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Public Opinion, Party Politics, Policy, and Immigration News in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the relationship between public pressures and immigration policy. Using agenda-setting theory as a foundation, it investigates links between news coverage of immigration issues, public opinion, political party positions, and Parliamentary actions on immigration policy in the UK between 1990 and 2010. It finds strong relations among news, opinion, and party attention, but weak relations between those factors and policy enactment. It also shows that no single party or newspapers with particular political leanings can be held responsible for the rising interest in immigration and policy enactment in the past two decades. It concludes that the simple claim that public pressure produces policy (restrictive or otherwise) is not a robust explanation of the policy dynamics and that other factors and dynamics must play significant intervening roles.

Debates about immigration policy often include the argument that restrictive policies are the political outcome of public demands for action on immigration. However, research on public demands and immigration policy, and explorations of the processes that create and link demands and policy, are currently inadequate. This paper seeks to address this deficiency through employing media effects theory to explore the dynamics of immigration policy, the public, political parties and the mass media. Substantiation of the claim that policies reflect public demand needs to consider the ecosystem of immigration policy, how public interest in immigration is formed, how the issue becomes politicised, and whether and how policy responds to public concern. Central to this process are issues of how media, public opinion, and politics interact to create pressures that influence policy.

A number of contradictory explanations of the relationship between the public and immigration policy are evident in the literature. The first asserts that public pressure has pushed policymakers to act. This view is based on arguments that negative public opinion about immigration induces the state to enact restrictive state immigration policies (Hollifield, 2008; Massey et al, 1998; Simon and Sikich, 2007). The second approach, however, asserts that liberal states have ignored public pressure and promulgated or maintained liberal policy. The latter argument arises from observers' perceiving incongruity between restrictionist public opinion and the permissive immigration policies observed in many liberal nations (Cornelius, Martin and Hollifield, 1994; Freeman, 1995 and 1998; Joppke, 1999). This 'control gap', between public preferences and policy outcomes, is often attributed to influences of business interests and desires for domestic economic growth (Cornelius, Martin and Hollifield, 1994; Freeman, 1995; Hollifield, 2004). In this view a hostile public are largely ignored in the policy process, which produces policies which are more liberal than the public appear to want. Another view is that public opinion responds to, rather than shapes, policy on immigration. One study, for example, argues that public opinion in favour of restrictions on immigration to the United Kingdom (UK) in the Noughties was a reaction to British state policies, particularly the decision not to impose restrictions on immigration from the East European countries which acceded to the European Union (EU) in 2004 (Flynn, 2009). Other studies question the widespread assumption that public opinion regarding immigration is polarised and unambiguous. This research shows that public opinion is nuanced and cannot be simply portrayed as a dichotomous negative or positive perception of immigrants and immigration (e.g., Simon and Skitch, 2007; Page, 2009; OECD, 2010; The Migration Observatory, 2011).

The role of media in developing public opinion is commonly recognized in the literature. A common view is that media coverage drives public opinion about immigration, generally in the negative direction. Page, for example, has argued that “the ebb and flow of concern relative to media coverage does suggest, if not prove, a causal link” (2009: 6). A number of studies have applied linguistic and discourse analyses to the language used to report issues of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigration. These types of studies seek to determine how language is used to represent power, ideology, domination, etc. and frame discussions of public issues. In the case of immigration issues, language used in news reports can label those moving across borders with terms such as ‘immigrant’, ‘migrant’, ‘refugee’, or ‘asylum seekers’ – all of which carry different denotations and connotations. Presentational focus also frames issues of immigration on a continuum from negative (focusing on illegality of entry, economic burden to the country, criminality, and challenges of expulsion) to more positive (focusing on immigrants’ plight, their abilities and contributions to the country, and solutions to humanitarian crises) (van Dijk, 2007; Baker *et al.*, 2008). Research has found an overall negative portrayal in the UK press from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008). Research on a sample of UK newspapers during the same period found that coverage tended to revolve around crisis events which precipitate refugee movements and political rivalry over immigration policies. The representation of immigration issues in newspapers emphasized economic burdens and criminality (KhosraviNik, 2008). Other research has shown that media coverage of migrations in Europe tends to lack depth and to lack contact with local immigrant communities (Jacomella, 2010).

Comparison of major papers in the UK found that they tend to relate the same facts and issues in immigration coverage, but differ significantly in focus or interpretation of the facts (Frech, 2008). A study linking readership of specific UK newspapers with public opinion found that papers convey different views on immigration, but that there was an unclear relationship between the papers read and differences in public opinion (Duffy and Rowden, 2005). A study of coverage in Italy, Germany, and the UK shows that negative views of immigration in the UK were not exceptional and that the primary framing of immigration in all three countries was a focus on danger and destabilization (Jacomella, 2010). News about immigration thus tends to frame it generally as a threat to culture, welfare, and security (Squire, 2009).

Studies of media and immigration also suggest a relationship between political parties, media coverage and media discourse. In the UK, for example, parties on the right of the political spectrum – the Conservative Party, British National Party (BNP) and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – are often blamed for fuelling anti-immigrant opinion and policy (Lugo-Ocando, 2007; Dean, 2011). These studies have tended to ignore the significant restrictive policies of Labour, whose governments tightened immigration policy (Flynn, 2003, Spencer, 2007). Van Dijk articulates a widespread view of the relationship between political elites, the mass media and public opinion when he says that research shows that ‘the discourse of politics and the media both express elite attitudes and ideologies on immigration as well as shape those of the public at large – which the elites in turn use as the “democratic” legitimation of their own prejudices and policies’ (2013: xvii-xviii).

The idea that media coverage inflames public opinion regarding immigration is, however, at odds with more than a half century of media effects research, which has shown that media coverage produce rather limited effects and – although media effectively focus public attention on issues – they are not highly influential in determining what opinions to hold about the issues. Media coverage alone is not a necessary and sufficient condition to produce public opinion and policy change, but a contributing factor along with numerous factors including previously held values, beliefs and attitudes and the

influences of family, friends, and opinion leaders (McCombs, 2004; Bryant and Oliver, 2009; Nabi and Oliver, 2009). Media are important as information sources for conveying developments and issues, raising awareness of topics, and revealing their salience to the public, but media effects research finds little evidence that the media significantly influence the direction of opinion, positive or negative. Thus the mere amount of media coverage cannot be used as a proxy for public interest in or opinion about a topic.

Much of the literature assumes and asserts a link between public opinion and policy formation, but lacks well developed empirical evidence of the nature of the relationship, its influence, and the directionality of its impact. The inconsistency of these approaches reveals that fundamental questions about the political dynamics and mechanisms influencing immigration policy remain unanswered, partly because democratic politics involves complex interaction between actors and institutions, and partly because the relationships and influences involved are often not transparent. Many scholars accept that media coverage, public opinion, party politics and policy are inter-related, but as of yet do not provide compelling validation of that belief. Immigration policy is thus believed to emerge from the interactions among these factors, but research has tended to explore them individually rather than as an interrelated system and has yet to effectively establish the relationships and the strengths of relationships among the factors.

This paper endeavours to establish the extent of relationships among the four factors – public opinion, party politics, immigration news and Government policy – using the case of immigration in the UK during the period 1990 to 2010. This longitudinal approach explores developments in and relationships among media coverage, public opinion, party politics and government policy to gain a better understanding of the dynamics involved and to clarify which of these have been driving immigration debate and policy. Use of the longer time frame reduces the effects of short-term reactions to individual developments and facilitates a more precise investigation of relationships among the factors. In non-experimental settings, it is difficult to control for the range of intervening variables involved in public opinion and policy, so this study does not seek to establish causality. However, it will reveal whether the relationships between media, public opinion, and policy posited in literature regarding immigration are evident and whether those relationships need to be reconsidered.

Agenda-setting as an explanatory theory

Throughout both political studies and communication literature it is argued that there is a relationship between public opinion and policy and that news coverage is influential in creating that public opinion. However, limited effort has been made to elucidate and verify those relationships, the strength of the relationships, and the claims of influence.

Exploring the relationships in immigration policy-making requires a theoretical and analytical approach that encompasses the four fundamental factors identified in immigration research; media, public opinion, politics, and policy. The role of media in forming public opinion and the influence of public opinion on the politics and governance of democratic states are captured in agenda-setting theory, which represents the agenda-setting process as one in which three differing agendas are vital; media agenda, public agenda, and policy agenda. The theory has been widely used in studies relating news, public opinion, and policy to social, economic and other issues at local, national, and global levels (McCombs, Shaw and Weaver, 1997; McCombs and Shaw, 1993).

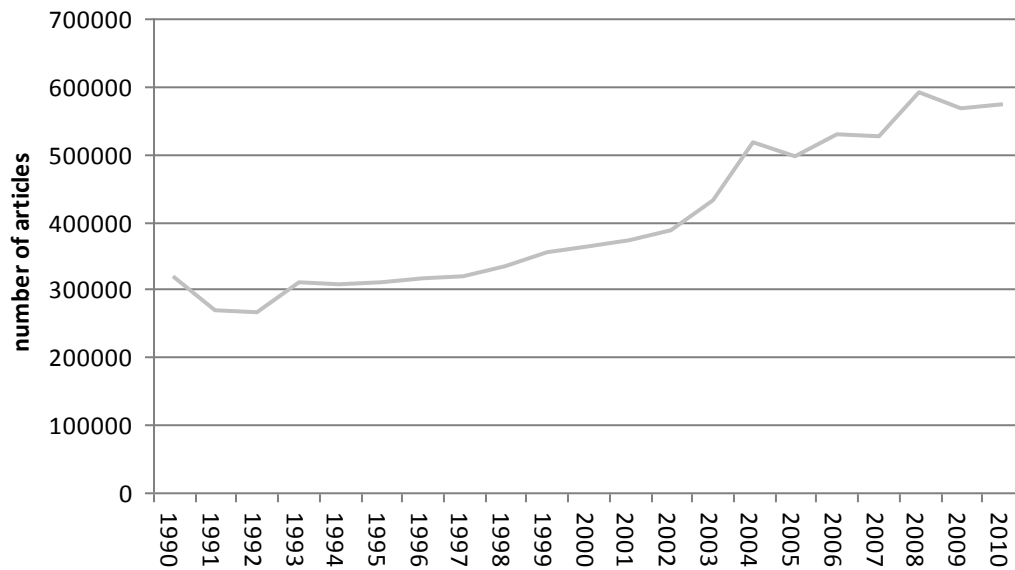
Agenda-setting theory posits that media elevate or relegate topics and information in the 'media agenda' by; coverage of an issue, the amount of attention given, and the importance given relative to other issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Dearing and Rogers, 1996). Media influence studies show that topics given significance and prominence gain salience with the general public. The media agenda is thus transferred to the 'public agenda' as a concern deserving response or action. Conversely, if media omit or downplay certain topics (inadvertently or deliberately), it reduces their importance in the minds of the public and moves them further down the public agenda so they are not perceived as requiring much attention or action. The 'policy agenda' is characterized as the locale to which the public turns for action on issues they perceive to have high significance. When media make an issue salient and the public becomes concerned, those factors induce policymakers to give the issue attention and push the topic higher on the policy agenda for action (McCombs, 2004).

This basic media influence approach, however, does not address the fundamental issue of how the topic initially becomes part of the media agenda. In other words, it does not address the twin challenges of determining whether the media agenda produces the public agenda or the public agenda creates the media agenda; and whether media agenda induces the policy agenda or the policy agenda produces the media agenda. Consequently, understanding influences that underlie news choices and create the media agenda is also important. The fundamental issue in this aspect of agenda-setting is who influences and sets the media agenda. In some cases media personnel may act on their own to place items on the agenda; in some cases, concern amongst the public may be reflected by the media; and in other cases political activists, officials, and policymakers may influence the media or the public to get topics on the media agenda. The importance of the latter in influencing the media agenda is well-recognized (Cox and McCubbins, 2005; Princen, 2009; Le Chiminant and Parrish, 2010; Bennett, 2011). Establishing how a topic became part of the media agenda is traditionally done through case studies on a topic at a particular point of time, which is not appropriate for longitudinal research such as in this case. Consequently, this study will consider how the amount of coverage changed as other measured factors changed. Through an investigation of the relationship between the various factors we can discern whether media coverage led or followed other trends.

Context of the study

Interest in immigration and immigration policy in the United Kingdom did not occur in a vacuum during the period of this study and policy cannot be attributed merely to changing views of immigration *per se*. The assessment and response to immigration took place in an environment in which the number of immigrants grew and immigrants became increasingly visible, raising awareness of immigration at a personal level amongst the UK public. The annual number of immigrants to the UK nearly doubled between 1990 and 2010, reaching nearly 600,000 annually in 2008 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of immigrants, 1990-2010



A variety of factors influenced the increase. During the 1990s, the number of immigrants was pushed upwards by refugees fleeing wars in the former Yugoslavia, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Refugees from war in Iraq, Sudan, Congo and Somalia contributed to further increases in immigration after the turn of the millennium. Immigration to the UK was further boosted by labour migration from the East and Central European countries which acceded to the EU in 2004. Immigration policy in the period was promulgated not only because of domestic UK factors, but because of developments in the European Union and other European institutions that required the UK to align its policies and practices (Geddes, 2008). Issues of immigration increasingly involved both the domestic and European political spheres, so media coverage, public opinion, political interest, and policy responded to both domestic and international developments.

Methods

To carry out this study, data on news coverage, public opinion, party positions, and Parliamentary Acts were gathered for use in trend analyses and comparisons, and a correlation analysis was conducted to identify and explore strengths of relationships between the variables. News coverage was measured through calculation of the volume of media content about immigration in the UK national press, public opinion was assessed using opinion surveys on the importance of immigration as a political issue, party politics were considered by using party positions on immigration policy, and policy action was examined through enactment of immigration Acts.

News coverage

The amount of news coverage was established by using the number of stories in UK national newspapers related to immigration. The data were obtained using the Nexus UK database. The search term “immigration” was employed to capture all stories related to immigration, including stories in

which immigration issues arose in the UK and in other countries. Because of the coding of the database used, this process included stories related to refugees, asylum, immigration policy, immigration and crime, etc.

The search included articles from the UK national newspapers: *The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday, The Express/Sunday Express/Express Newspapers, The Guardian, The Independent and Independent on Sunday, The Mirror and the Sunday Mirror, The Star, The Observer, The Sun, The Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph, and The Times and Sunday Times*.¹

To determine whether political leanings of the papers affected the amount of coverage, the papers were also coded as Left-leaning or Right-leaning. *The Guardian, The Independent, The Mirror, and The Observer* were coded as Left-leaning and *The Express, The Daily Mail, The Star, The Sun, The Telegraph, and The Times* were classified as Right-leaning. Assessing the amount of news coverage is appropriate for this agenda-setting based analysis because that theory is based on the principle that media attention itself drives public and political interest in issues and developments. It could be argued that additional understanding and means of analysis would be gained from assessing the extent to which coverage was positive or negative toward immigration. Such an analysis would be necessary if the study was linking coverage to the presence of negative or positive opinion toward immigration. Undertaking that analysis was unnecessary for this study, however, and would require significant financial and temporal resources unwarranted in this early attempt to establish relationships. Moreover, qualitative studies of immigration coverage cited above reveal that the dominant framing of immigration and immigrants is generally negative and there is no reason to believe findings would differ had they been employed in this research.

Public opinion

Standardized annual public opinion data specifically regarding immigration issues was not available across the twenty-year period because opinion was measured sporadically by polling firms and inconsistent methods and questions were employed. Because it is impossible to retroactively create a better opinion indicator, a reasonable proxy indicator had to be employed.²

This research on the relationships among factors in promoting immigration policy is not directly concerned with directionality of opinion, but the extent to which immigration is seen as an issue deserving political and policy attention. A usable and consistent measure was found in the Ipsos-MORI measurement of most important political issues in the UK (Ipsos-MORI Issues Index). Taken monthly throughout the period, respondents were asked to indicate what they viewed as the three most important political issues. The responses produced four dozen issues, which were reported according to the percentage of people who named them as the three most important. The measure used to gauge public opinion for this study was respondents listing “Race Relations/Immigration/Immigrants” among the three most important issues.

The indicator does not reveal the direction or nuances of immigration opinion, but it is a reasonable assumption that belief that immigration is an important issue has some negative opinion

¹ The *Financial Times* is not included in this analysis because it is not included in the Nexus UK database. If this study were an analysis of how immigration was framed and presented in papers, its inclusion would be requisite; for this indicator concerned with overall trends in number of stories, its exclusion has limited effect.

² Methods exist that can be used to assess the public “mood” retroactively, e.g. Jennings and Green 2009, but those require research and analysis that are not necessary for the purposes of this study.

associated with it. It is also imperfect because race relations and immigration are separate, albeit interconnected, issues. Nevertheless, the indicator is viable for measuring of the extent to which immigration is on the public agenda, i.e., seen as important by the public—the factor that is necessary for the analysis being performed in this study. To make the data comparable with data on annual number of stories related to newspapers, the author selected December data from MORI to represent the opinion for each year in the 20-year period. In five of the years (1991, 2001, 2005, 2009, and 2010) data for December was unavailable so the data report for the latest month in the year was selected.

The consequence of the limitations of this dataset is that public opinion data cannot be seen to represent a particular view of immigration, but rather the extent to which immigration is on the public's agenda as an important issue. The data provide serviceable indicator to test the existence of a relationships between media coverage and public opinion and between public opinion and political interest and policy action—relationships posited in much immigration policy literature and agenda-setting theory. The public opinion data used is thus capable of providing evidence of a “public agenda” that immigration is salient and for determining whether the relationships asserted in immigration literature and agenda theory are faulty—which will be indicated if significant relationships are not established in this analysis.

Party positions

To gain a measure of concern of the leading parties about immigration, the manifestos of the Conservative and Labour parties in the 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, and 2010 general elections were examined. This measurement was selected to indicate the extent to which immigration was a part of their overall political programmes—thus indicating the extent to which it was part of their policy agendas. The number of words related to immigration, asylum, and refugees in each manifesto were counted and the percentage of the words in the manifestos devoted to the topic were calculated.

This process does not address the extent to which the words used by the parties were positive or negative toward immigration because that was not required for this study.³ It does provide a workable measure of party interest in immigration and the extent to which it is raised on their policy agenda. This indicator is thus adequate to measure this research's question of relationships between media coverage, public opinion, and policy. The measurement is not fully consistent in temporal terms with other variables because it is not measured annually. Although imperfect, it introduces a conservative error that should reduce rather than strengthen any relationships established.

Policy action

Parliamentary Acts on immigration issues was used to indicate policy action in this study and was evidenced by immigration Acts enacted during the 20-year period under study. These included:

- 1994 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act
- 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act
- 1997 Special Immigration Commission Appeals Act

³ The manifestos themselves did not directly state level of support for or against immigration, but expressed concerns and balancing factors that would considered in policy.

- 1998 Human Rights Act
- 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act
- 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act
- 2004 Asylum and Immigration Act
- 2006 Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act
- 2007 UK Border Act 2007
- 2008 Criminal Justice and Immigration Act
- 2009 Borders, Citizenship, and Immigration Act

Use of these Acts permits associating them with media, public opinion, and political interest developments during the period. A three-point interval scale was constructed for the analysis: 0 for a year with no Act; 1 for a year in which an Act was put into place that made limited changes to existing legislation; 2 for a year in which an Act that significantly altered existing legislation was put in place. Acts coded as limited changes involved technical, minor procedural, and other provisions not expected to significantly alter the number or types of immigrants. Significant changes included major rewriting of immigration law and provisions that significantly altered processes and would affect the number or types of immigrants permitted. The weighting was applied by the author based on analyses of the Acts by immigration organisations and specialists. This weighting of Acts was undertaken to create ordinal data for use in subsequent quantitative analysis. Although this categorization is not highly probative in itself, it does provide an adequate basis for correlation analysis.

This the author recognizes that Parliamentary action is not the only sphere of policy activity and that administrative regulations and application are often noteworthy because they provide the Government significant scope in interpreting and implementing Acts and non-legislative policies and these can change over time. For the purposes of the encompassing perspective sought in this study, however, Acts provide a readily available and highly visible indicator for establishing policy relationships that will be instructive if relationships between news, opinion, and political interest, and policy specified in immigration literature and agenda-setting theory are found to be absent. Acts are also the kind of policy action most covered by media and most apparent to the public. If Acts should be found to be unrelated to the other variables, it will be appropriate to consider the regulatory measures in future research.

Methodological limitations

In a perfect world for empirical studies, longitudinal datasets providing clear indications of the frames and tones of newspaper articles, direct measurement of public opinion about immigration, and the scope and impact of legislative and regulatory actions regarding immigration would be available for this study or significant research funding available to create data necessary. Absent those factors, this research was conducted using less robust, but workable, data as indicators. The four variables were selected because they provide readily available evidence of the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda and because they encompass media, public opinion, politics, and policy factors. They are imperfect indicators, but can serve the purpose of establishing relationships.

The variables are measured using nominal, interval, and ratio scales and not all data were available at equal intervals. These factors keep the indicators from being fully parallel in measurement

or strength of evidence. Consequently, they limit the types of analysis that can be done with the data, thus reducing ability to make fine distinctions in relationships or to assert causation. Interpretive care is thus appropriate in cases where weaker relationships are identified. Nevertheless, the data are acceptable for establishing relationships among the variables and in answering the larger question of whether the prevailing claims about what drives immigration policy are meritorious. Because of the construction of this study and the character of indicators, it will provide greater elucidatory value where no or weak relations are revealed to support the assertions in immigration literature. For variables in which this is the case, pointed investigation for future research will be indicated.

The correlational analysis used in this study is appropriate for answering the fundamental questions posed in this study. If high correlations—indicating strong bivariate relationships—are established in the study, it will also indicate there is reason for further research using more robust methods and indicators for examining the complexities involved in the interacting relationships. This study thus serves as an effective means of the determining whether the basic relationships asserted in the literature are evident and whether more extensive and expensive research is warranted to parse the underlying complexities.

Results

National newspaper coverage

During the 1990s—with the exception of 1995—the national press' interest in immigration was relatively stable. A rapid and strong increase in the number of articles, however, occurred during the period of 1999-2004 (Figure 2). Immigration was already on the media agenda in 1990 (represented by an average of about 5 articles daily in the national press), but media attention increased over the 2 decades (rising to a height of about 27 articles per day in 2007). Between 2000 and 2007 the number of stories about immigration in UK national newspapers rose 500 per cent, to just more than 10,000 in 2007 (Figure 2).

The increase in media attention followed the rising number of immigrants to the UK, but the rate of increase in the early years of the twenty-first century was much higher than that for immigration itself (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Total number of stories annually regarding immigration

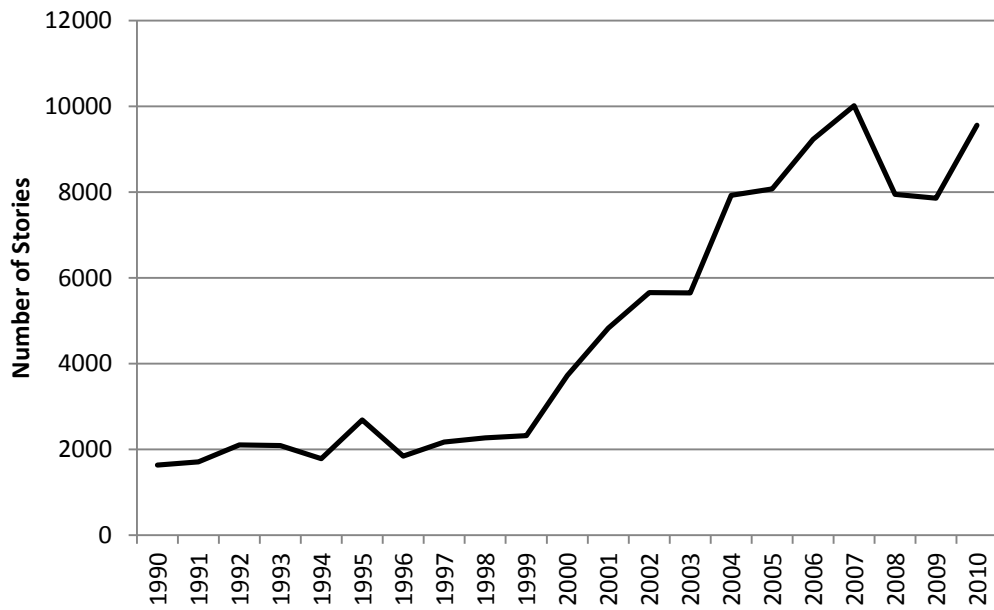
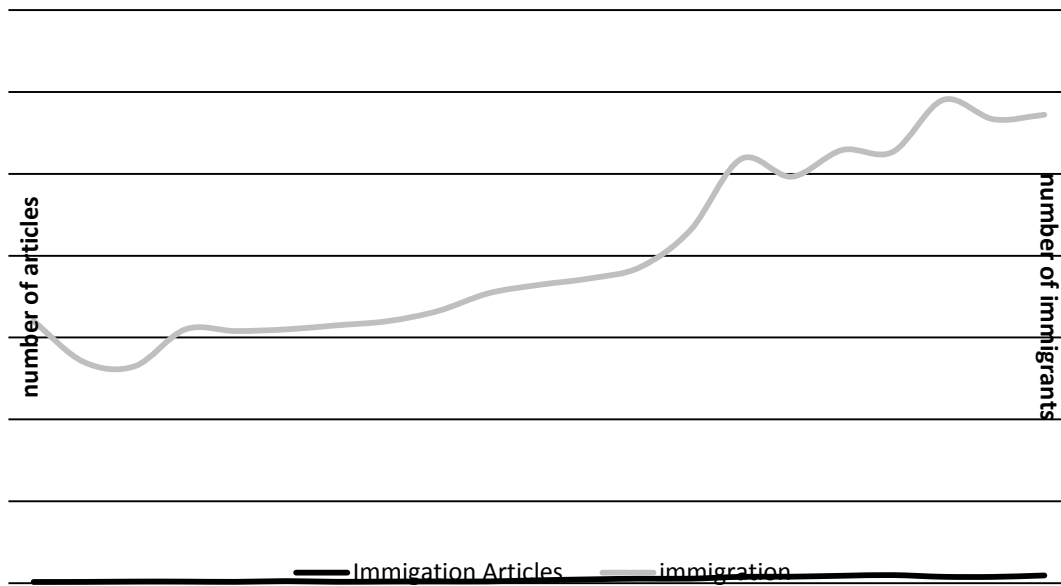
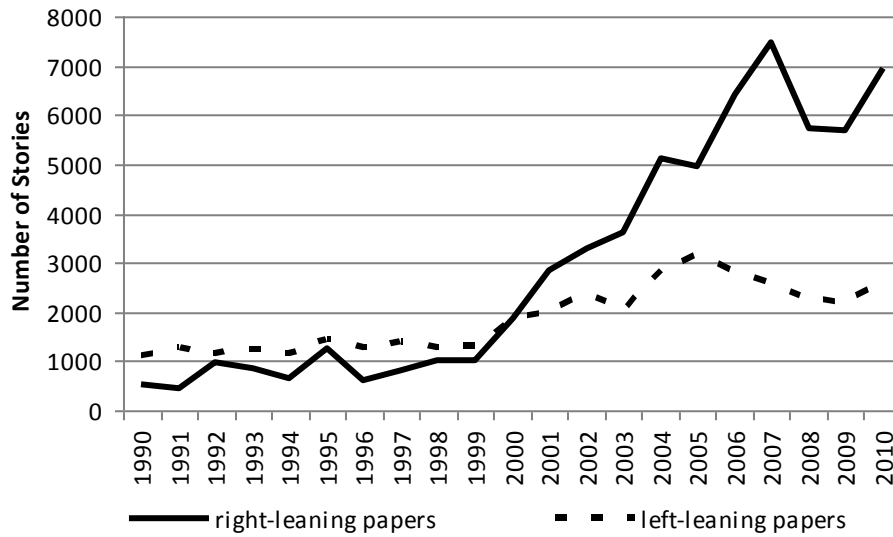


Figure 3: UK national newspaper coverage and number of immigrants, 1990-2010



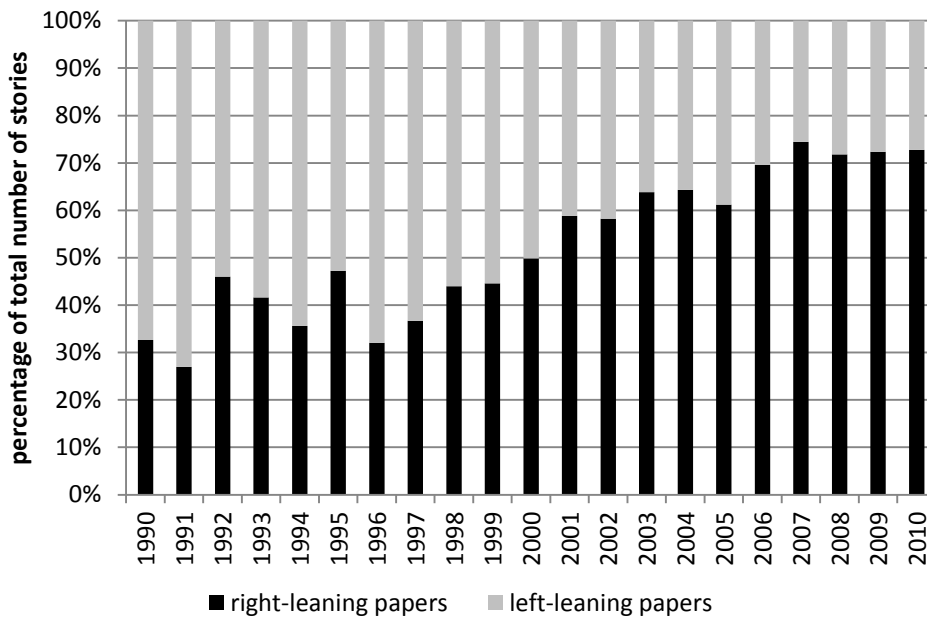
Immigration issues were covered most by Left-leaning papers in the 1990s, but the Right-leaning papers provided the bulk of the coverage after the turn of the millennium (Figure 4). Left-leaning papers, however, published between 1000 and 3000 articles annually during 2000-2010—not an insignificant amount.

Figure 4: Number of stories annually regarding immigration in Left- and Right-leaning papers



During the first half of the 1990s, the majority of immigration coverage was provided by Left-leaning newspapers with spikes in coverage by Right-leaning papers in 1992 and 1995 (Figure 5). The coverage amounts of the two equalized in 2000, but thereafter the majority of immigration stories were published by Right-leaning newspapers.

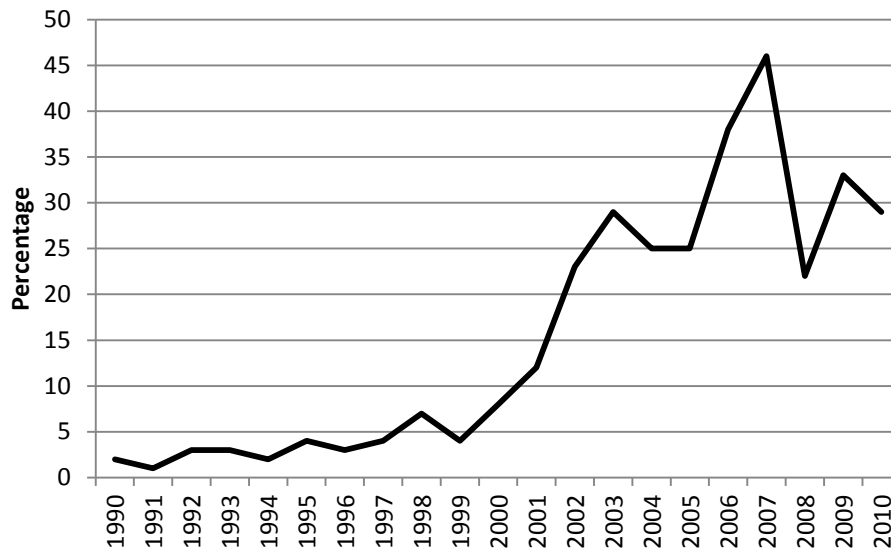
Figure 5: Percentage of immigration stories in Right-leaning and Left-leaning papers



Public opinion

Immigration remained low on the public's list of concerns until the millennium and then began rising rapidly (Figure 6). In 2003 more than 25 per cent of the respondents reported it as one of their top issues for the first time. That figure rose to 46 per cent in 2007. It is notable that concern declined nearly 15 per cent during the 2005 general election year, but then it nearly doubled in the subsequent years before dropping in 2008.

Figure 6: Percentage of respondents reporting "race relations/immigration/immigrants" among the three most important issues



Political party positions

Immigration issues were mentioned in all general election manifestos of the Conservative Party across the 20-year period of study and in the 1997, 2005, and 2010 manifestos of the Labour Party. The number of words devoted to the issue increased for both parties in the 2000s (Figure 7). In the 2005 manifestos, the Labour Party devoted nearly 250 more words to immigration issues than the Conservative Party.

When these words are considered in terms of the import within the entire manifestos, however, Labour gave more emphasis to immigration issues than the Conservatives only in 1997 (Figure 8). In 2005, the Conservative Party gave 127 per cent more emphasis to immigration than the Labour Party.

Figure 7: Number of words devoted to immigration issues in party manifestos

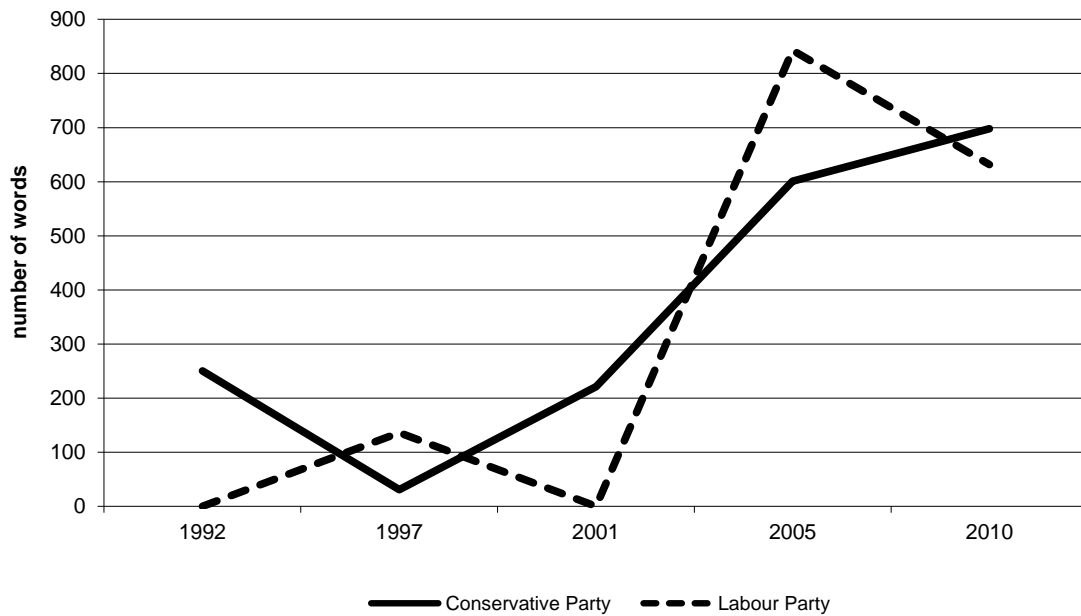
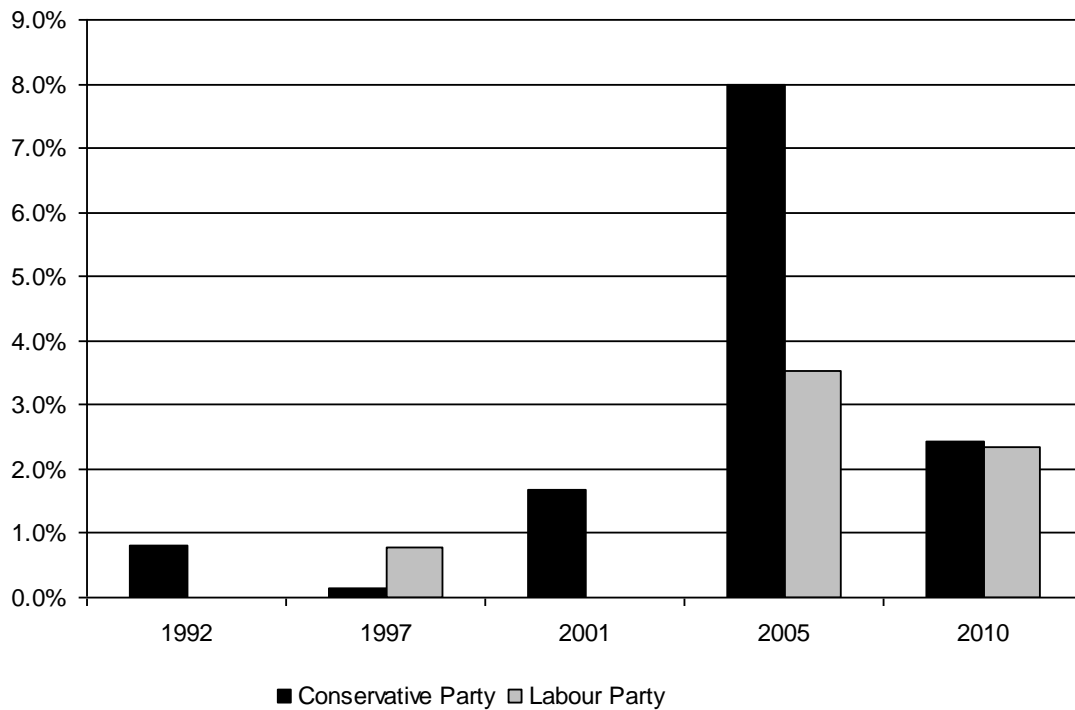


Figure 8: Percentage of words devoted to immigration issues in party manifestos

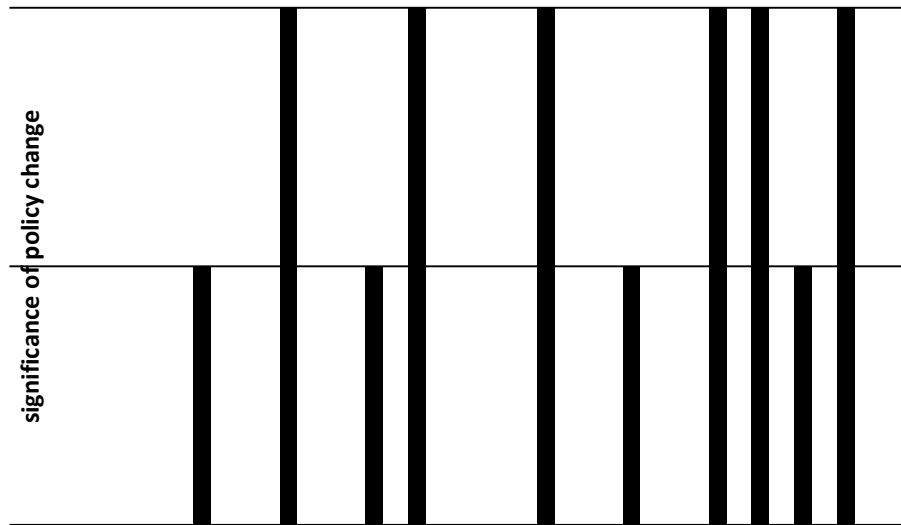


Although this study does not measure the directionality and strength of the party position, many commentators have generally assessed Conservative Party policies as being more restrictive toward immigration (Lugo-Ocando, 2007; Dean, 2011; The Economist, 2012).

Policy action

During the period, ten Acts were enacted, with six including significant changes in policy. The Acts were created in response to migration issues precipitated by international conflicts and increased mobility of European citizens, particularly from member states of the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and 2007. From 1990 to 1997, during the Conservative government under John Major, two immigration Acts were enacted. From 1997 to 2010, during the Labour government under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, eight immigration Acts were enacted. No new Acts were put in place during 2010 under the coalition government headed by Conservative Party leader David Cameron. Major revisions to policy tended to be made every four years (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Acts related to immigration and the significance of the changes⁴



Correlation analysis

The data generated in the basic part of the study were subjected to correlation analysis to determine the existence and strengths of relationships among the variables (Table 1).⁵ To consider a potentially intervening variable to the analysis, the author included the level of immigration, evidenced by number of long-term immigrants entering the UK, into the analysis.

The results indicate moderate to very high correlations among all variables, with the exception of the immigration Acts, for which only low to moderate correlations (both positive and negative) were found, and immigration level and per centage of manifesto devoted to immigration in Conservative Party manifestos, for which a moderate correlation was found.

⁴ 0 represents no Act; 1 represents an Act with limited changes to existing legislation; 2 represents an Act that significantly altered existing legislation.

⁵ These can be interpreted using the 5-level interpretative guide suggested by Guilford (1956: 1451): < .20 = slight correlation, almost negligible relationship; 2) .20 to .39 = low correlation, definite but small relationship; 3) .40 to .69 = moderate correlation, substantial relationship; 4) .70 to .89 = high correlation, marked relationship; 5) > .90 = very high correlation, very dependable relationship.

Table 1: Correlation matrix showing relationships among the variables

	Opinion	IMA	ImA RLP	IMA LLP	CP #	CP%	LP#	LP%	Acts	Immigration
Opinion	1									
Immigration articles	0.95123	1								
Immigration articles RLP	0.95336	0.99551	1							
Immigration Articles LLP	0.86860	0.93781	0.90075	1						
Conservative Party Manifesto #	0.93789	0.93785	0.93942	0.83791	1					
Conservative Party Manifesto %	0.68692	0.65962	0.57167	0.87205	0.67780	1				
Labour Party Manifesto #	0.88190	0.85479	0.81200	0.90408	0.85241	0.83270	1			
Labour Party Manifesto %	0.84207	0.81078	0.76071	0.88764	0.80027	0.84007	0.99562	1		
Acts	0.41490	0.30761	0.32486	0.22015	-0.38434	-0.30838	-0.30793	-0.31594	1	
Immigration	0.88036	0.95117	0.95613	0.85817	0.89352	0.59963	0.86412	0.82774	0.33918	1

Notable in analysis are considerably strong relationships

- between coverage in both Left- and Right-leaning newspapers
- between the number of immigration articles and public opinion (overall and those in Left- and Right-leaning papers)
- between amount of immigration coverage and attention given in party manifestos (overall and in Left- and Right-leaning papers)
- between public opinion and attention given in party manifestos

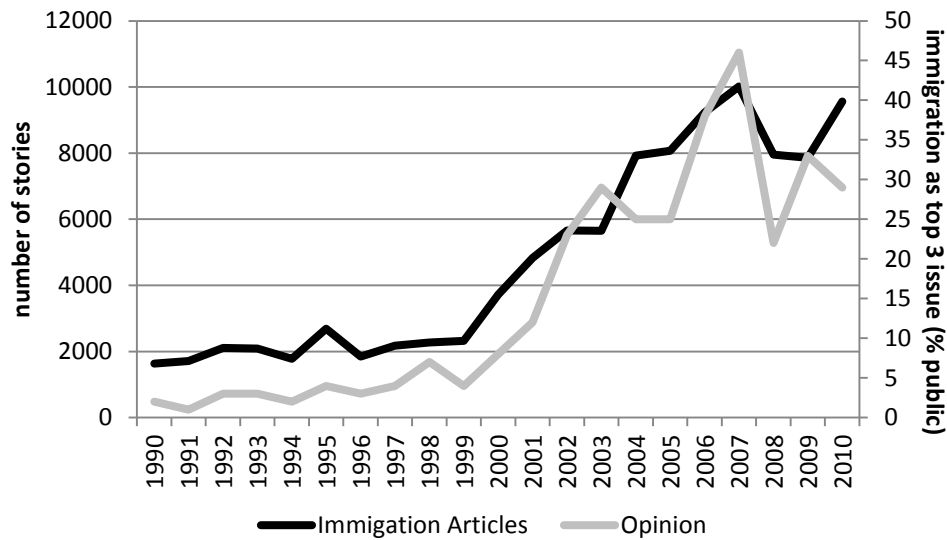
These results indicate that assessing the amount coverage, but not its directionality, is effective in establishing relationships among the variables. Notably, the analysis shows

- only a small relationship between passage of immigration Acts and amount of coverage (overall and in Left- and Right-leaning papers)
- a negative small relationship between attention given immigration in party manifestos and passage of immigration acts

Findings

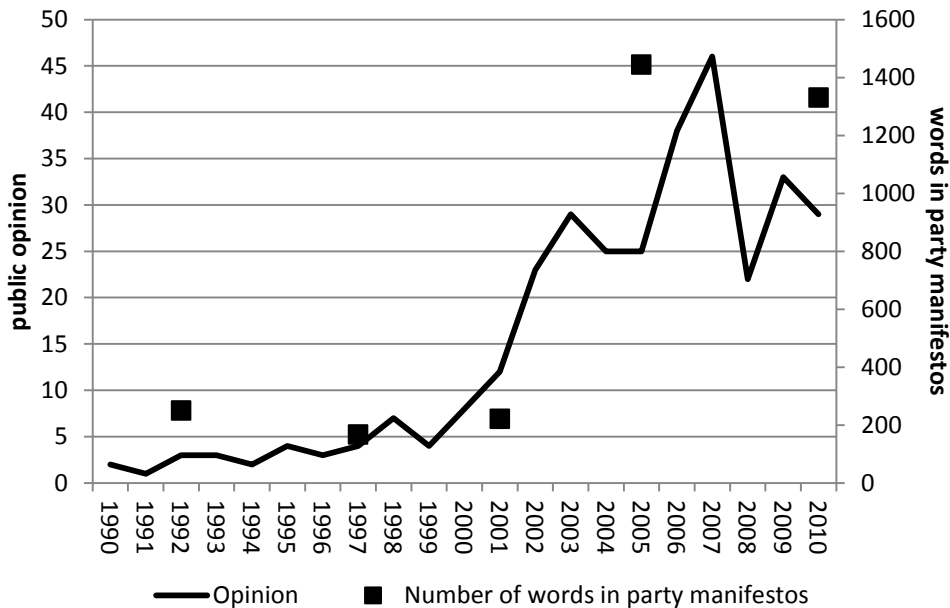
This study considers relationships among factors related to basic agenda-setting theory and influence. Based on that theory and the literature on immigration policy, one would expect media coverage to be linked to public opinion, public opinion to party attention, and party attention to passage of and significance of immigration Acts. On the question of the link between coverage and public opinion, media coverage and public concern about immigration rose across the 20-year period and there was a very high positive correlation between the two. When viewed graphically, it becomes clear that the two variables did not vary proportionally (Figure 10). Although there is a strong overall relationship between the two, declines in public concern in 1999, 2004, and 2010 occurred despite rising press coverage, and in 2008 public opinion declined far more than declining news coverage. Two public opinion spikes that rose above the level of new coverage are also evident in 2003 and 2008. Overall, these results fit expectations based on agenda-setting theory, but one cannot conclude that news coverage was the proximate cause of rising public concern over immigration, especially given the variances between stories and opinion in several years.

Figure 10: Number of stories and public opinion



In terms of public opinion being translated into party attention, these results showed high and very high positive correlations between opinion and attention to immigration in manifestos of both parties.⁶ Because opinion data is continual and party manifestos are only related to general elections, it is not possible to graphically track change in manifestos annually, but the relationship between the two is clearly evident (Figure 11). These results fit with expectations based on agenda-setting theory, but do not provide evidence to conclude that public opinion was the immediate cause of rising party concern over immigration.

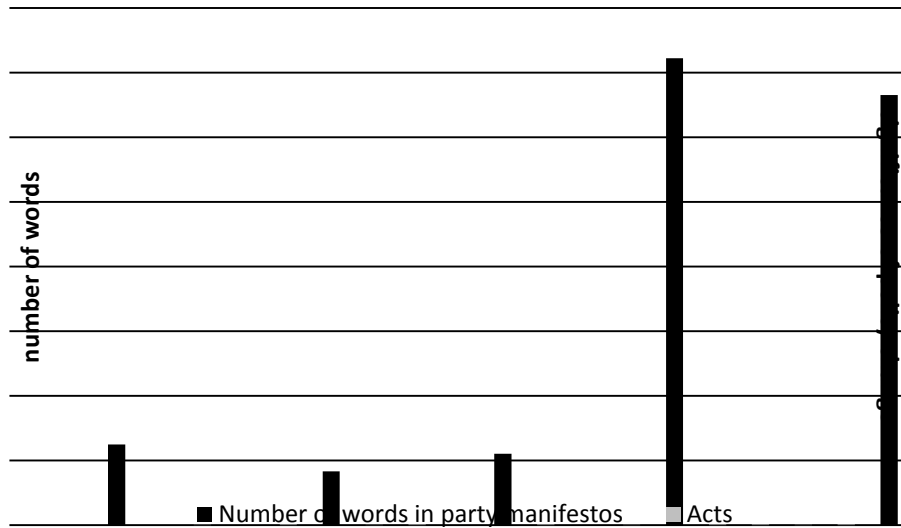
Figure 11: Public opinion and political party interest



⁶ The attention is evident in both words and per centages, with the exception of the per centage of words in Conservative Party manifestos devoted to immigration, which showed only a moderate correlation across the period and a low correlation from 2000 to 2010.

Given theory, one would expect party attention to the issue of immigration to be related to policy outcomes (Acts in this research). However, the data show that party interest and immigration Act enactment have low and even negative correlations. The results show a low negative relationship between words in party manifestos and immigration Acts. When viewed graphically, a visible relationship between the two is not highly evident during the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, although they grew more aligned after 2005 (Figure 12). These results are thus not conclusive, and the link between party interest and policy action cannot be shown.

Figure 12: Political party interest and Acts



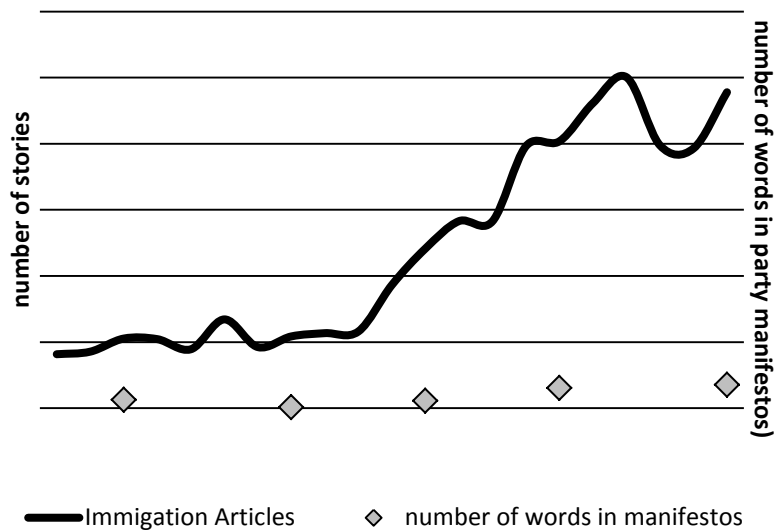
Agenda influence

The study also made it possible to extend the basic media influence approach to examine whether the media agenda (amount of coverage) was influenced by public opinion (public agenda), party politics (policy agenda), and Acts (policy outcome). As shown above, media coverage and public concern about immigration rose across the 20-year period and there was a very high positive correlation (0.951232) between the two. Although it is not possible to conclude from those results whether public opinion drove news coverage or *vice versa*, the growth in news coverage lagged far behind the growth of public opinion that immigration was a concern. Across the period, average change in public opinion rose 3.5 times more than the average change in number of newspaper articles (80 per cent for public opinion; 23 per cent for news articles). Between 1990 and 2000 the average change for public opinion was 3 times the change in newspaper articles (36 per cent vs. 12 per cent) and between 2000 and 2010 it was nearly double (21 per cent vs. 11 per cent). It is clear that something was driving newspaper coverage, but the data do not provide conclusive confirmation that it was public opinion.

Very high and high correlations were observed between number of words in the party manifestos and news coverage. When viewed together, however, it is not clear that news coverage follows political party interest (Figure 13). The decline in party interest in 1997, for example, was not followed by news coverage; further, the relationship between the rise in party interest and news coverage in 2001 is not reflected in 1992, where the number of words in manifestos was higher. The relationship of manifestos

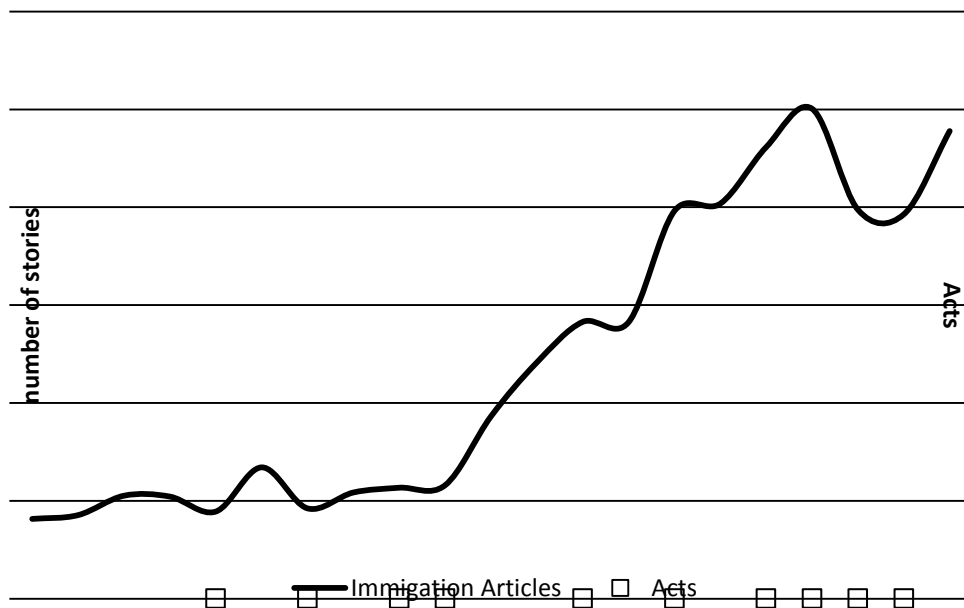
in 2005 and 2010 is what one would expect if the hypothesis were to be supported. The effect of party interest on news coverage is thus not conclusive.

Figure 13: Number of news stories and words in party manifestos



The correlation analysis showed a low positive correlation between policy action and news coverage. Visualisation of the relationship, however, reveals that as more Acts were put in place or revised, the news coverage rose (Figure 14). However, the coverage increased regardless of the magnitude of the changes in the Acts and even in years when no Acts were put in place, particularly after 1996. These results do not support the view that policy actions drove news coverage.

Figure 14: Policy action (Acts) and news coverage

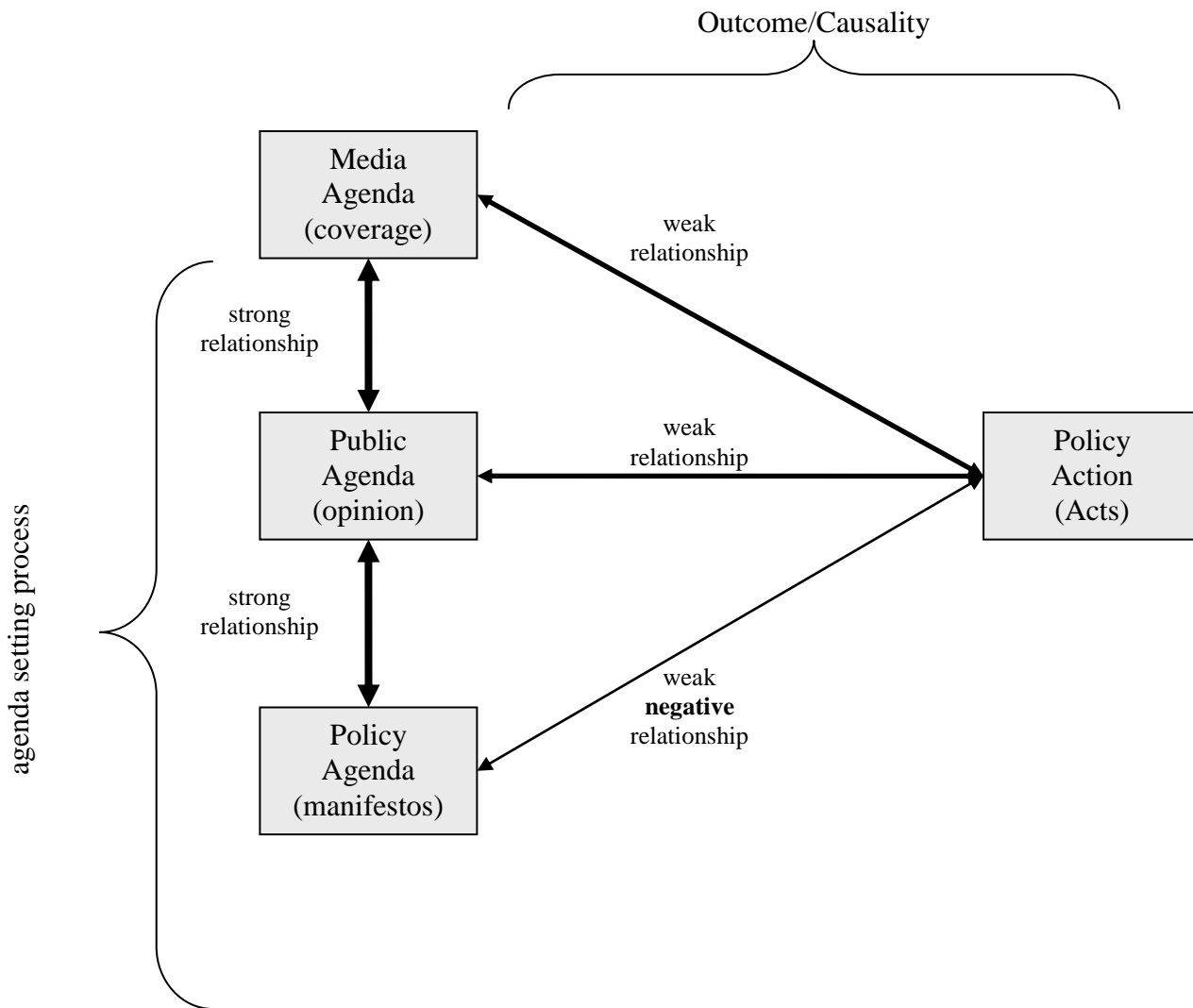


Discussion

This study reveals how media, public opinion, political attention to immigration, and policy enactment in the UK developed in the past twenty years and the relationships among those factors. Its results are relevant to assessing recurrent claims about factors leading to restrictive immigration policies.

If restrictive policies are the political outcome of public demands for action, agenda-setting processes (media information raising public concern and consequently directing political party attention to the issue) would need to take place. For analysis of the claim, the factors in the agenda-setting process can be used as independent variables, with policy action evidenced in immigration Acts as the dependent variable. On that account, the results produce mixed results. Although the agenda-setting process was shown to create the strong relationships among media, opinion, and political attention fundamental to making a claim that public pressure produces restrictive policy (illustrated as a vertical process on the left of Figure 15), evidence that links these finding to the outcome (policy action) was weak and even contradictory (shown horizontally in the figure).

Figure 15: Fundamental relationships in the analysis



The strength of relationships between the volume of media coverage and opinion that immigration is an important political issue, and opinion and political interest evidenced in the policy agenda, are so marked that not having positive/negative directionality assessments of tone of coverage and opinion does not affect the efficacy of this study.

The weak and negative relationships between public opinion and policy indicate that the simple claim that public pressure (a mobilized manifestation of opinion) produces policy (restrictive or otherwise) is not a robust explanation of the policy dynamics. Other factors or combinations of factors must strongly influence the outcome and these may be independent of public pressure. This study included one potentially intervening variable, number of immigrants, but found that although it had strong relationships with factors in the agenda-setting process, it had only a weak relationship with policy outcome. This result corresponds with communications effects literature that show that media are highly influential in suggesting what topics and issues to think about, but less so in influencing opinions about them (McCombs, 2004; Bryant and Oliver, 2009; Nabi and Oliver, 2009).

The weak and negative relationships between the media agenda, public agenda, and policy agenda and policy outcome do not support the arguments made in immigration literature that public pressure pushes policymakers to act or agenda-setting theory view that the public agenda influences policy agenda when immigration is involved. This would indicate that policy is somehow influenced by factors not included in this study or that operationalising the policy variable as Acts might miss other policy activities that are more affected. It may also be that the other indicators used in this study are also unsophisticated at capturing a relationship. Those possibilities should be explored in future research.

This study cannot directly address the argument that policymakers ignore public opinion in favour of liberal immigration policies, because it did not assess policy actions as restrictive or liberal. However, weak overall relationships between policy action and media coverage and public opinion, and the weak negative relationship between policy agenda and policy action, do not contradict the view and provide some credence to the control gap hypothesis.

If media, public opinion, and party attention are not borne out as significant drivers of policy in the UK, what other explanations might be appropriate? The idea that elites play a significant role—asserted by Stratham and Geddes (2006)—would seem probative. The strength of influence of judicial institutions and multinational institutions may also prove to provide a better explanation of domestic policy development and change and should be explored in future research.

This study challenges the argument that public concern, party positions, and policies were driven by the Right-leaning press. For half of the period studied coverage was driven by the Left-leaning papers and thereafter they provided dramatically increased coverage. Both wings of the press were shown to have strong relationships with public opinion and party attention to the issue.⁷

Likewise, party interest in immigration cannot be attributed to any one party, as some have argued.⁸ Both the Conservative and Labour parties began to significantly address the issue after 1997. Although there were differences in approaches, both presented views that immigration issues needed to be addressed but neither party's approach became as vociferous as that of the BNP or UKIP.

⁷ This study did not undertake a framing analysis of the newspaper coverage, but given results in previous studies, the presentational styles and issues focused differ between the two—especially in the Right-leaning tabloids.

⁸ This view is promulgated in publications such as Lugo-Ocando, 2007 and Dean, 2011, and others who focus on views of the Conservative Party, which criticized Labour immigration policies from 1997 to 2010 and used immigration as an electoral issue from 2001 onward, but tend to ignore the attention given it by the Labour Party.

In terms of agenda-setting theory, the research provides more support for the view that media coverage set the public and policy agendas on immigration rather than the view that public opinion and politicians set the media agenda. However, the findings do not preclude consideration of whether media coverage, public concern, and political attention might be reactions to the cumulative effects of policy changes. Doing so would require treating policy as a dependent rather than independent variable and to pursue the approach in extended agenda-setting analysis about what put issues on the media agenda.

The results of this inquiry into immigration opinion and policy – despite limitations in the datasets – indicate that simplistic explanations of the relationships among public opinion, news coverage, and policy are unconvincing. Deeper and more complex dynamics are involved that require caution in asserting a simple cause-and-effect relationship because the rise of interest in immigration appears to be the result of cumulative effects of multiple factors, including a coalescence of international events, EU developments, legal pressures, and immigration trends.

Other studies of public opinion in the UK also reveal the hazards of crude assertions of links among the factors and reveal that opinion is complex. Despite higher immigration and media coverage raising concern, opinion has been shown to be nuanced, not wholly opposed to immigration, and influenced by age, social class, and geography (Page, 2009; Migration Observatory, 2011). Even with significant media coverage, the public has a general lack of knowledge about immigration and immigration policy, and politicians' messages can play roles in creating misunderstandings and moral panic (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration, 2011).⁹

This study indicates that leading explanations for contemporary immigration policy are too one-dimensional and offer weak explanative value. Causality of restrictive immigration policy appears much more ambiguous and subtle than existing literature suggests. Unraveling the complexity of immigration policy-making will require greater understanding of the roles of multiple underlying variables – many of which are not currently considered in debates among migration and policy scholars.

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⁹ Public fears of immigration can be fueled by public discourse and events; some have speculated that rising concerns about immigration after the millennium resulted from psychological responses viewing outsiders as threats after the World Trade Center attack in New York and the London bombings.

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