

**PHOTOGRAPHIC FRAMES OF IMMIGRATION IN A POLARIZED MEDIA  
ENVIRONMENT**

by

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## Abstract

Based on the political communication and public opinion on immigration literatures, this paper develops and tests hypotheses for the visual news coverage of 2019 migration crisis at the Mexico-United States border. The news websites used here, the Huffington Post, the New York Times, the Washington Times and Breitbart News, span a polarized ideological spectrum. The way they use photography to frame the immigration crisis and immigrants should be consistent with their respective political biases and those of their audiences. Looking at 987 images used by these outlets for two months, the findings presented here are largely consistent with the expectations of the referenced literatures. The more conservative a news sources, the likelier it is to visually link immigration to criminality and to portray immigrants as criminals and mostly males. The more liberal the source, the more it will depict the situation at the border as a humanitarian one or link it to the economic benefits of immigration. It will also portray immigrants as family members and show more mobilization against government policies. Looking at the visual coverage of immigration during that period also allows us to uncover two specific editorial practices driving polarization. First, more radical sources tend to make a rhetorical use of images at the expense of a more strictly informational approach. Second, Breitbart displays systematically stronger frames and exploits the images' potential for implicit messaging to advance more radical positions than the Huffington Post, which implies that polarization might be skewed to the right, at least in the case of media discourses on immigration.

## Lay Summary

This thesis looks at the photojournalistic coverage of the 2019 immigration crisis at the Mexico-US border to better understand media discourses on immigration in a polarized environment. The findings presented here are generally consistent with the predictions made by the academic literatures on media polarization and on public opinion on immigration. By analyzing the images used by four media, this research finds that immigration and immigrants are represented very differently across ideological lines. Media on the left favors a humanitarian and empathetic coverage, where on the right immigration and immigrants are presented as threatening. The analysis of visual discourses also helps us understand how polarization happens: more radical media use images to advocate their position rather than to inform by excluding significant aspects of immigration. Moreover, polarization seems to be skewed to the right, as the far-right media's visual frames of immigration are much more extreme than the far-left's.

## Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Renaud Chicoine-McKenzie.

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## Dedication

À tous ceux et celles dont on meurtrit l'image.

## Introduction

On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019, a father, Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, and a child, Valeria, were found drowned on banks of the Rio Grande and photographed. Like thousands of others, they were trying to reach the United States. The photograph shows a small girl tucked in her father's t-shirt and still almost holding on to his facedown body. Despite its significance, it was soon overflowed by renewed streams of photos of the 2019 migrant crisis, often running along partisan lines: overcrowded detention camps, migrants travelling in 'caravans', mothers and children being separated at the border, males being arrested, protests against the administration policies. It was, after all, just one image among a sea of pictures that frame our understanding of migrations. This thesis will examine the visual framing of the 2019 migrant crisis in the U.S. to determine if it conforms to the recent polarization of the media environment; and if so, whether looking at these images can uncover specific editorial practices driving the polarization of discourses on immigration.

Photographs are formidable framing devices: in a we moment understand their content and experience their emotional charge; they deliver information and message almost immediately. Yet, images remain somewhat peripheral to the study of politics. Perhaps because of its visual potential, human migration is among the rare events whose representation has been examined extensively. The visual discourse accompanying coverage of immigration has been studied both in terms of its impact on attitudes toward immigrants (Wright & Citrin 2011) and its portrayal of immigrants (Farris & Mohammed 2018). These images have been found to frequently represent immigration as a threat, a humanitarian issue or to illustrate the national myth of the "nation of

immigrants” (Chavez 2001). While there is a sizeable body of literature that studies the content of particular discourses, little has been done to approach the subject by comparing the use of images in the media along ideological lines; the recent trends of polarization beg us to contrast visual discourses across the media landscape.

To do so, this paper starts by deriving hypotheses on the use of visual framing from the political communication and migration literatures. The first sets out that due to media polarization, we have entered an era of “minimal media effect”: as people self-select into ideological comfort, the information they access is unlikely to change their points-of-view. This should lead outlets to try to reinforce the pre-existing opinions of their own audience instead of competing for each other’s viewers. The literature on immigration predicts right-wing media will categorize immigrants as cultural sociotropic threats, notably by emphasizing criminality and by presenting migrants as predominantly young males and migrations as invasions. It also predicts that left-wing media will emphasize the humanitarian nature of immigration and the economic benefits that come with foreign labor, as well as the politically contested nature of the 2019 border crisis. Combined, these two literatures imply that the closer a media outlet is to the extreme-left of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of humanitarian, economic and protest images will be; the closer a media outlet is to the extreme-right of the spectrum it is, the higher its proportions of threatening and criminalizing images will be.

To test these hypotheses, this paper looks at the 987 images used to cover immigration by four ideologically distinct media—the Huffington Post on the left, the New York Times on the center-

left, the Washington Times on the center-right, and Breitbart News on the far right—between May 25th and July 25th, 2019. These two dates are one month away from when the photograph of the drowned father and child was taken, which should allow me to test whether it impacted the visual discourse. May and July 25ths also circumscribe a period during which the issue of immigration was extremely salient in the media, which abounded in images of it for that reason. Each photograph has been coded according to its content: does it present immigration as threatening or as a humanitarian issue? Are immigrants mostly males or are they also family members? Are citizens taking to the streets against immigration policies? To make sense of these data, I contrast the four media's use of images with the help of the Cochran-Armitage trend test method, whether a trend in proportion along an ordinal variable (in this case the bias of the sources) is discernable and statistically significant. Overall, this essay finds that, with some exceptions, the visual framing of immigration generally maps out on the above expectations. The research finds evidence confirming that the closer a media outlet is situated to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum, the more it will use images depicting immigration during the summer of 2019 as threatening and immigrants as criminals. On the other hand, the closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the spectrum, the more it will emphasize the humanitarian and economic benefits of immigration, as well as the political contestation against the Trump administration's policies.

The last part of this thesis reflects on what the visual coverage of the 2019 migrant crisis may tell us about the polarization of media discourses on immigration more generally. Polarization is often thought of as ideological, rightly so as per the findings presented here, but this should not obscure other ways by which it materializes in the news. Looking at all images used by the four

outlets to represent immigration allows us to notice some patterns that may otherwise go unnoticed. One of these is that polarization seems to entail, for more radical outlets, the subordination of information to rhetoric. Immigration is a complex issue and many of its components have obvious visual potential: immigrants themselves, their home-country conditions, the work they do in the U.S., border-crossing, criminality, etc. Yet, the results presented here seem to indicate that the more biased media simplify their representation of immigration, possibly in order to produce a more coherent narrative. A second observation on polarization is that it seems to be skewed to the right. Breitbart displays systematically stronger frames, which should help it entrench the opinion of its public more profoundly, and it exploits the images' potential for implicit messaging to advance more radical positions than the Huffington Post allows itself to. This opens new doors for the research on the public representation of immigration and the competition in political communication.

## Literature review

### **A new environment: polarized media for polarized publics**

In the United States, polarization has affected political institutions, the media and the public. The way it has transformed the media's effect on public opinion is debated in the literature. It seems to have diminished it, as publics are increasingly comforted in their preexisting biases by the information they consume. But if it cannot anymore change public opinion per se, as predicted by the "minimal effect era" thesis, polarization doesn't prevent media organizations from entrenching their public views.

Media polarization is the result of a polarization of political institutions and of a proliferation of media organizations. The polarization of Congress has meant that on several key issues, including immigration, deadlock has impeded comprehensive policy reform and fostered extreme language. Both the Democratic and the Republican parties are divided by the dual pressures of interest group lobbying and popular immigration anxieties. (Bloemraad & Provine 2019) This charged political background is reflected in a media environment which has itself become polarized and has tended to isolate the public in ideologically constituted echo-chambers. With the increased supply of information in recent decades, we have entered an “era of selective exposure” (Bennett and Iyengar 2008., p.717). Being offered news by outlets which, together, span across the ideological spectrum, audiences can decide only to consume information that aligns with their pre-existing attitudes. Liberals will find theirs on liberal platforms, conservatives on conservative platforms, and public opinion will be shaped by the media environment that reflects the polarization in political institutions. Polarization could potentially disrupt any framing effects in that the competitive mechanisms mentioned above might not be able reach their goal because their audience doesn’t access the alternative frames they refer to. The partisan self-selection of audiences also raises important questions about the effect of exposure to information.

In the political communication scholarship, evidence of important shifts in public opinion due to media treatment of an issue are rare, notably because of structural changes in the industry.

Bennett and Iyengar (2008) argue that the polarization of audiences is leading us into an era of “minimal media effects”. This is in part due to the selective exposure of audiences on the basis of

their political views. The relatively recent emergence of new media, many of which deviate from the moderation of traditional media (the Huffington Post and Breitbart were both launched in 2005, for example), allows the public only to access media that conforms to its pre-existing biases and thus to avoid the rhetoric of alternative discourses. Media information is unlikely to change public opinion for the simple reason that it tends to reiterate its public's views. The simultaneous creation of outlets specialized in entertainment also undermined media's potential effect by drawing inadvertent audiences away from information. Inadvertent audiences are less interested in politics and likely because of that to be less set in their opinions. They would, when looking at media that included both political and non-political content, "stumble" upon political content and be influenced by it. Paradoxically, then, the recent proliferation of media that brought about increasing amounts of political information also reduced the audience for it. "As exposure to news programming more closely correlated with the demand of political information, the knowledge gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' expanded" (*ibid.*, p.718). In other words, specialized sources of information provide individuals with outlets tailored to their predispositions, while also giving "entertainment alternatives" to the public uninterested in politics. This uninterested public can therefore avoid political information altogether, and with it the effect news networks could have on their attitudes. Deprived of inadvertent audiences, information media must now cater to the opinions of their politically engaged public alone, however extreme it may be. This model matches other more general theories of polarization that argue that polarization is not necessarily a phenomenon that encapsulates the whole of society, but rather "a variety of narrowly based, ideologically mobilized mass constituencies" (Quirk 2013, p.201).



If overestimating media effects on public opinion is a danger in the actual media context, we should also avoid underestimating it. Bennett and Iyengar (2008) argue that the ideological division of the audience prevents the news and framing effects from shifting public opinion, but that doesn't mean they cannot have the more subtle, but still important effect of entrenching it. Holbert, Garrett and Gleason (2010) characterize today's context as a "pull media environment", as opposed to the previous "pushed environment". While the latter describes a context where information is filtered through a top-down decision process, the "pull environment" refers to a context in which audiences engage with political news content out of their own motivation. It also provides viewers with the opportunity to access "their chosen political media messages at desirable times, in preferred places/contexts" (Holbert, Garrett & Gleason 2010, p.27). As a result, recipients of political information are more likely to follow the so-called "central route" of persuasion where they are more cognitively engaged with the content, thereby producing opinions that are more resistant to "subsequent counterattitudinal messages" (*ibid.*, 25). In other words, according to these theories of media polarization, we should expect today's media messages to be engaged with by more receptive audiences, to be consistent with their prior predispositions to reinforce them, rather than compete with alternative views.

## Framing effects

Framing effects have been an important component of the scholarship on the media's influence on public opinion. Framing effects occur "when (often small) changes in the representation of an issue or an event produces (sometimes large) changes in opinion" (Chong & Druckman 2007a, p.104). They are omnipresent in mass-media and are particularly influential on large, uninformed

publics, which raises the question of how they can be used strategically by politically biased news organizations.

Mass media is a crucial site for framing effects because these are most powerful when frames are available for retrieval and are accessible. Frequent access to mass media allows “regular or recent exposure to a communication frame” to make the framing effect “a passive or unconscious process” (*ibid.*, p.110). We would like to think that active citizens take conscious positions reflecting good levels of information, especially on political subject matters as important as immigration. But “high-quality opinions” that are “stable, consistent, informed, and connected to abstract principles and values” (*ibid.*, p.103) are in reality rare. Instead, low-quality, unstable and unsubstantiated positions are common. These uninformed opinions are most consequential when people draw inferences about short-term political issues, singular events, specific policies or changing social circumstances (Kuklinski & Quirk 2000, p.182). There is no consensus on how to measure their effects, but political scientists assume that frames significantly “affect the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences” (Chong & Druckman 2007a., p.109).

Because public opinion is a battleground for politicians and interest groups, it should come as no surprise that framing has been used strategically. One way that can be done is by using frames competitively. This can lead political actors to use framing as a strategic tool of “vilification”, with the aim of characterizing adversaries negatively. They can also engage in “frame debunking”, by which they try to cancel an adversary’s frame by promoting alternative interpretations or calling out a lie. “Frame saving,” finally, comes in response to “debunking” to

maintain the salience or veracity of a given frame (McCaffrey & Keys 2000). But competing frames are more or less effective depending on whether the individuals they reach share or reject their point of view: receivers with strong prior attitudes are less sensitive to frames than those without (Chong & Druckman 2007a, p.110). For that reason, competitive frames are unlikely to be effective in a polarized environment, one in which publics are sheltered from alternative points-of-view.

Instead, media in a polarized environment are likely to use frames to maintain their audiences consciously engaged and reinforce their preexisting opinions by using powerful frames consistent with their ideological bias. This raises the question of what constitutes a “powerful” frame and, for our purpose, what it can mean for the representation of immigrants and immigration. Several aspects of a frame could influence its strength: its emotional potential, its extraordinary or exceptional content, for example. When it comes to visual framing, images are powerful when they display emotionally charged content, which could be both positive, through attractiveness for example, or negative, notably through violence. “Positively” or “negatively compelling” images remain accessible in memory longer and facilitate information absorption (Newhagen & Reeves 1992). This should make the opinions they support both more extreme and more entrenched.

## Images in the new environment

One of this thesis’ primary assumptions is that media images are important and distinct tools of political communication. If television news has produced its share of research on the effect of

moving images, the technological transformations of the last two decades, especially the emergence of social media, have revived an interest in photography as a means of political communication. Research has shown images to be particularly effective in framing issues, in expressing more radical messages and, in the case of photographs, in passing for evidences.

Photos seem to be framing devices tailored to the media circumstances established earlier: they can draw attention in a way that words can't, they are understood rapidly, and their content is absorbed even without conscious engagement, subliminally (Farris & Mohammed 2018, Lilleker 2019, Messaris 2019, Barry 2020). Furthermore, psychological studies have long demonstrated the power of visuals over words when it comes to absorption and memorization of information (Posner, Nissen & Klein 1976), which is particularly relevant to framing effects that rely on readily available references.

Images also have a reach- and content-related advantage over words which comes from their subliminal potential. On one hand, they can be “hidden” in entertainment content and still have an effect. Research has found “that the essential psychological preconditions for subliminal persuasion” were met when information is disguised as “entertainment”, as it is “likely to encounter less viewer resistance” (Messaris 2019, p.29). If words can be avoided by uninterested audiences in the new media environment, images may reach them nonetheless, because they are immediate and flow seamlessly in social media feeds. More crucial for the purpose of this paper, the content of images can generate feelings of empathy or enmity towards the subjects or classes of subjects they depict. On one hand, the brain's “mirror neuron system” effectively allows us to

“empathize and recognize the ‘other’ [we see] as ‘us’ . . . .” (Barry 2020: 19) This unconscious mechanism is contingent on a degree of “fit” of the observed subjects with the observer’s group; “if a clear differentiation is introduced into the process, it can cause us not to feel akin to them, to see them more as objects than as people like ourselves.” (*ibid.*: 22) Migrants or refugees moving from Latin America into the United States are susceptible of being objectified by “ethnocentric” watchers, which have been shown to adopt stereotypical views of certain groups and a “consistent preference for white, culturally proximate immigrant groups.” (Hainmuller & Hopkins 2014: 9) Racial stereotypes coded into images have been shown to be particularly efficient primers of racial attitudes. According to Valentino & al. (2002), the racial content of a message has to remain subtle as not to be interfered with by the “norm of equality”. This implies “that ‘implicit’ (i.e., visual but not verbal) cues rather than ‘explicit’ (i.e., visual *plus* verbal) ones” (Valentino & al. 2002: 75-6) are likely to prime racial attitudes and to dissociate from and objectify migrants and refugees crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. More than just reaching inattentive audiences, then, images can also send messages that would seem unacceptable if put into words.

Finally, news images are also distinct from words because they “are presented in a context of ‘authenticity,’ they tend to be read not as representation but as *evidence*” (Cisneros 2008, p.574), whereas words are generally automatically associated with a voice, a subjective point of view. In a minimal effect era described Holbert, Garrett & Gleason (2010), this might be of crucial importance. As we have seen, this “minimal effect” on changes in opinion only makes more important the reinforcement of preexisting opinions. If representational frames can serve to back up existing opinions, either through words or illustrations, photography as evidence has the

potential of entrenching attitudes a lot deeper and to make them resistant to discursive counterarguments or fact-checking. Images are, indeed, well-suited tools for the new media environment.

## Framing immigration

To determine what we should expect to find the visual framing of the migrant crisis at the Mexico-U.S. border and how to code it, a look into the literatures on public opinion on immigration and on the framing of immigration is necessary. First, some general distinctions are established between distinct kinds of judgments on immigration and between different threats associated to it. Attitudes that we should expect to be mobilized on the conservative and liberal sides are then reviewed. Conservative views of immigration revolve a lot around the representation of immigration and immigrants as threats. On the other hand, liberals tend to emphasize humanitarian concerns as well as certain economic benefits associated with immigration.

A first useful step is Wright, Levy and Citrin's (2016) distinction between attribute-based judgments, which are aimed at individual characteristics, and categorical judgments, which take for objects social classes or legal status with which immigrants are associated. We should further differentiate between types threat that shape immigration attitudes: Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) argue that self-interest and *economic* sociotropic concerns are weak explanatory factors compared to *cultural* sociotropic concerns. The latter concerns are typically associated with

demographics with lower education, holding negative stereotypical views and valorizing national homogeneity (*ibid.*, p.231, Hainmueller & Hangartner 2013).

Security is a regular theme in negative representations used to frame immigration. Accordingly, a large body of work examines that recurring criminalization of immigrants in the news media. Research shows that immigration becomes increasingly salient when associated to a physical threat (Igartua & Cheng 2009; Lahav & Courtemanche 2012, p.483). That would help to explain why criminalizing frames are frequent in right-wing media, many of which cater to nationalist public discourses that are made relevant by a salient and problematic immigration. The press is “likely to feature negative aspects of immigration through images in a way that is inconsistent with immigration demographics” (Farris & Mohamed 2018, p.814). Illegality, criminality, undocumented status and unemployment are iterated themes in pictures of immigrant population (*ibid.*, p. 815-820). In fact, “native-born American males between 18 and 39 are 8 times more likely to be imprisoned for crimes than unnaturalized Mexican immigrants of the same age,” research shows (Kim & al. 2011, p.311). This type of framing presumably serves as a call for “the demonstration of efficient governance, understood as repressive and punitive policies” (Merolla, Ramakrishnan & Haynes 2013, p.113). It is therefore reasonable for security frames to be associated with right-wing parties and media. But they are powerful frames across the board, having notably important effects on liberals (Lahav & Courtemanche 2012, p.477). Because they make liberals more approving of restrictive policies, closer to conservative points-of-view, immigration tends to become less polarized when associated to threats, particularly physical or national security threats (*ibid.*, p.499).

The negative frames of threats posed by immigrants are opposed by positive frames emphasizing their humanitarian needs and innocence, as well as their integration into society. These are relatively understudied, however, which makes them interesting. In general, humanitarian frames that show immigrants victim of a system that works against them, that emphasize their suffering and its discordance with human rights will work as counterweights to the criminalizing frames. Alamillo, Haynes and Madrid (2019), for example, find that the liberal media has framed immigration in the Trump era as family reunion, “emphasizing the harm these separations could cause to young children” (p.7). Other research on the visual representation of immigration have looked for images symbolizing the trope of America as a land of immigrants, mother-child imagery (Chavez 2001, p.21-24). Humanitarian frames will present immigrants, as a social class, are deserving of sympathy whatever their legal status. These frames are likely to portray the individuals at the Mexico-U.S. border as refugees. The status of refugees is much more uncertain in the eyes of public opinion than that of regular immigrants, however. The “validity” of their claims is often questioned and their arrival “often described using terms as ‘flood,’ ‘flows,’ or ‘waves’ that suggest that existing policies provide insufficient security” (Lawlor & Tolley 2017, p.973). These seemingly contradictory effects of humanitarian frames probably don’t take place within a single individual’s reading of them but distinguish liberal and conservative publics. They do preclude humanitarian frames from having the same de-polarizing effect that physically threatening ones have.

Frames associating immigration to its economic benefits, trade and laborers for example, can support liberal policies and cater to favorable views of immigration. Public opinion tends to favor young, language-proficient and highly skilled immigrants (Bansak, Hainmueller &



Hangartner 2016), which are evidently less likely to be part of the migration happening at the Mexico-U.S. border. Instead, migrants there probably more like economic refugees—the Ramirez family, for example, was living on only \$10 a day. Research shows that the public is more accepting of a humanitarian concerns for immigrants fleeing persecution than for those pursuing economic opportunities (*ibid.*). The problem with economic frames of immigration, if they are intended to foster liberal opinions, is that they are caught in what has been called “the liberal paradox, a trade-off between national social solidarity and diversity, or between a generous welfare state and equality among all peoples.” (Lahav & Courtemanche 2012, p.482) It’s important for those frames to achieve their intended effect to emphasize economic benefits of migrations that do not undermine the interests of the working-class constituencies they are addressed to.

The frames above do not represent all the ways immigration can be framed, but for the purpose of this thesis, they have the benefit of being easy to illustrate. Immigration is an exceptional political subject for its visual potential, which make immigration attitudes particularly apt to be shaped by images. Unlike other political events—passing legislation for example, which usually implies little more than people speaking and an assembly voting—immigration happens physically: young individuals looking for work, families, sometimes crowds are on the move; they have obstacles in their way, border walls, perhaps armed individuals; they are suffering, but also quite easily turned into criminals. The following sections details how these frames can be expected to materialize in the coverage of the 2019 border crisis and how they can be distributed across media of different ideological bias.

## Methodology

This paper seeks to assess whether the visual representation of immigration in mass media websites respects the expectations of the polarized media environment and of the literature on public opinion of immigration. More specifically, it examines both liberal and conservative media coverage of the “migrant crisis” at the Mexico-U.S. border between the months of May and July 2019. The information sources were selected on the basis of a 2017 study by the Pew Research Center that categorized American news outlets by the ideological composition of their audience (Pew Research Center 2017). The Huffington Post and the New York Times were chosen among the sources most trusted by liberal audiences; the Washington Times and Breitbart were picked to represent media trusted by conservative audiences.

From May 25<sup>th</sup> to July 25<sup>th</sup>, a total of 987 images were drawn from the websites of the Huffington Post (94), the New York Times (341), the Washington Times (120) and Breitbart (432). Each accompanied an article on immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border. These dates were chosen because they were one month away from the photograph of Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his daughter, Valeria, who drowned on the bank of the Rio Grande while attempting to reach the U.S. While this specific image will not be discussed at length here, it is a powerful image, taken at the height of the crisis with a definite humanitarian content.

The images have been coded according to their content and emotional reaction they were likely intended to generate. Following Chong and Druckman (2007a) and consistent with methodologies used in the study of visual rhetoric (Foss 2004), the coding scheme was determined both deductively and inductively. Deductive codes were drawn from existing theories on the visual framing of migration (Chavez 2001; Farris & Mohamed 2018; Alamillo, Haynes & Madrid 2019) and on public opinion on immigration (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2014; Sniderman & al. 2004; Hainmueller & Hangartner 2013). The inductive approach allowed for the inclusion of context-specific categories. The contents that were coded are the following: the predominant presence of male subjects; the representation of immigration as a movement of invasion; reference to criminality; the representation of immigrants as criminals; the representation of the crisis as affecting children; the representation of immigrants as family members; reference to trade and economic integration of immigrants; reference to overcrowded detention centers (inductive); and reference to political activism opposing the Trump administration's policies. The affective content of the images was coded either as "threatening" or as emphasizing the "humanitarian" nature of the crisis. All of these features have been treated as binary variables, for which a yes/no judgment is given for each of the pictures. (The main indicators for the coding are laid out in more details in Annex 1.)

Hypotheses will be tested using the Cochran-Armitage trend test, also known as the trend in proportions test. This test allows us to determine if a dependent variable is varying linearly with an ordinal variable. Each of these three hypotheses predicts that a proportion of images (threatening, portraying immigrants as criminals, as families, etc.) will vary according to a trend. It is important to note that the Cochran-Armitage trend test doesn't establish a correlation coefficient. A coefficient would approximate the strength of that trend, but with only four observations, the standard error could be high and make it somewhat unhelpful. To assess the strength of the trend, I will instead rely on bar graphs and the visual representation of the proportions. After assessing whether there is a statistically significant trend with

the Cochran-Armitage trend test, examining the bar graphs will help me assessing how important and linear the trend in proportion is, whether proportions in some media explain that trend more than others, or if others have unexpectedly high or low proportions.

## Hypotheses

This thesis seeks to assess whether visual framing of immigration maps onto the media environment described earlier. In this “era of minimal effect”, we should expect most of the frames to be directed at reinforcing the preexisting attitudes of each media’s audience.

Accordingly, Hypothesis 1a predicts that conservative media disproportionately reference a safety threat using threatening imagery of crime and “invasion”. Liberal media is expected to emphasize the economic benefits of immigration and fluid borders and the humanitarian aspects of the crisis. It could link the crisis at the border to its economic implications (Hypothesis 1b) by showing congestion at the border, immigrant workers or images of produces referring to the trade between Mexico and the U.S.; humanitarian aspects should be highlighted with images of detention camps, children or violence against immigrants (Hypothesis 1c). Considering the polarization of the media environment, the two should not overlap much, especially at the extremes of the ideological spectrum.

**H1a:** The closer a media outlet is to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of threatening images will be.

**H1b:** The closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images of humanitarian aspects of immigration will be.

**H1c:** The closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images economic aspects of immigration will be.

Attribute-based judgments, which are founded on individual characteristics, also influence the public's perception of immigration. Among the characteristic that matter, family ties and law-abidingness are relevant here for their visual potential. We should expect the individuals depicted in the conservatives' frames to be disproportionately male (Hypothesis 2a) and criminalized (Hypothesis 2b); and inversely to be identified more often as family members (Hypothesis 2c) in liberals' frames.

**H2a:** The closer a media outlet is to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images of migrants that include mostly male individuals will be.

**H2b:** The closer a media outlet is to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images criminalizing immigrants will be.

**H2c:** The closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images representing immigrants as family members will be.

The June 25<sup>th</sup> photo of the tragedy on the Rio Grande highlighted, like no other image, the humanitarian nature of the border crisis. A third hypothesis anticipates the liberal media's use of this images to be more frequent than that of conservative sources, which should downplay the event.

**H3:** The closer a media is to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum, the less it will show the June 25<sup>th</sup> photography.

In a polarized environment information media will cater to the political leanings of their public. The representation of the public opinion on the migration crisis should therefore tend to confirm the audiences' point-of-view. Visually, this could be done by presenting political activism. Such activism is more likely to manifest an opposition to the course of action in which the administration is engaged. A fourth hypothesis, then, predicts that more liberal media will publish more images of protests against the administration's immigration policies (Hypothesis 4).

**H4:** The closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images of political activism and protests against the government's immigration policies will be.

## Results

The results for the hypothesis above are presented below in eleven bar graphs and their associated Cochran-Armitage trend tests results and, in the cases of the fifth hypothesis, a summary of qualitative evidence.

Table 1: Overall data and observations

Bias	Very Liberal	Moderate Liberal	Moderate Conservative	Conservative
Media	Huffington Post	New York Times	Washington Times	Breitbart News
Images	94 (100%)	341 (100%)	120 (100%)	432 (100%)
Threat	0 (0%)	16 (5%)	2 (2%)	105 (24%)
Threat*	0 (0%)	16 (5%)	2 (2%)	54 (14%)
Humanitarian	19 (20%)	33 (10%)	10 (8%)	38 (9%)
Humanitarian**	19 (20%)	32 (9%)	10 (8%)	19 (4%)
Economy	5 (5%)	14 (4%)	2 (2%)	7 (2%)
Criminals	2 (2%)	9 (3%)	6 (5%)	68 (16%)
Criminals*	2 (2%)	9 (3%)	6 (5%)	34 (8%)
Men	1 (1%)	27 (8%)	10 (8%)	86 (20%)
Men***	1 (1%)	19 (6%)	6 (5%)	26 (6%)
Families	16 (17%)	78 (23%)	10 (8%)	11 (3%)
June 25 <sup>th</sup> photo	2 (2%)	5 (1.5%)	1 (1%)	2 (0.5%)
Activism	19 (20%)	36 (11%)	11 (9%)	23 (5%)

\* Omits images showing cartel violence.

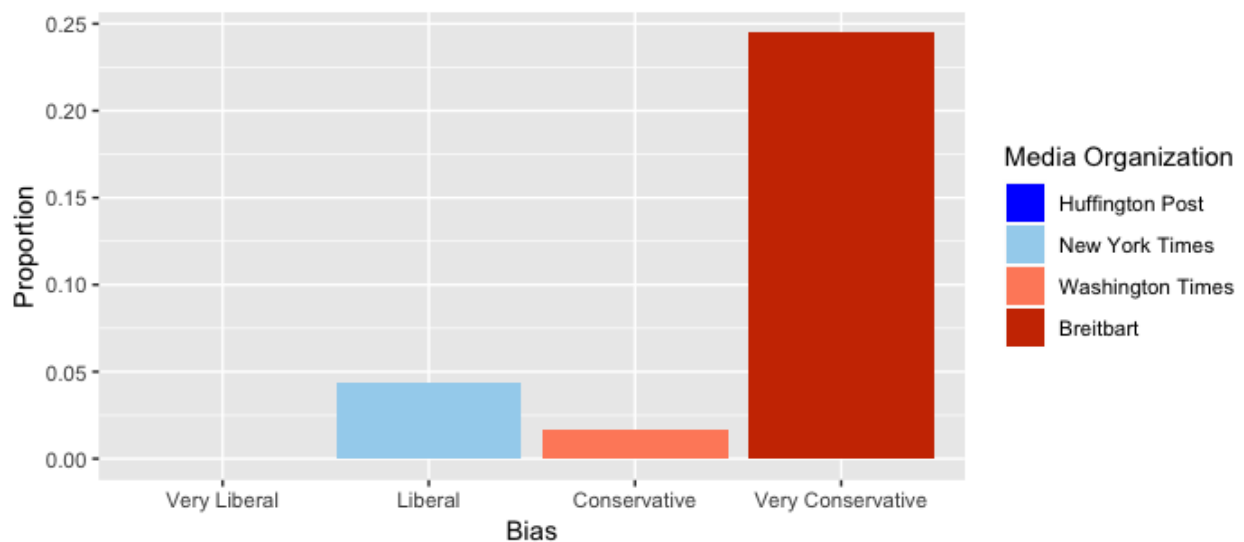
\*\* Omits images of corpses.

\*\*\* Omits images portraying immigrants as criminals

**H1a:** *The closer a media outlet is to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of threatening images will be.*

These results for the use of threatening imagery to represent the immigration crisis mostly corresponds to the expectations of *Hypothesis 1a*. With the exception of the Washington Times, the proportion of threatening images increases as the media moves toward a more right-leaning bias. The Cochran-Armitage trend test results indicate a statistically significant trend ( $p\text{-value} < 0.0001$ ). That the Huffington Post has the smallest proportion, showing no such pictures, and that Breitbart has the highest, with about a quarter of their pictures, constitutes no surprise, given the expectations derived from a polarized media environment. The case of the Washington Times, with only 1.7% of threatening images, defies expectations, however. It is not very different from the Huffington Post's coverage and, it uses proportionately fewer threatening images than the NYT. Breitbart and the Huffington Post, in this case, seem to be responsible for the trend.

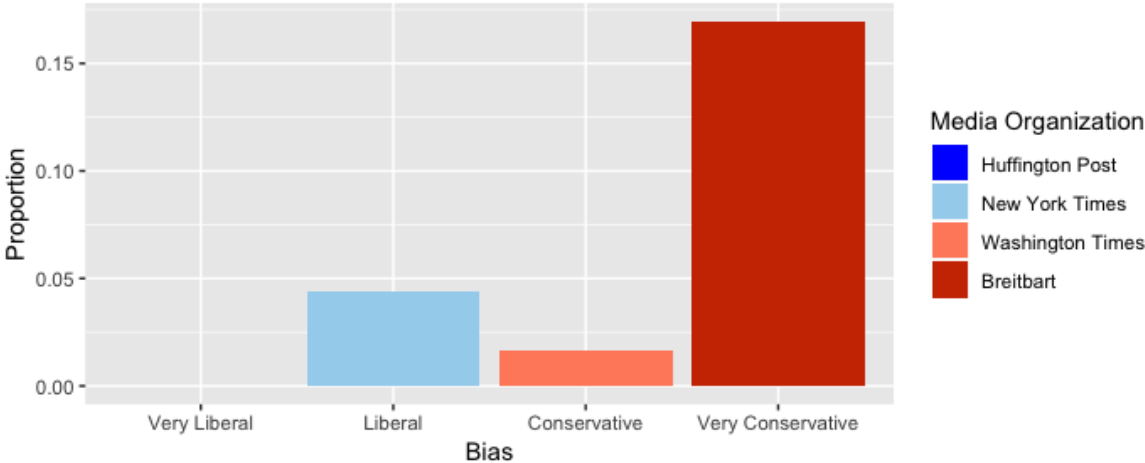
**FIGURE 1: BIAS AND PROPORTIONS OF THREATENING IMAGES**





The above results could be biased by the inclusion by of images associated to articles on cartel-related criminality in Mexican border-states, which are used exclusively by Breitbart News. The use of these images will be discussed later on, but for now, it is worth noting that even without them, the proportion of threatening images used by Breitbart remain significantly higher than those of the other media. Even if Breitbart’s proportion of threatening images goes down from 24.5% to 17%, the trend remains as statistically significant ( $p\text{-value} < 0.0001$ ).

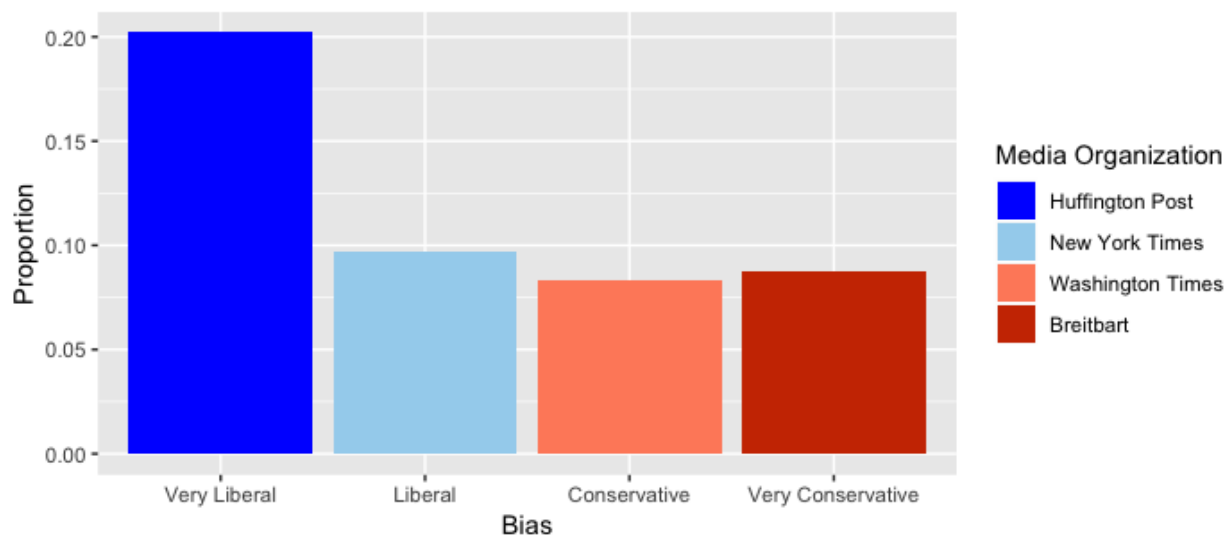
**FIGURE 2: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF THREATENING IMAGES, OMITTING IMAGES OF CARTEL VIOLENCE**



**H1b:** *The closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images of humanitarian aspects of immigration will be.*

The representation of the migrant crisis as a humanitarian crisis—in which immigrants are shown incarcerated in overcrowded camps, as victims of violence or as children—is the focus of one of this paper’s central hypothesis. In that respect, the result shown in Figure 3 are surprisingly negative. The Huffington Post’s relatively high proportion of humanitarian images corresponds to *Hypothesis 1b*’s predictions in a statistically significant way. The three other media, however, do not are not very different from each other, with Breitbart News even showing higher than expected proportions. There doesn’t seem to be a statistically significant trend ( $p\text{-value} = 0.218$ ).

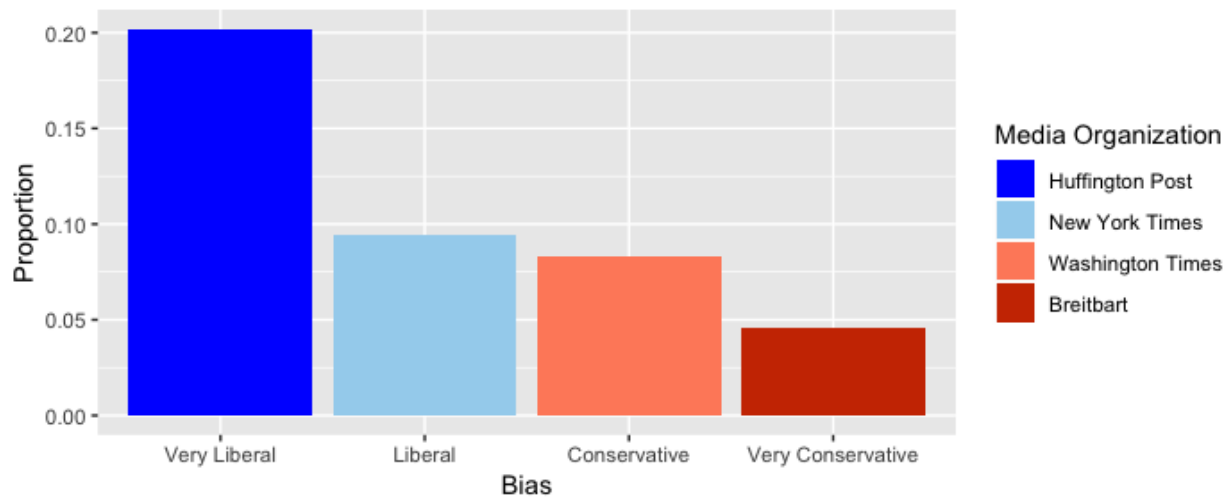
**FIGURE 3: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF HUMANITARIAN IMAGES**



A closer look at the images used by the far-right media reveals that some observation should be omitted, however. About half of the images used by Breitbart to represent immigration across the US-Mexico

border as a humanitarian situation show migrant corpses, often in advanced stages of decomposition. While these images do indeed point out the violent faith of immigrants, they do so in a way that doesn't generate empathy for them (this will be discussed at length in the following section). Once these images are controlled for, the downward trend in proportion of humanitarian images becomes statistically significant.

**FIGURE 4: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF HUMANITARIAN IMAGES, OMITTING IMAGES OF CORPSES**

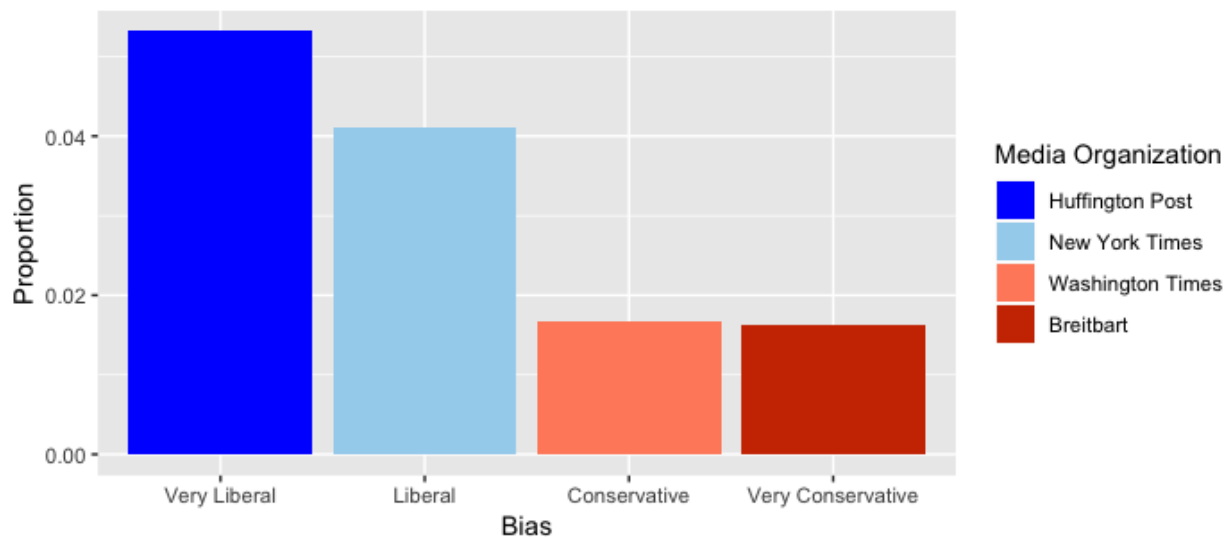


The Cochran-Armitage trend test result now indicate a statistically significant trend ( $p$ -value = 0.001), which allows us to reject the null hypothesis. It is now possible to conceive of a similarity between the NYT and the Washington Times, perhaps attributable to the moderate nature of their biases, which distinguishes them from Breitbart News.

**H1c:** *The closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images economic aspects of immigration will be.*

The proportion of images representing economic aspects of immigration are moving in the expected direction and this downward trend is statistically significant ( $p\text{-value} = 0.029$ ). These proportions are all relatively low and much of the difference seems to come from being liberal or conservative. In other words, having moderate or extreme political bias doesn't seem to have much of an influence on economic representation.

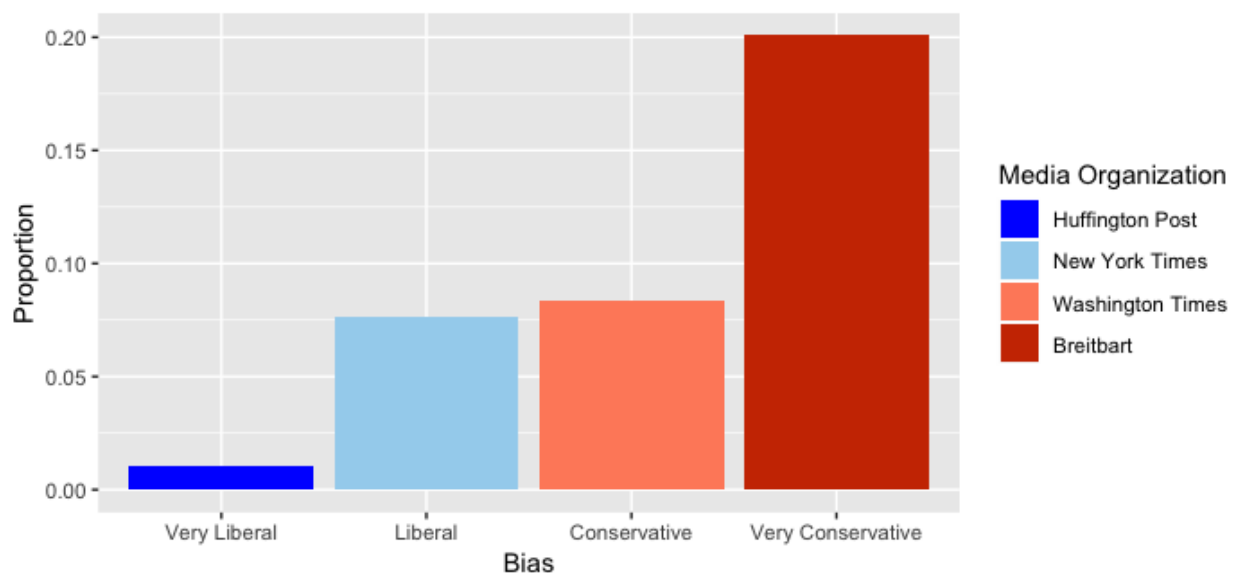
**FIGURE 5: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF IMAGES REPRESENTING IMMIGRATION AS AN ECONOMIC ISSUE**



**H2a:** *The closer a media outlet is to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images of migrants that include mostly male individuals will be.*

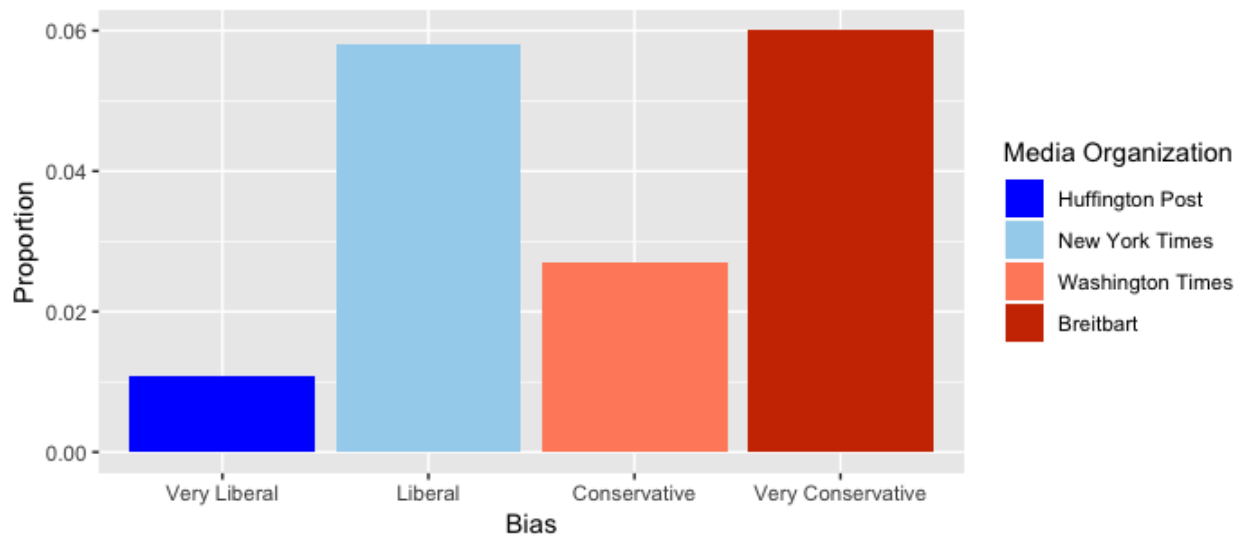
A gendered bias in the coverage of immigration is largely confirmed by these findings. The differences in proportions are in the expected direction and the trend is statistically significant ( $p\text{-value} < 0.0001$ ). The Huffington Post shows fewer images of immigrants as men than any other media, as predicted by its strong liberal bias; Breitbart shows the most, with an even clearer gap when including the coverage of cartels. The more moderate sources—the NYT and Washington Times—are close both in the use of images of immigrants as men, the proportions differing by not even a percentage point, and in their position relative to their more extreme counterparts, literally mirroring each other. The results with regards to gender are much less significant if we omit images of criminals, which are almost automatically male.

**FIGURE 6: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF IMAGES REPRESENTING IMMIGRANTS AS MALE INDIVIDUALS**



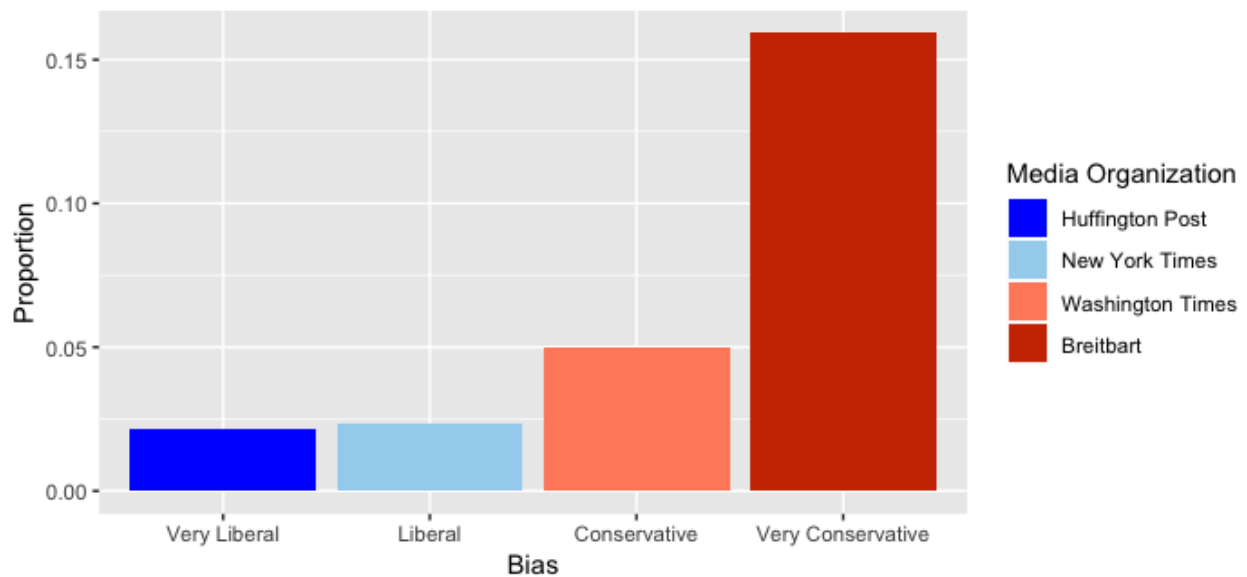
When omitting images of criminals, the gendered representation follows no definite trend ( $p$ -value = 0.228). This is largely because of the enormous decrease of proportions of images representing immigrants as males in the conservative sources (the Washington Times' goes from 8% to less than 3%, while Breitbart moves from 15% to 6%). If these results question the former statistically significant results, they should not be used to undermine them with too much certainty. Because the biggest changes in proportions happen in conservative sources, it would be necessary to know how gendered their images be if they could replace the images of criminals with others. In other words, images of criminals might play a role both in “gendering” the representation of immigrants and in portraying them as outlaws. By omitting images of criminals, these results are at risk of underestimating conservatives' tendency to represent immigrants as male individuals.

**FIGURE 7: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF IMAGES REPRESENTING IMMIGRANTS AS MALE INDIVIDUALS, OMITTING IMAGES OF CRIMINALS**



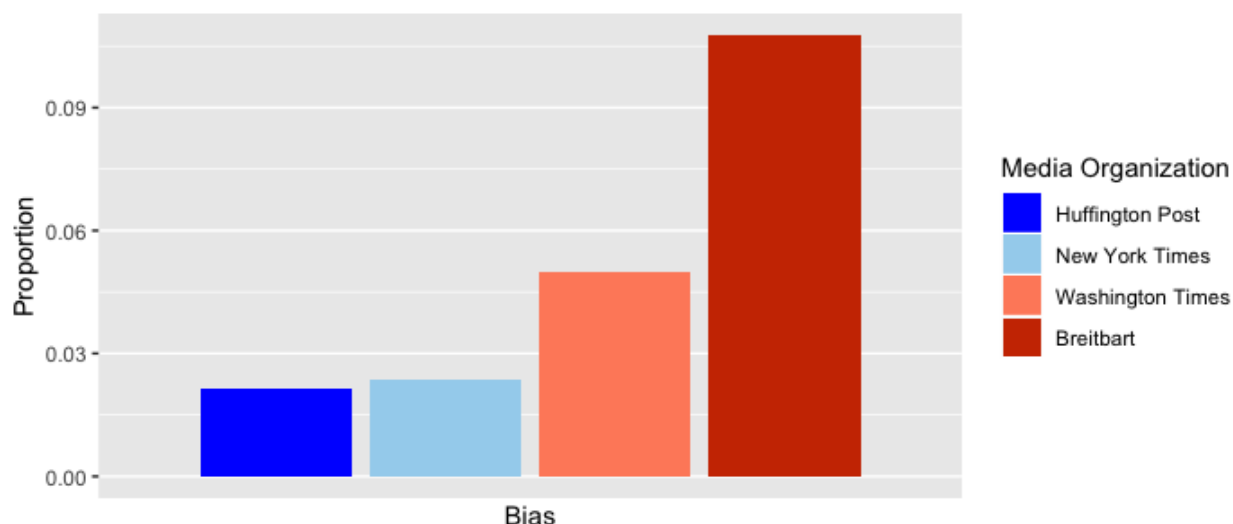
**H2b:** The closer a media outlet is to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images criminalizing immigrants will be.

**FIGURE 8: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF IMAGES REPRESENTING IMMIGRANTS AS CRIMINALS**



The trend in proportions of images portraying immigrants as criminals is statistically significant ( $p$ -value  $< 0.0001$ ). The differences in proportions all go in the expected direction, with the biggest one involving Breitbart, testament to the tendency of this far-right media to depict immigration as “cimmigration”. The two liberal media are extremely similar in their proportion, both under 3%, possibly indicating a general reluctance on the left for that type of representation. The Washington Times adopts it more readily, but is still relatively close to the liberal media. When images of cartel violence are omitted, the Breitbart’s proportions fall from 16% to 10%. Despite this, the results remain statistically significant ( $p$ -value  $< 0.0001$ ).

**FIGURE 9: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF IMAGES REPRESENTING IMMIGRANTS AS CRIMINALS, OMITTING IMAGES OF CARTELS**

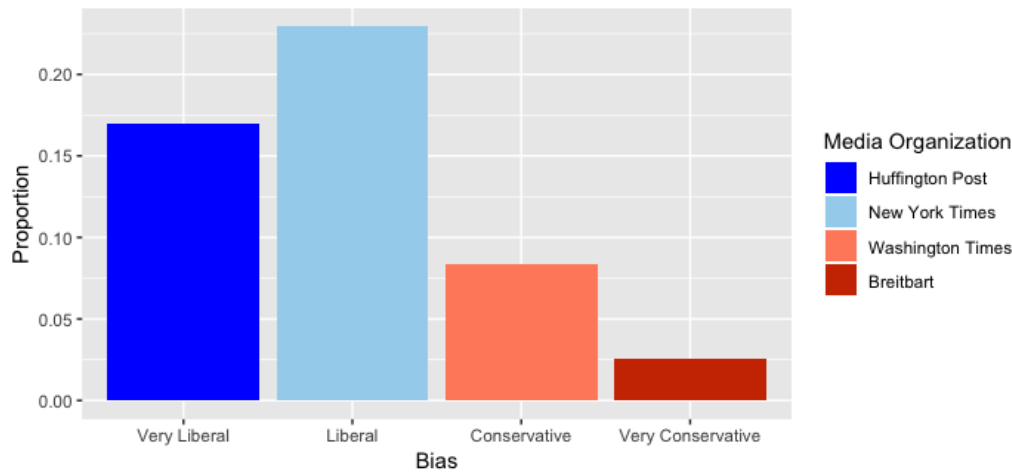


*H2c: The closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images representing immigrants as family members will be.*

Immigrants are portrayed as family members in liberal media more often than in conservative ones, which is in line with Hypothesis 2c. The Cochran-Armitage trend test indicates a statistically significant trend in that direction ( $p$ -value < 0.0001). The one surprise in this set of results is the higher-than-expected proportion in the NYT coverage. This may be explained by the featuring of long-form, life-narrative style of journalism, that tends to follow individuals, often families, alongside their journey, often accompanied by multiple photographs.



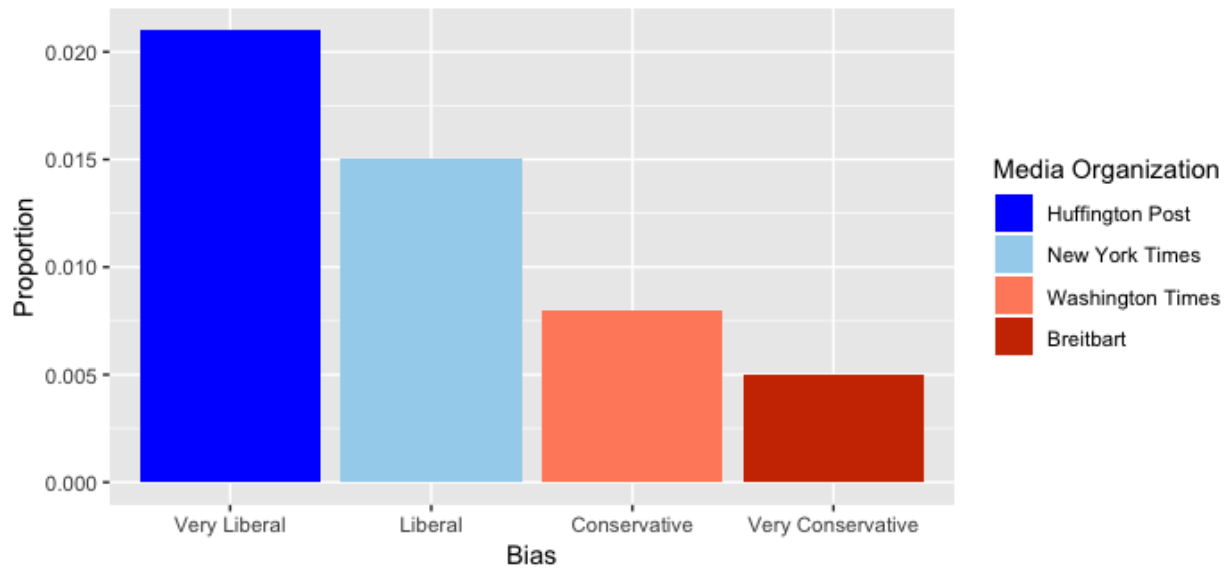
**FIGURE 10: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF IMAGES REPRESENTING IMMIGRANTS AS FAMILY MEMBERS**



*H3: Conservative sources will show the June 25<sup>th</sup> photography less often than liberal do.*

The Huffington Post showed the image two times (for 2,1% of its photos), the New York Times five times (1.5%), the Washington Times once (0.8%) and Breitbart News twice (0.5%). Although these results all head in the direction *Hypothesis H3b* predicted, and do so almost linearly, the trend is not statistically significant ( $p\text{-value} = 0.075$ ). More data, one that would cover more than a single source for each political bias, would be necessary to determine whether or not conservative sources showed the June 25<sup>th</sup> photography less than liberal ones.

**FIGURE 11: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF THE JUNE 25TH PHOTO**

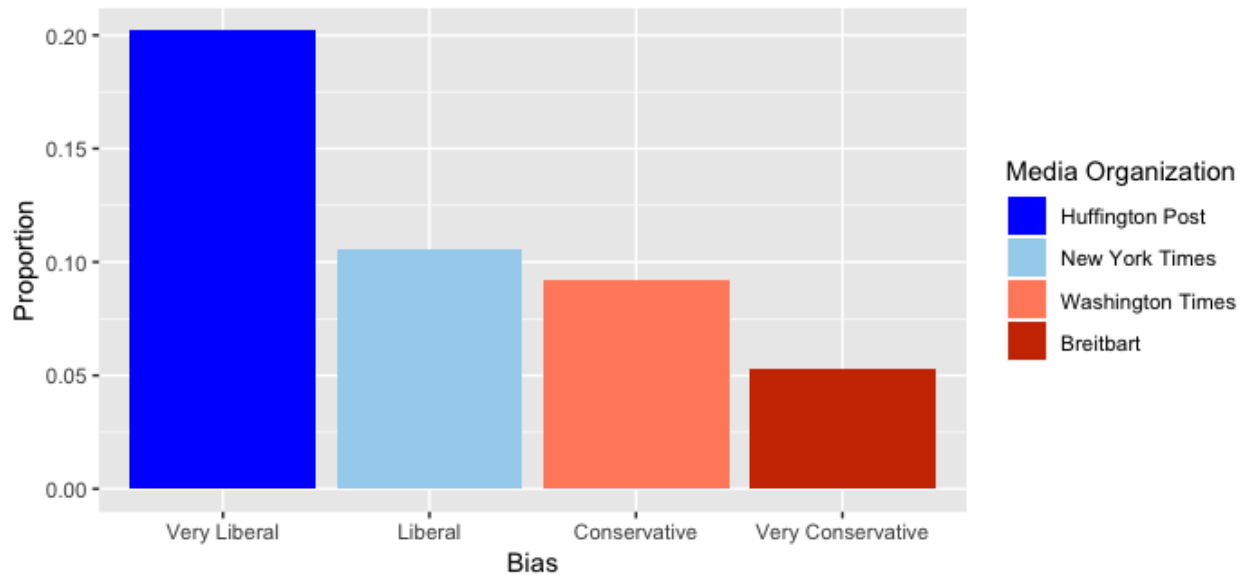


***H4:** The closer a media outlet is to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, the higher its proportions of images of political activism and protests against the government's immigration policies will be*

The expectation of the fourth hypothesis is confirmed by the above results ( $p\text{-value} < 0.0001$ ).

Proportions head in the right direction, with more biased media including or rejecting more intensely images of protests or other forms of mobilization against the immigration policies of the Trump administration. The sustained representation of political activism by the Huffington Post, which is a lot higher than all other sources, probably explains a lot of the statistical significance of this trend. Again, the NYT and the Washington Times do not differ by a lot, but they do in the expected direction.

**FIGURE 12: BIAS AND PROPORTION OF IMAGES REPRESENTING POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND PROTESTS AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT’S IMMIGRATION POLICIES**



## Summary of findings

Before interpreting these results, I will synthesize the approach taken by each of the four media examined above. Underlying the hypotheses above is an attempt to define and differentiate ways of seeing or imagining immigrants and immigration. At the risk of oversimplifying things, one could distinguish sympathetic from hostile representations of immigrants, as well as those that are more descriptive from others that are designed to advance or reinforce a political position on immigration. As media move toward the extreme of the ideological spectrum, we expect them to adopt more consistently rhetorical frames, advocating for their public’s position, which is more extreme and less open to a complex, if more truthful, depiction of immigration. These conceptual axes may seem a bit blunt, but they speak to the media’s position both in the media environment and in relation to public opinion.

The Huffington Post portrays immigrants mostly as families, workers, and victims of abuse. A significant proportion of their images shows families, mostly mothers and children. When male immigrants are shown, it's generally as workers or as detainees in overcrowded camps, rarely as fathers. Its coverage is consistently sympathetic to the experience of immigrants, who are almost never shown as criminals. Frequent photos of protest and political figures against governmental policies present immigration mostly as a politically contested domestic issue. The root reasons for immigration, its human costs other than those imposed by U.S. policies, and its potential links with criminality are practically never illustrated. As a result, the Huffington Post's coverage, while being sympathetic, is also clearly advocating for a certain perception of immigration, which fits its categorization as a 'very liberal' media.

The photojournalistic representation of immigrants and immigration by the New York Times is far-reaching and nuanced by comparison to the Huffington Post or any of the outlets inspected here. Immigrants are represented as families, workers, detainees, but also as travelers—both solitary and in crowds—and sometimes as criminalized individuals. By engaging with the diverse (and sometimes challenging) identity of immigrants while remaining sympathetic to their faith, the NYT maintains a liberal editorial line while steering away from rhetorically uniform frames. This descriptive approach is reflected in the NYT's coverage of immigration as a regional phenomenon, which is not only about immigration and immigrants arriving to the United States, but also about the conditions of people forced out of their home-countries as well as those of migrants making their way across Latin America. The NYT's wealth explains at least in part the richness of its coverage, but so does its moderate ideological bias.

The Washington Time's coverage illustrates many of its articles on immigration with photos of political figures, probably an effect of being a Washington-based paper. As a result, the images it uses to frame immigrants and immigration themselves are relatively few despite being quite diverse. A bit like the NYT, from which it rarely differs significantly, but generally in the expected direction in our results, the Washington Time's photojournalism portrays immigrants as males and as families, as detainees in overcrowded camps and criminalized individuals. It centers its representation of immigration around the border, detentions centers, the work of law enforcement personnel and protests against government policy. In general, the results show the Washington Times's coverage to be only slightly more conservative than the NYT' its low-key rhetoric is consistent with its moderate right-wing bias.

Breitbart's photojournalism, finally, comes as no surprise. Immigrants are largely young males, often criminalized, coming in crowds or through illegal means. If there is a humanitarian angle to Breitbart's coverage, it is the gruesome exposition of migrants' bodies found dead in the desert; it justifies a wall and a shutdown of immigration more than it creates empathy for the people crossing into the United States. Immigration is exposed as a chaotic stream underneath which lurk murderers, rapists and, across the border, sadistic criminal gangs. Breitbart's graphic reporting of cartel criminality in Mexican border states, which is fraught with racist and xenophobic undertones, is perhaps one of its most distinguishing features. It legitimizes discourses criminalizing migrants and justifies strong borders and controls on immigration, without explicitly finger-pointing immigrants themselves. The radical nature of this organization is reflected both in its content, which criminalizes immigrants to instill fear in its readers, and in

its approach to journalism, which is overwhelmingly rhetorical, in particular through the use of strong framing effects.

## Discussion

What can the photojournalism of our four sources tell us about the media environment itself and how it shapes public opinion on immigration? In the abstract, the polarized media environment can be conceived rather schematically. Political biases differentiate media organizations and attract or alienate publics whose ideological predispositions are set. Sketched in that way, many mechanisms and implications of this process are obscured. One of the purposes of looking at media polarization as it affects the coverage of immigration was to shed some light on how it plays out concretely. The 2019 migration crisis at the Mexico-U.S. border has been represented in distinct, sometimes incompatible ways by different media. This is true of the content of that representation, which largely fits the expectation drawn from the literature, and of the rhetorical strategies used by different outlets, which diverge based on their position on the ideological spectrum. Liberal media offer a more positive view of immigrants and immigration and illustrate political contestation more than their conservative counterparts, which in turn hold a generally negative view of immigrants and immigration. When it comes to the rhetorical strategies of the four sources above, the radical-left and -right's biases are stronger, as predicted; their editorial choices focus much more on images that are consistent with and will reinforce their publics' preexisting opinions.

There is one telling, but somewhat unexpected aspect to the results presented: the consistently small differences between the NYT and the Washington Times. The only result clearly demarcating the two is caused by the NYT's exceptional representation of immigrants as family members (*H2c*), which is also surprisingly superior to the Huffington Post's. The statistical similarity of the two moderate sources doesn't exactly contradict the political communications literature, since it doesn't necessarily expect moderate sources to be strikingly different. It does inform our understanding of polarization, however: the middle-ground of the media environment can still be called "moderate", its representatives are not departing significantly from a common understanding of immigration or from a more or less comprehensive coverage of it. Such a position would be vacant in a completely polarized environment (which wouldn't necessarily mean that there are not differences in radicalism among sources of a same orientation).

A central claim of the literature on the new media environment is that it has a minimal effect on political views. Because audiences expose themselves only to ideologically compatible sources, biased editorial lines guide disagreeing readers or spectators into their respective echo-chambers. Articulating a political stance is only one side of the editorial work through which that process happens, however. It is complemented by a curatorial approach to content which is also subject to polarization. One of this thesis' findings is that as news organizations move toward the extremes of the political spectrum, not only do they take more radical stances toward immigration, but they also simplify its representation to fit their rhetoric. The far-right bias of Breitbart is not achieved simply by framing immigrants as criminals or normalizing detention centers but by silencing or obscuring constitutive aspect of immigration, for example the

significance of undocumented immigrant workers or of immigrant families. The same can be said of the Huffington Post's coverage, which doesn't show images of immigrants that would associate them with illegality or criminality. A more comprehensive coverage, like the one of the Washington Times or the New York Times, is likely to involve information that justifies diverse and seemingly contradictory positions on immigration.

The potential effects of a more restricted coverage are consistent with the literature on the new media environment and its minimal effect claim. More radical publics, in their tendency to insulate themselves from narratives conflicting with their views, should reject moderate sources of information as well as diametrically opposed ones. An alternative movement could also exist in which some radical publics are still exposed to a moderate media that could have mitigating effect on their political views. These mechanisms of polarization and moderation probably both happen, but with different demographics; it is not hard to imagine that far-right audiences, which are more suspicious of mainstream media than their liberal counterparts, would tend to insulate themselves more staunchly.

One important implication of the findings presented in this paper is that, at least in the case immigration coverage, media polarization is skewed to the right. Two features of pictures as framing tools make them particularly effective in entrenching and radicalizing perceptions of immigration. The first is that photographs can easily constitute very strong frames. Images have an advantage when it comes to this: they are quickly understood—one look is generally enough—and remembered—notably because they generate emotions; fear, empathy, disgust. We could reasonably expect radical news organizations to use stronger frames than moderate ones,



but that is not necessarily the case. The sheer size and financial means of the New York Times allows it to publish consistently memorable images, be it for their artistry, the intimacy of their subjects or their shock value. If the NYT's frames work together toward a single narrative, however, it is a complex one that encapsulates several realities. Breitbart, the most politically extreme source inspected here, is also the most forceful in its use of visual frames. Mostly dedicated to the violence and chaos surrounding immigration, the pictures it uses inspire fear and disgust, the narrative they create is simplistic yet shocking. The frames of the Huffington Post are tame by comparison. To be sure, some of the photographs it uses constitute strong frames, particularly those that portray immigrant families and reveal detention centers, but they do not come close to the shock value of Breitbart's. This could be attributable in part to the inherently shocking nature of violent images and to the possibility that showing consistently powerful images that humanize immigration is more demanding.

Right-wing media may be in a better position to exploit another feature of images, that of circumventing the limits of normatively acceptable discourse. Racist and xenophobic frames are only really effective when they are implicit (Valentino & al., 2002), which is easier done with pictures than with words. Taken one by one, photographs' effect on attitudes may be small to in-existent, but their strength lies in numbers: Breitbart consistently portrays immigrants as dangerous males of color, thus reinforcing negative racial stereotypes without having to say anything explicitly racist. What constitutes explicit and implicit terms may vary with audiences, of course. Breitbart's coverage may appear to some as blatantly racist and yet be seen by others, probably those with the preexisting attitudes it aims to reinforce, as an unbiased representation of reality. The reporting on cartel criminality in Mexican border states by Breitbart is a good

example of how xenophobic agendas can be “hidden” under the pretense of objective journalism. Without showing the Mexico-United States border or migrants per se, images of ruthless violence—gang members when they are alive are often shown covered in tattoos, grimacing threateningly; or hanging from bridges, riddled with bullet, decapitated or dismembered when they are dead—depict an anarchic region where life is nasty, brutish and short. Highlighting the ‘otherness’ of immigrants and foreigners, notably when it comes to civility, the frames used by Breitbart entrench the sociotropic fears of their audiences toward immigration. By comparison, the other media, which are not attracted to such taboo discourses, have no use for the potential of images for implicit discourse. It’s hard to imagine how a media outlet, the Huffington Post for example, could illustrate radical cosmopolitan takes on immigration with photos of the 2019 border crisis, even if it wanted.

Our intuition when speaking of media polarization is to schematize mirroring journalistic practices that their political biases alienate from each other. This research shows that, in the case of the photojournalistic coverage of immigration anyways, this intuition of symmetry is wrong. What we observe is that one end of the ideological spectrum uses the journalistic and rhetorical means at its disposal much more extensively than the other, which may lead conservative publics to have more extreme and rigid opinions. To be sure, many of the substantive expectations drawn from the political communication and public opinion on immigration literatures are respected in our results. The Huffington Post does portray the 2019 border crisis as a humanitarian issue and humanizes immigrants much more than Breitbart, but it is less consistently distinct from the coverage of the moderate New York Times and Washington Times, especially with regard to images of individual immigrants (as criminals or as family members). Breitbart’s coverage is

extremely consistent with the literature's expectations concerning it as well. The minimal effect thesis of the political communication literature may be true overall; none of the media is really susceptible of reorienting its public preexisting opinion. But Breitbart, by using powerful framing effects and by exploiting the potential of images to instill and support racist and xenophobic attitudes, is a lot more dedicated to creating a strong if fictitious worldview. These are all mechanisms through which it reinforces the preexisting opinions of its public toward immigration. Right-wing audiences' positions, according to this reading, are both entrenching and radicalizing to an extent that the left-wing publics' aren't, and images are playing a certain role in this process.

## Limitations

Several limitations of this research prevent us from generalizing its findings and from drawing implications with certainty. One unavoidable limitation concerns the measurement of bias, which is necessarily vague. Are the Washington Times and the New York Times really equally distant from the hypothetical center of the ideological spectrum? Probably not. Augmenting the number of sources would increase the reliability of our results in that respect. Another issue is that Breitbart News is likely to be more conservative than the Huffington Post is liberal. How much of this asymmetry explains the right-wing skew of the results presented here was impossible to know in the context of this thesis.

Other limitations apply to all hypothesis. For one thing, because different sources of similar ideological alignment will have different editorial approaches to the visual representation of immigration, the representativeness of the sources used here is questionable. The salience of

immigration, or of any of its aspects, will inevitably vary across these sources. The Wall Street Journal, for example, may be more interested in immigration's economic implications than its humanitarian ones, not because of its political leaning, but because of its focus on business. Differences in the coverage of immigration may also stem from the size and financial means of the news outlets. Those organizations with more financial capacity are not only able to generate more articles about immigration but can, in part because of this, cover more of its facets. Hiring photographers instead of relying on stock photos, while costly, allows wealthy organizations like The New York Times to produce portfolios adjusted for their editorial lines. For example, life narrative pieces that follow particular families throughout their migration are costly to make but provide the NYT with more humanitarian photos than outlets with fewer financial means. Political leaning cannot be expected to affect the visual representation of immigration alone. Further research could focus on ideologically similar news organisations to identify relevant control variables, surely not enough of which have been considered in producing the results presented here.

This research is also limited by not taking into account the relative visibility of the many coded images. The ones that made it onto the websites' homepages are likely to be more representative of the deliberate editorial approaches of the news organizations and to be more impactful on their audiences. An analysis that doesn't distinguish between front-page images and others is likely to misrepresent the editorial work. We could expect this to be particularly true for large, moderate media like the NYT. Its large number of publications makes their front-page a more exclusive affair, opening-up the possibility that some image types (images of 'criminals' in the NYT, for example) are systematically relegated to less-viewed articles because they diverge from the

editorial narrative. This problem shouldn't exist to the same extent for more radical organizations like Breitbart which, despite using a lot of images, have a relatively homogeneous coverage of immigration. In their case, the exclusive nature of the front-page probably won't make it differ significantly from the whole. By ignoring an important aspect of the editorial work—deciding which images get the most visibility—and assuming that this work is often one through a stance on political issues is taken, the results presented here may be underestimating the extent to which the visual coverage of immigration is biased, particularly in resourceful and nominally moderate organizations.

Particular hypotheses also have limitations of their own. The validity of *Hypothesis 1*'s results on threatening, humanitarian and economic images faces two problems. First, 'threat' and 'humanitarianism' cannot be universally coded. If some images are definitely working in either one of these directions, others occupy more liminal places; for example, not all incoming crowds are threatening; nor all pictures of detention camps made from a humanitarian perspective. More ambiguous images require interpretation and are thus subject to measurement errors which could be checked by a multiple coding strategy. A second limitation is that economic aspects of immigration, despite being of central importance to the phenomenon, are less photogenic and may be less photographed, as a result. This doesn't necessarily skew the results presented here, but the small number of sourced images lower the statistical significance of the observed trend in proportions.

*Hypothesis 2a*'s results on the gendered nature of immigrants' representation are problematic because they overlap significantly with *Hypothesis 2b*'s results on criminality. Indeed, many of

the images showing immigrants as men also portray them as criminals. When controlling for criminality, results for gender become much less statistically significant, but this may also be misleading. Simply excluding photos that show criminality or criminals ignores the fact that media that use them most, like in our case Breitbart, may be using them both as gendered and as threat-inducing devices. This leaves open the question of what types of images it would use to portray immigrants instead of the crime-oriented ones, in particular with respect to gender, to which *Hypothesis 2c* may be providing a clue. Breitbart's minimal depiction of immigrants as family-members could be interpreted as evidence of an editorial approach that masculinizes immigration.

## Conclusion

Toward the end of her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003, p.105), Susan Sontag reflects on a commonly held idea: “in a world saturated, no, hyper-saturated with images, those that should matter have a diminishing effect: we become callous. In the end, such images just make us a little less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked.” This critique of images, of which she was a proponent herself in her earlier work *On Photography* (1977), suggests that “it is the *sense* of reality that is eroded” (*ibid.*, p.109) and with it, our ability to respond to images in an ethical way. If it still valid today—after all, the tragic picture of Mr. Ramírez and his daughter Valeria did not prompt big shifts in public opinion and was shortly replaced by hundred more images—the problem presented by images has evolved since then, partly because of media polarization. Assuming that how publics imagine immigration is informed by the news, the fact that it changes so fundamentally across ideological lines might imply that the very realities

imagined by different political constituencies are becoming irreconcilable. Images could be key to this process.

For one thing, they are seen as evidence even as they frame a particular subject matter in a certain way. Written or verbal statements are more readily fact-checked than photos which, in most cases, can only exist if what they illustrate actually happened. Of course, this is not entirely true. Photography excludes whatever space and time lies outside its frame and the instant it captures; it can be as editorial and biased as text can be. Still, photographs attest that during the summer of 2019, men have been arrested at the border and that drugs were smuggled across it, that detention camps were overcrowded and that children were separated from their parents. But depending on which media an individual consumes, that person will witness starkly different immigrations, ones that align with their political biases. Liberal publics will see immigration framed as a humanitarian issue and immigrants as victims, families, workers. Conservatives' view of immigration will be shaped by threatening frames of it, as immigrants are criminalized and masculinized.

These findings are consistent with the expectations of the political communication and immigration literatures. But looking at images teaches us more about polarization. First, it shows the cost radicalism bears on the representation of immigration: far-left and far-right media will systematically exclude from their coverage of its elements that do not fit their political discourse. The Huffington Post practically never represents immigrants as criminals, and Breitbart almost never as families. The visual coverage of the 2019 immigration crisis also reveals that polarization is not the symmetrical phenomenon its name implies, that it is skewed to the right.

By using consistently strong frames and by implicitly reinforcing racial attitudes, right-wing media like Breitbart exploit photograph's potential much more efficiently than others. What is lost with polarization, on one hand, is a faithful representation of immigration, in all its complexity. On the other, a common perception of reality is eroding. We would like public opinion on immigration to be well-informed and rationally justified, but some of it is probably better explained by different perceptions of what immigration is.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Coding

#### **The predominance of male subjects**

As to avoid any confusion, the vast majority of the images coded as representing immigrants as predominantly males *only* show male subjects. In most cases, this prevents judgment calls about whether or not the presence of women or children is significant enough to dismiss images from this category. Some exceptions exist in which isolated subjects in the distant background appear to be female but where subjects in the foreground and/or middle ground are all males.

#### **The representation of immigration as a movement of invasion**

To categorize it as representing a movement of invasion, a picture had to show a crowd of immigrants or immigrants entering the United States through unauthorized means. This raises the question of when a crowd becomes a crowd. Some images, such as those of migrant “caravans” obviously fall into that category. Others are more ambiguous and required a judgment call on my part. One factor taken into consideration was the relationship of the group to the individuals assisting or “processing” them, be it border patrols or desk workers. Images in which groups of immigrants appeared to be overwhelming institutions were treated as showing immigration as a movement of invasion. “Unauthorized means” is not a clear-cut category either. Images that actually are of immigrants crossing into the United States illegally may not appear as such. Others are rather obvious however: migrants crossing the Rio Grande on foot or in boats; on train roofs or hopping across wagons; climbing over the wall or infiltrating one of its breaches.

### **Reference to criminality**

This broad category includes all images that refer to criminality, whatever their subjects. This could include drug trafficking, weapon trafficking, individuals in prison (which are distinct from detention centers) or being arrested, gang members, crimes or crime scenes.

### **The representation of immigrants as criminals**

This more restricted category of images portrays individuals as criminals. In general, the images coded in that category would show migrants being arrested, either near the border but also at their homes. This category also includes photos of gang members used by Breitbart, despite them obviously not being immigrants (Hypothesis 2b, which looks into these images specifically, makes sure to present results omitting images of gang members as well as results including them). Not all interactions with border patrols were coded as representing criminals: among them those images where agents are helping migrants getting to safety or passing through security checks, or where migrants are detained in detention camps. These don't associate immigrants with criminality as much as they do with illegality; the latter is less physically threatening and doesn't reinforce the same stereotypes as the former.

### **The representation of immigrants as family members**

This category is relatively simple. The presence of families in pictures was sufficient to code them in that category. Photos including only children were also coded in, as we can assume most of them are family members, even if they are separated from their families.

### **Reference to trade and economic integration of immigrants**

Images in this category represented trade by showing imported produces (in crates, trucks, in markets or in groceries) or means of transportation (cargo boats, trucks). The economic integration of immigrants is a blurrier indicator in principle. They were in fact almost all images of immigrants working in fields graduating from college. Although these images could hypothetically be used to illustrate the “immigrants stealing our jobs” trope, this was never actually the case.

### **Reference to overcrowded detention centers (inductive)**

In this category fell images that show crowds of detainees in cages of course, but also other images that illustrated the problematic conditions in the detention centres. That was the case of images of lines of individuals (notably children) being walked outside.

### **Reference to political activism opposing the Trump administration’s policies.**

This category is relatively self-evident: it contains images of protests and public addresses before crowds. It includes images of protests against Trump’s immigration policies in general, not just those regarding the border situation.

### **“Threatening” images**

Threatening images comprise those images that refer to criminality, that show criminality in association with immigration, or immigration as a movement of invasion, and those that represent immigrants as criminals or as males.



### **Images emphasizing the “humanitarian” nature of the crisis**

“Humanitarian” images seek to create sympathy by emphasizing the human character of migrants by representing their emotions, their vulnerability and family connections. This category, then, comprises images of immigrants as family members, as detainees in an overcrowded detention center, but also those that show them as victims of violence or being helped out of perils by border agents.

