Media Analysis:

The State of Media Coverage of Immigration 2012–2013

April 2013

The start of 2013 found a decidedly different and more positive public discourse on immigration policy reform than any time in recent memory. Though far from unified, politicians on both sides of the aisle as well as pundits across the political spectrum had begun calling for commonsense reform, which frequently included a pathway to citizenship. Media coverage also began to change, in ways that could both help and hamper effective policy change. In order to understand the nature and implications of that change, The Opportunity Agenda analyzed mainstream newspaper and TV coverage of immigration policy during a six-month period, from September 2012 through February 2013. Major events during that period included the presidential election, the Republican leadership’s public shift toward support for immigration policy reform, an announcement of a bipartisan U.S. Senate framework for reform, President Obama’s immigration address from Las Vegas, and, lastly, the State of the Union address on February 12, 2013.¹ A detailed description of methodology appears in the appendix.

We analyzed trends in narrative, opinion, spokespeople, and use of terminology related to immigrants and immigration contained in news reporting, opinion articles, and talk shows. Our findings are described in this report, along with recommended strategies for pro-immigrant advocates, policymakers, and other spokespeople, to leverage openings and overcome challenges in coverage in order to influence public discourse toward lasting positive change.

Soon upon the completion of this media audit, two significant developments unfolded. On April 2nd, The Associated Press changed its stylebook to ban the use of the term “illegal immigrant,” and on April 17th a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators introduced a bill to overhaul current immigration laws.

Key findings include:

► A media focus on the politics of immigration and, particularly, Latino voting patterns in the 2012 national election.

► A major shift in sources and quotes, with conservative and Republican voices playing a leading role, largely in support of positive immigration policy reform.

► Virtual unanimity in op-eds and other newspaper commentary in support of immigration policy reform, frequently including the call for an explicit path to citizenship.

¹ On the day of the release of this report, April 17, 2013, a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators introduced a bill to overhaul current immigration laws.
Little in-depth coverage of immigration enforcement issues, or of state anti-immigrant laws.

Largely sympathetic coverage of immigrants, and particularly immigrant young people, but inadequate coverage of the everyday struggles of immigrants.

A slight reduction in the use of the term “illegal” to describe undocumented immigrants, though the term remains ubiquitous in reporting.

**Findings**

**Political Framing**

The main themes and narratives that we identified were:

- Overall, the discourse about immigration focused heavily on the politics of federal policy reform, including the Latino vote in the 2012 presidential election, the Republican leadership’s public shift toward support for immigration policy reform, friction in the Republican Party concerning immigration, speculation about the impending legislative battle, and finally, President Obama’s stake and role in the effort for policy change.

- Broadcast and cable television coverage in particular was focused mostly on the discussion of the politics of reform. Newspapers, however, addressed a greater range of immigration-related issues, including local policy initiatives, enforcement issues, the impact of different policies on the immigrant community, the community’s response, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, and the DREAM Act. The word clouds below illustrate the difference in the range of stories covered by newspapers and television.

**Figures 1 and 2: Words most commonly found in mainstream newspaper coverage (left) and television coverage (right) about immigration policy from September 2012 to February 2013.**

Discussions of politics before the election consisted primarily of speculation about Latino voters’ presidential choices and the Republican Party’s electoral strategy regarding this community. Following the election, these conversations gave way to a discussion about the Republicans’ disconnect with the Latino community—which, according to some, cost them the 2012 election—and the shift of high-profile elected officials and other conservative figures from opposition to advocacy for comprehensive immigration policy reform.

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2 DACA allows certain younger undocumented students or graduates to apply for deferrals on their immigration status, without granting them new status.

3 The DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) was a bipartisan bill that would have allowed young immigrants who arrived in the U.S. before they were sixteen to achieve permanent residency through completion of high school or college entry.
New Voices for Reform

Conservatives were heavily featured in print and TV coverage talking about immigration policy reform primarily as a strategy to regain Latino voters’ trust. Reporters and media pundits largely echoed this narrative, limiting the conversation to election strategy—while neglecting to address the reasons why the Latino community cared about immigration and Republicans’ attitudes toward immigrants. For example:

“Romney’s defeat brought many lessons, none more stark than the problem Republicans face with Hispanics. […] Because Hispanics are the fastest growing group in the country and the white vote is declining, Republicans must perform better or perish. Party leaders have turned to Rubio to address a newfound interest in immigration reform, but Rubio’s own experience tracks the gyrations the GOP has felt on the issue.”

Coverage largely assumed that Congress would not quickly or easily come to agreement on policy reform, pointing to friction within the Republican Party around this issue, as well as certain fundamental differences between Democrats and Republicans regarding citizenship for immigrants currently in the U.S. Media depicted Democrats and Republicans as determined to change immigration policy, but most stories also conveyed uncertainty or even pessimism about the potential of reaching a bipartisan agreement in 2013.

Brianna Keilar: And it really speaks to just how sensitive of a subject this is. Yes, right now there does seem to be some momentum. There does seem to be more agreement than you have seen in some time about the fact that something needs to be done. But make no mistake. This is treacherous political territory.

Ashleigh Banfield: ...Thank you. It is way too soon to know whether this is really the year something gets done on immigration, actually gets done, but it’s definitely got Washington talking.

The presidential election and conservatives’ shift to a pro-reform position on immigration reversed a multiple-year trend of pro-immigrant spokespeople and Democrats outnumbering conservative spokespeople in related news coverage. In pre- and post-election coverage (September 2012 to February 2013), Republican politicians and other conservative voices made up 43 percent of all spokespeople in TV and print news. But for the first time, most of them were advocating for some kind of comprehensive policy reform. By contrast, our 2012 analysis of media coverage of the Supreme Court case Arizona v. United States found 3 percent of quotes were conservative advocates, and those ran overwhelmingly counter to the integration and human rights of immigrants.

Journalists, commentators, and some Republican voices have started more heavily using some of the pro-immigrant movement’s themes, including the need for sensible solutions and policy reform, values shared by newcomers and the native-born such as hard work and family, and even integration of immigrants.

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6 Arizona et al. v. United States was decided on June 25, 2012.
“[Jeb] Bush, considered by many to be a potential GOP presidential candidate in 2016, is among a growing number of influential Republicans who want to see the party drop the harsh rhetoric on illegal immigration and adopt what they consider to be a more practical, market-driven approach that helps businesses and doesn’t break up families.”

“‘America can be a lawful society and a welcoming society at the same time,’” [former President George W.] Bush said Tuesday.

Anti-reform Voices Marginalized

The voices of those opposing immigration policy reform altogether were outnumbered and marginalized. They made up only a third of all conservative sources quoted and a little over a tenth of everyone quoted in our sample. These opinions were often depicted, both by reporters and fellow conservatives, as disconnected from the dominant pro-reform trend within the Republican Party and the electoral reality.

Opponents of immigration policy reform used the narrative of “law and order,” alleged lowered wages and increased costs due to immigrants, or argued that stricter enforcement of current laws, rather than new laws, was the solution.

Kris Kobach, the Kansas secretary of state who authored anti-immigration measures in several states and the Republican Party’s platform position on the issue last summer, charges that taxpayers would be hit with $2.6 trillion in added food stamps, Medicare and Medicaid, which are government health care programs, and in welfare costs. That estimate is refuted by reliable studies; it still cuts.

Supportive Commentary

Democratic elected leaders made up 14 percent of all spokespeople, while executive branch sources accounted for 8 percent. Also represented [12 percent] were civil rights and social justice advocates from outside the immigration context who, nonetheless, largely echoed pro-immigrant themes.

March Morial, President, National Urban League: Well, it’s early cherry blossom season in Washington and it’s good to see a serious start and a serious effort at a bipartisan solution to the problem of immigration in the nation. Fairness, compassion, and common sense, I think, dictate that we address the problem of the 11 million people who are in this country who are undocumented, keeping in mind that while a large portion of them are Latino, there are people from the Caribbean, people from Africa, people from Asia, and people from Europe who are part of those 11 million. So it’s important to recognize that the problem or the situation or the people involved are not simply from one part of the world. They’re from all over the world.

A few faith leaders were also quoted speaking in support of policy reform, on welcoming “newcomers,” and on the human aspect of the immigration debate.

“It [Secure Communities] also runs counter to Americans’ deeply held values that remind us of our own immigrant experiences and call on us to love newcomers. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us, ‘I was a stranger, and you welcomed me in.’ The Trust Act would defend those values while rebuilding trust between immigrants and police and easing the burden on local governments.”

Our random sample of print opinion pieces produced only commentary in support of immigration policy reform. A third of them explicitly called for a “path to citizenship,” a few of them called for the passage of the DREAM Act, and half of them talked generally about providing legal status for immigrants currently in the U.S.

Television commentary trended toward support for an overhaul of federal immigration policy. Most talk show hosts and guests on Fox News, for example, spoke in support of citizenship with prerequisites, including further securing the border, enforcing existing laws, and imposing certain requirements on undocumented immigrants in order to allow them access to citizenship. They also tried to distinguish their approach from the president’s, whose proposals, according to Fox News commentators, would allow for a “faster pathway to citizenship” than their own.

Newspaper coverage featured a greater diversity of spokespeople, such as academics, legal professionals, and immigrant voices, than TV coverage did. Most notably, immigrant voices were frequently featured in print coverage, but were completely absent from the television coverage we analyzed. The majority of immigrants quoted were young people speaking about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the DREAM Act, or state policies regarding in-state tuition rates for immigrants without papers. Only a few immigrants were featured in stories more broadly about immigration policy reform; they spoke about the need for citizenship based on their own personal experience or family history of immigration.

The DREAM Act, both as a public policy proposal and a rallying point, has had a significant effect on the media discourse around immigrants and immigration. Coverage of issues concerning young undocumented immigrants was driven by President Obama’s memorandum on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) in August 2012. Coverage of these issues also shifted the representation of immigrants in the media to a predominantly positive one.

There were also several articles that touched on in-state versus out-of-state college tuition for undocumented students or citizen children of undocumented parents. A few stories discussed the matter in depth, especially with respect to a Florida judicial decision by U.S. District Judge K. Michael Moore against charging higher out-of-state tuition to the children of undocumented immigrants. There were also a few references to Maryland’s version of the Dream Act, and a failed attempt in Indiana to pass a similar policy.

“[Judge] Moore further found the policy ‘does not advance any legitimate state interest, much less the state’s important interest in furthering educational opportunities for its own residents.’”

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Sympathetic Coverage

Depictions of immigrants were overwhelmingly sympathetic during the period that we studied. This is in part explained by increased media focus on younger immigrants. Media have long struck a sympathetic tone when discussing or featuring young people who came to the U.S. as children. As discussed earlier, young immigrants were quoted talking about DACA, the DREAM Act, and in-state college tuition. They were mostly portrayed as eager to complete their educations and officially become part of the system as contributing members of American society, and as not at fault for their immigration status. Last but not least, young immigrants, also known as “Dreamers,” were hardly ever identified by their legal status, in contrast to descriptions of immigrants everywhere else in the coverage (who were usually referred to as “illegal” or “undocumented”).

Finally, these positive portrayals of immigrants coexisted with an abundant volume of policy coverage that largely ignored the human aspect and impact of current immigration laws. Many stories and opinion pieces about immigration policy reform mentioned immigrants in passing and often labeled them “illegal” or “undocumented.” (See analysis of the term “illegal” later in the report.)

A Paucity of Enforcement Stories

Generally, there was little in-depth coverage of immigration law enforcement and recent or ongoing state battles around this issue. The enforcement coverage that did exist was almost exclusively focused on the “Secure Communities” program.¹³

Most mainstream media discussed increased border enforcement as an inevitable part of a larger agenda of immigration policy reform, but not as a solution to immigration-related problems or as a problem in its own right. At large, coverage echoed pro-reform Republicans who declared increased border control an essential part of comprehensive immigration policy reform. These Republicans, but not most newsmakers, also argued that without border enforcement there would be a new influx of undocumented immigrants.

Several Democrats, social justice advocates, and opinion writers were critical of additional investment in border security, and of Republicans for making increased border security a prerequisite for other policy reform. Some among them also pointed out the current administration’s record number of deportations, and the continuation of enforcement policies of the Bush administration.

“Luis Valenzuela, director of the Long Island Immigrant Alliance, was cautious. He said he likes the move toward a citizenship path, but questioned the need for more enforcement at a time of record deportations and security spending.”¹⁴

Political pundits on Fox News reported the need for increased enforcement and painted an extreme view of failures in current enforcement, portraying it as entirely failed and weakened by the reforms that have already been put in place.

¹³ The “Secure Communities” program, which was introduced in March 2008 pursuant to federal law. It’s a federal enforcement program in which the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement uses state and local law enforcement agencies’ resources to enforce federal immigration laws. Under the program, biometric data (e.g., fingerprints) collected from individuals arrested and transmitted by such law enforcement agencies to the FBI are automatically shared with Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and this data is used by ICE to request that local law enforcement detain the individual until ICE comes to take him/her into its custody.

“Greg Fettig, a leader of the tea party movement in Indiana, agreed that politics got the GOP’s attention. He doesn’t agree, however, that this is good public policy. ‘That is sad when we are looking at (politics) instead of enforcing the laws,’ he said. ‘It sounds like it’s going to be just an amnesty for 11 million illegals. . . . They need to return to their country and apply legally.’”

A very few conservative voices, none of whom were elected officials, continued to hold that increased border security would solve the problems of immigration, making appeals based on law and order.

“The issue over which they’ll be fighting of course is enforcement, which basically doesn’t exist now. You saw this week unions representing ICE and border patrol agents, saying we can’t enforce anything. The Dream Act has gotten to the point where if someone is picked up off the street, an illegal alien asked by a border patrol agent, “Are you here illegally,” as long as he claims to have a GED with no documentation, just the claim itself to have an American GED, they are required to let him go.

So the truth is this is a fundamental ideological issue. Does the United States have the right to enforce its own borders or doesn’t it? If the Republicans can keep it to that, I think they have some leverage.”

As mentioned above, there were a few stories about the Secure Communities program and California’s TRUST Act. The main narrative was that Secure Communities had drifted away from its original goal of targeting violent offenders. Concerns about this measure, echoed mostly by advocates and some law enforcement officials, focused on wrongful detention and erosion of relationships between police and immigrants, which were described as essential to public safety.

“[Assemblyman Tom] Ammiano’s [D-San Francisco] office said the program has resulted in the deportation of 72,000 people from California since 2009 and that at least 70 percent of them did not have criminal convictions or minor offenses.”

Modest Decline in Use of “Illegal”

The term “illegal immigrant” continues to be used extensively in news coverage, as compared to the use of other terms such as “undocumented,” “unauthorized,” “without papers,” “new Americans,” or “aspiring citizens.” Within the sample, the term “illegal immigrant” was used about 2.5 times more often than “undocumented.” The ratio of “illegal” to “undocumented” was greatest in print coverage (2.6:1) and less pronounced on television (1.7:1). The alternative terms “unauthorized,” “without papers,” “new Americans,” or “aspiring citizens” did not appear in coverage we analyzed, except for one mention each of “without papers” and “unauthorized.”

We also measured how frequently in TV and print coverage in the last three years different terms were used to describe the legal status of undocumented immigrants. Overall, there is a trend toward a decrease in usage of the terms “illegal immigrant” and “illegal alien.” The use of “undocumented” and similar phrases, such as unauthorized, actually increased between 2010 and February 2013, becoming a stronger competitor to the term “illegal.”

15 Schneider, Mary Beth “Migrants hopeful yet still wary,” The Indianapolis Star, January 30, 2013.
17 The TRUST Act would have restricted California’s cooperation in the Secure Communities program. The bill was passed by California’s legislature but vetoed by Governor Jerry Brown.
19 The Associated Press changed its stylebook entry on the term “illegal immigrant” on April 2, 2013, after this media audit was conducted. The entry now reads “except in direct quotes essential to the story, use illegal only to refer to an action, not a person: illegal immigration, but not illegal immigrant.”
The vast majority of articles we reviewed that used “undocumented” in the main narrative (other than any quoted copy), used the term interchangeably with “illegal” rather than in lieu of it. We did not identify any newspaper that completely refrained from using “illegal,” though some articles did so. In none of the newspapers studies, moreover, did “undocumented” appear more frequently than “illegal.” The table below shows the use of these two terms in a few major newspapers.

<table>
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<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Number of articles in search</th>
<th>Articles using “illegal immigrant”</th>
<th>Articles using “undocumented immigrant” (not exclusively)</th>
<th>Articles using “undocumented immigrant” (exclusively)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>The New York Times</td>
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<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
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<td>San Antonio Express-News</td>
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<td>17</td>
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</table>

The term “illegal alien” appeared only in Fox News transcripts and in one article describing conservative views on immigration. This finding is consistent with trends identified by six years of analysis of immigration media coverage by The Opportunity Agenda, which show that the use of this phrase has almost disappeared from mainstream print and TV discourse—with the exception of Fox News.

**Figure 3. TV Coverage**

- **“illegal immigrants”**
- “undocumented immigrant” or “unauthorized immigrant” (exclusively)
- “undocumented immigrant” or “unauthorized immigrant” (not exclusively)
- **“illegal alien”**
Figure 4. Print Coverage

- "illegal immigrants"
- "undocumented immigrant" or "unauthorized immigrant" (exclusively)
- "undocumented immigrant" or "unauthorized immigrant" (not exclusively)
- "illegal alien"

9/1/2010 - 7/15/2011: 734
11/1/2011 - 7/15/2012: 783
9/1/2012 - 2/15/2013: 603

Legend:
- Blue: "illegal immigrants"
- Green: "undocumented immigrant" or "unauthorized immigrant" (exclusively)
- Orange: "undocumented immigrant" or "unauthorized immigrant" (not exclusively)
- Red: "illegal alien"


Recommendations

1. Because the discourse concerning immigration policy reform lacks details about specific proposals on the table or their expected impact on communities, provide reporters and other audiences with greater detail on the proposed immigration policy changes and the implications.

2. Advocates should seize media’s increased attention to immigration policy reform to become a dominant source of information for reporters. In the pre- and post-election coverage we studied, journalists quoted conservative spokespeople almost twice as often as progressive voices. Naturally, conservatives’ dramatic shift from largely opposing to largely supporting immigration reform captured the media’s attention. However, progressives and other traditionally pro-immigrant advocates must be careful to prevent this trend from continuing throughout the legislative battle for reform.

3. Replace the current notion that there is a “line” immigrants must get into for citizenship with a description of the outdated and problematic processes that exists now.

4. Further highlight the harmful consequences of harsh immigration enforcement in communities around the country by using examples, such as the need for well-trained police departments that keep us all safe and are not distracted with immigration enforcement duties thrust on them.

5. Underscore that a significant majority of Americans support policy reform that includes citizenship.

6. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals has generated increased discourse about the lives of immigrants in the U.S. Leverage this opening to see that more stories of immigrants of all ages are reaching journalists across the full spectrum of immigration issues, e.g., consequences of laws such as Secure Communities, and the positive and diverse contributions of immigrants to American society.

7. Continue to talk about immigrants as contributing members of society and about the values shared by immigrants and native-born Americans, such as hard work and family, themes now echoed not only by pro-immigrant advocates but also by politicians of both major parties.

8. Pitch stories and contribute commentary that move coverage from a largely political frame to a narrative of shared values, positive contributions, and moving forward together.

9. Elevate due process and human rights violations—and particularly instances of racial profiling—which currently receive inadequate coverage. Connect the dots for reporters between human stories, systemic practices, and community impact. Make it clear that these are important concerns for Latino voters, along with many other Americans of all backgrounds.
Appendix

Methodology

The Opportunity Agenda conducted an audit of immigration coverage by 53 major national and regional daily newspapers and eight national broadcast and cable television networks. We reviewed coverage from September 1, 2012 to February 15, 2013 using LexisNexis’ news aggregator service, Nexis. (Full list of outlets follows.) The audit pulled every news story, transcript, editorial, op-ed, and letter to the editor that included the word “immigrant” or “immigration” and the word “policy.” We found over a thousand articles and a thousand transcripts, of which we randomly selected and analyzed 50 articles and 30 transcripts. The analysis of TV coverage was based on transcripts only and therefore did not consider imagery, intonation, or nonverbal cues.

News Outlets Analyzed

Newspapers

Print sources come from the newspapers with the top 50 circulation according to the Editor & Publisher Yearbook.

The Arizona Republic (Phoenix)
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock)
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
The Baltimore Sun
The Boston Globe
Boston Herald
The Buffalo News
The Charlotte Observer
Chicago Sun-Times
Chicago Tribune
The Christian Science Monitor
The Cincinnati Enquirer
The Columbus Dispatch
The Courier-Journal (Louisville)
Daily News (New York)
The Daily News Journal (Murfreesboro)
The Dallas Morning News
The Denver Post
Detroit Free Press
The Detroit News
Fort Worth Star-Telegram
Hartford Courant
Houston Chronicle
The Indianapolis Star
The Journal of Commerce
The Kansas City Star
Los Angeles Times
The Miami Herald
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
New York Post
The New York Times
Newsday (New York)
The Oklahoman (Oklahoma City)
Orange County Register
The Oregonian (Portland)
Orlando Sentinel
Philadelphia Daily News
The Philadelphia Inquirer
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
The Plain Dealer (Cleveland)
The Sacramento Bee
San Antonio Express-News
San Francisco Chronicle
The Seattle Times
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Star Tribune (Minneapolis)
Sun Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale)
Tampa Bay Times
The Tampa Tribune
Times-Picayune (New Orleans)
USA Today
U-T San Diego (formerly The San Diego Union-Tribune)
The Washington Post

Television

ABC News
Bloomberg
CBS News
The Charlie Rose Show
CNBC News
CNN
Fox News Network
MSNBC
NBC News
PBS NewsHour
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About
The Opportunity Agenda

The Opportunity Agenda was founded in 2004 with the mission of building the national will to expand opportunity in America. Focused on moving hearts, minds, and policy over time, the organization works with social justice groups, leaders, and movements to advance solutions that expand opportunity for everyone. Through active partnerships, The Opportunity Agenda synthesizes and translates research on barriers to opportunity and corresponding solutions; uses communications and media to understand and influence public opinion; and identifies and advocates for policies that improve people’s lives. To learn more about The Opportunity Agenda, go to our website at www.opportunityagenda.org.

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