a clear policy punctuation in bills passed through the House and Senate. A longitudinal study with a longer time frame could provide insight into any and all punctuations in immigration policy, and compare stasis periods with media attention.

Appendix A

Table A.1: Descriptive Statistics of Bills and Media Attention

Congress	Bills Introduced
111th Congress (2009–2010)	203
112th Congress (2011–2012)	201
113th Congress (2013–2014)	197
114th Congress (2015–2016)	290
115th Congress (2017–2018)	369
116th Congress (2019–2020)	431
Party of Sponsor	Bills Introduced
Democratic	858
Republican	825
Independent	3
Independent Democrat	3
Libertarian	2
Media Attention (Seconds)	
Mean Immigration Coverage	3,223
Mean “Illegal Immigration” Coverage	490

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