

Going Negative: Immigration Rhetoric in Congressional Hearings



Abstract

During the last decade, the political rhetoric regarding immigration has increasingly become more negative. This study seeks to ascertain if context, rather than rhetoric as an entrepreneurial mechanism of power, can predict the use of negative narratives. In building a comprehensive database on the discussion of immigration, we address the pertinent variables that cause members of Congress, and experts invited to congressional hearings, to talk about immigration negatively. Coding remarks from every congressional hearing regarding immigration from the 103rd Congress through the 113th Congress, allowed us to ascertain if external factors can predict negativity. Moreover, this enabled us to map-out the trends in the tone of immigration rhetoric, how it has changed over time. Such an analysis provides insight into the externalities that shape congressional leadership. Rather than determining if congressional attention to immigration is capable of effecting change in the policy narrative, we think that understanding the dynamic as a way for members to capitalize on the public mood provides a more enriching assessment of the immigration discussion.

Guiding Questions for the Analysis

Research Question 1:

What patterns, if any, emerge in the rhetoric of government officials while they are providing 'expert' witness testimony to Congress in sub-committees on immigration?

Research Question 2:

What patterns, if any, emerge in the rhetoric of elected officials while they are providing 'expert' witness testimony to Congress in sub-committees on immigration?

Research Question 3:

What patterns, if any, emerge in the rhetoric of interest group officials while they are providing 'expert' witness testimony to Congress in sub-committees on immigration?

Impetus for the Study

The discourse on immigration, from political actors, has changed significantly since September 11th, 2001; it is much more negative.

Presidential rhetoric has increasingly become more negative when discussing immigration, creating a pervasive negative immigrant narrative in political discourse (Arthur & Woods, 2013).

The change in rhetorical tone and a dramatic increase has taken place in legislative action at the state level. Since 2005, states have increased their 'immigration' activities from 300 proposed bills to 1,305 in 2008.

Scholarship on immigration rhetoric, as shaped by context, in congressional hearings has not been fully developed. We offer a descriptive look at the context of those hearings on immigration rhetoric.

Theoretical Framework

As Rottinghaus (2006) stated, presidents tailor their policy statements on salient issues to match the majority public opinion polls.

Maintaining this 'rhetorical congruency' with public opinion enables the president to strategically connect to the public, especially during times of reelection (Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2004).

The attacks on 9/11 and the fear of terrorism hardened public attitudes toward immigrants and encouraged negative stories about those who could be classified as non-American in the news media (Woods & Arthur, 2013).

The public's negativity towards immigration saw a 20 percent increase directly after 9/11, from 38 percent to 58 percent (Woods & Arthur, 2012).

The public's concern over 'illegal immigration' also saw an increase (28 to 45) of nearly 20 percent after 9/11 (Segovia & Defever, 2010).

Empirical Design/Model

For this research, we used congressional hearings from both chambers. In the Senate it was the senate committee on immigration and in the house it was various sub-committees. The years of this study were from 1994 through 2005. The years 1996 and 2003 were absent from this study due to time limitations. The hearings were coded so that the use of the trigger word "immigration" would be used to record the negativity of the comment being made in the hearing. The word 'immigration' was used as opposed to 'immigrant' because there is a perpetual 'positivity' associated, in the political rhetoric, with the word 'immigrant.'

Independent Variables

Each mention of immigration was coded with the following variables, including the political party of the member of Congress (Democrat (1 = yes or 0 = no); Republican (1 = yes or 0 = no)), whether the mention was made before 9/11 or after (1 = after; 0 = before), whether or not there was an election transpiring when the speech was given (1 = election year; 0 = no election year), ideological spectrum (DW-Nominate Scores), Elected Politician (1 = Elected or 0 = Not Elected), Non-Elected Bureaucrat (1 = Non-Elected Bureaucrat or 0 = Not in Government), Interest Group Representative (1 = From an Interest Group or 0 = Not from Interest Group), divided government (1 = president and Congress are a *different* party; 0 = president and Congress are a *same* party), Chamber Control (House - Democrat (1 = yes or 0 = no); Republican (1 = yes or 0 = no)) & (Senate - Democrat (1 = yes or 0 = no); Republican (1 = yes or 0 = no)), whether there was a recession happening (1 = yes; 0 = no), the Unemployment Rate (continuous variable expressed in percentage), the Inflation Rate (continuous variable expressed in percentage), and the social identifiers (1 = Mexico, Central America, Caribbean, South America (also Latino or Hispanic); 2 = Europe; 3 = Asia; 4 = Africa; 5 = Arab/Middle East; 6 = Oceania; 7 = Canada; 8 = none mentioned) as well as the geographical area the member represents (1 = Northeast; 2 = South; 3 = Midwest; 4 = West), whether or not the member mentioned reforming the immigration process (1 = Immigration Reform and 0 = Reform not mentioned), and whether the speaker is from a Border State (1 = yes; 0 = no).

Dependent Variables

For each mention of 'immigration,' we coded the presence of a negative frame. To accomplish this, we created the dependent variable: presence of negative frame (0 or 1). The outcome variable is dichotomous, wherein "1" represents at least one negative immigration frame was present. The "0" will represent no negative immigration frame in the mention of immigration. The negative frames are defined as either illegality, criminality, terrorism, or economic threats (Woods & Arthur, 2014).

At Least one Negative Frame Present

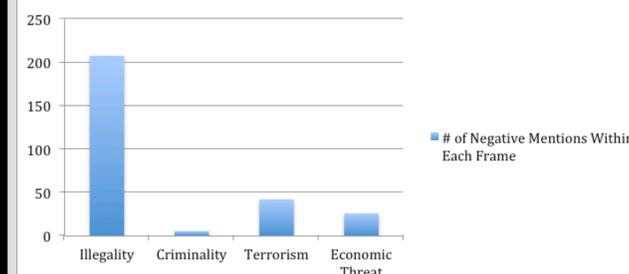
- 1 = A Negative Narrative Mentioned
- 0 = NOT mentioned

Negative Storylines in Rhetoric

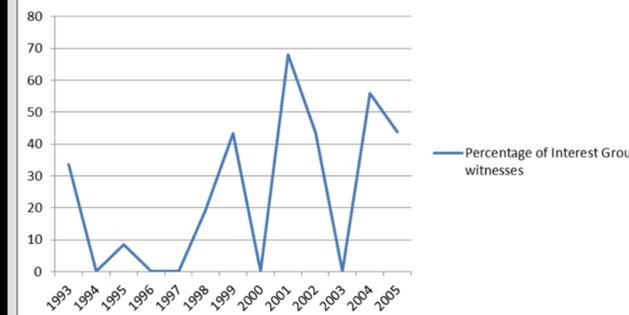
- 1 = Illegal Immigration
- 2 = Criminality
- 3 = Terrorism
- 4 = Economic Threat

Results

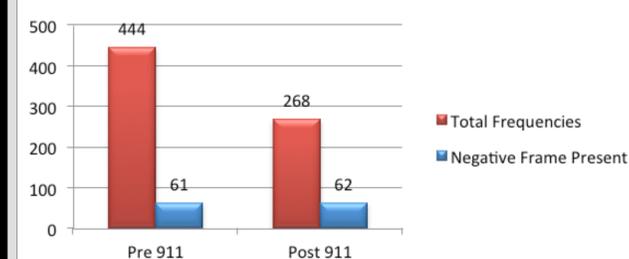
of Negative Mentions Within Each Frame



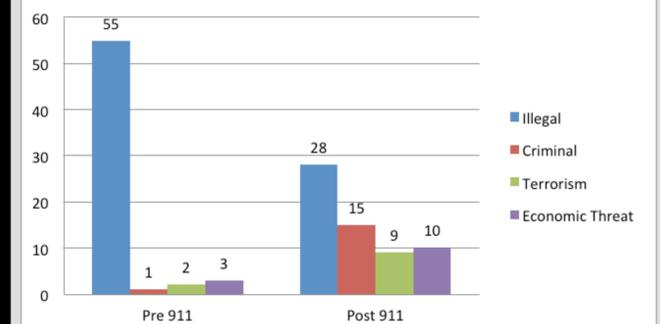
Percentage of Interest Group witnesses



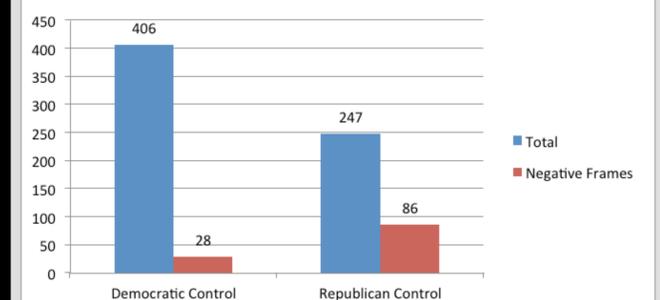
Pre and Post 9/11



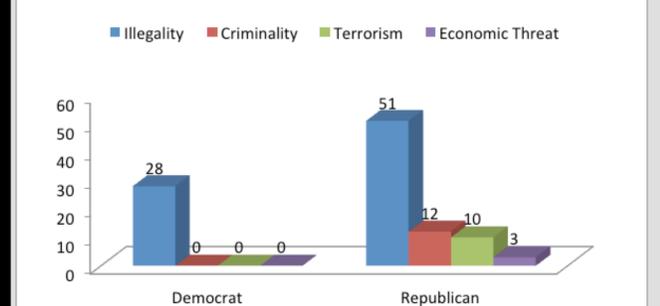
Negative Frames Pre and Post 9/11



Control of Committee



Committee Negative Frames



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