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# **Immigration policy narratives and the politics of identity: causal issue frames in the discursive construction of America's social borders**

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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# **Immigration Policy Narratives and the Politics of Identity: Causal issue frames in the discursive construction of America's social borders**

**Felicity P. Tan**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2013, a bipartisan proposal for comprehensive immigration reform in the United States won an uphill battle in the Senate, but as of this writing, the House has taken no action. Offering a pathway to citizenship for an estimated 11 million undocumented migrants, the reform bill has proven both congruous and divisive, splitting the Republican Party. One strand of policymaking theory highlights the role of perceptions, suggesting that policy conflict originates from disagreements in problem definition rather than outright solutions, and where attributing blame for the problem plays a crucial role in soliciting coalition support. This paper situates causal attribution theory within the field of political communications by introducing the concept of *causal issue framing*, or the discursive portrayal of the problem and its causes that emphasizes agency. Drawing on theories of identity and social distancing, this inquiry hypothesizes that causal framing necessarily constructs social borders, which in the context of immigration policy are contingent on competing interpretations of the American identity.

To dissect the ways Republican senators engage in the politics of policy perception, the Narrative Policy Framework, a nascent form of critical discourse analysis, was employed on political speeches. The identified causal frames show that solving the 'immigration problem' is unanimously seen as necessary to preserve the national identity but perceptions of how it poses a problem vary: one camp views restricting migrants as endangering national identity, whereas the other sees immigration as the threat. The findings also suggest that belief systems underpin conceptualizations of identity, and thus the causal theories that shape coalitions. The portrayal of these notions by political elites may impact how audiences perceive social boundaries in America, with the potential to institutionalize or delegitimize hegemonic relations.

## INTRODUCTION

As of this writing, one of the most sweeping reforms in United States immigration history is stalled in Congress despite having passed in the Senate. Sponsored by the bipartisan ‘Gang of Eight’ senators, S.744 or the *Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act* seeks to provide legal status for an estimated 11 million undocumented migrants, while its opponents argue it insufficiently secures the border (Ward, 2013). This inquiry examines how policy elites attempted to advance or impede the passage of S.744 in the US Senate, with a focus on the ways in which they frame the problem in their speeches. In so doing, present analysis also explores beliefs about national identity and America’s social borders.

Following a free-fall in support from the United States’ largest minority during the 2012 presidential elections (Pew Hispanic, 2012), Republicans now view reclaiming their share of the rapidly growing Hispanic voting bloc ‘a matter of political survival’ (Reuters, 2013). A recent Latino Decisions/America’s Voice poll (2013) shows that 44-percent of Democratic Hispanic voters would choose Republican in 2014 if the GOP led on immigration reform with a pathway to citizenship. Americans on aggregate also view immigration more favorably, with a decisive shift in favor of policies dealing with immigrants already in the US as opposed to tougher border-control measures (Gallup, 2012). However, fearing ‘getting primaried’ by voter bases that ‘hate anything that smacks of amnesty’ (Vandehei and Allen, 2012), many Republican leaders continue to oppose reform, resulting in rifts among the political right (Ward, 2013). The Senate debates on 9-11 June show that the GOP remain deeply divided over immigration, with 32 out of 46 voting against S.744 when it passed the Democrat-controlled chamber 68-32 on 27 June.

This study is an attempt engage with the questions Fryberg and others (2012: 97) raised regarding the implications immigration frames have on ‘defining the boundaries of American national identity.’ A linguistic, neo-institutional approach recognizes policymaking as ‘a struggle over alternative realities’ that language ‘reflects, advances and interprets’ (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: 9). If policy conflict is a competition of packaged ideas, then understanding the Republican divide necessitates an examination of the various frames through which the GOP perceive and promote the issue.

This study, however, goes beyond simply identifying frames. According to Rochefort and Cobb (1994: 8), frames contain statements of values, some ‘so dominant that their influence goes unexamined.’ As such, Rosenau asserts that ‘policy proposals cry out to be...torn apart

from within' (cited in Rochefort and Cobb: 7). Yet previous research on framing the immigration debate has tended to focus on identifying news frames and their effects on public opinion<sup>1</sup> or how they impact Washington politics.<sup>2</sup> While these studies make significant contributions to understanding the immigration debate, the frames themselves are taken at face value, leaving their role in reflecting and directing beliefs about 'who gets to be American' unexplored. Present analysis thus aims to dissect the frames themselves as they carry latent meanings that can reform or sustain the status quo.

Specifically, this inquiry will examine the various ways the Republican Party conceives of immigration as a social problem, under the assumption that problem definitions contain certain beliefs and guide preferred solutions that if enacted, have bearing on social organization. Stone (1989: 293) posits that the 'policy tug of war' is a result of conflicting problem definitions – causal attributions in particular – more so than the 'blunt instruments of elite control' (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991: 1050). In other words, disagreement over policy measures is fundamentally a conflict about who or what is to blame for social conditions that are deemed problematic. Policymaking as a 'function of the perceived nature of the problem' is shaped by cultural values (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: 4) but at the same time 'involves strategic efforts to manipulate the understanding of reality' (Baumgartner and Jones: 1049). Taken together, policymaking possesses a political sociological function that can reveal and construct perceptions of political identities and relationships.

This paper begins by exploring the theoretical foundations of causal attribution theory and, by applying it to the ongoing debate on US immigration reform, situates it firmly within the field of political communication. Using an emerging approach to narrative analysis particular to policy texts, the inquiry will systematically examine how causality is framed in political speeches, because their narrative form renders them promisingly rich in meaning-making. Finally, the findings aim to contribute to an understanding of social relations based on what is here termed *causal issue framing*. This study hopes to illuminate cultural assumptions and interpretations of the American identity, as well as mechanisms of exclusion in what is traditionally considered a nation of immigrants.

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<sup>1</sup> See Nelson, 2004; Dunaway *et al.*, 2010; Hayes, 2011; Knoll *et al.*, 2011

<sup>2</sup> See Suro, 2009; Westen, 2009

## **THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

Despite or because of the United States' history as a nation of immigrants, reforming US immigration policy has long been characterized by intense debates and political deadlock, leaving Americans today 'as conflicted as ever about [their] historical identity' (Ewing, 2012: 7). Contained in 'rival claims about the causes, dynamics and effects' of immigration (Boswell *et al.*, 2011: 1), immigration policy debate has consistently featured talk of race, culture and ethnicity, shaping and reshaping the face of American society for nearly two centuries (Bailey, 2013; Martin, 2013). This chapter discusses how the discursive construction of 'the immigration problem' in the policy sphere can conceal, reveal and actuate beliefs about what defines 'American' and delineates its social boundaries.

### **The Politics of Policy Perception**

The 'neo-institutionalist turn' in policymaking emphasizes the production of ideas that compete in a politically charged arena, where frames drive the debate and influence decision-making (Boswell *et al.*, 2011: 1–2). Predicated on a confluence of factors, policy change typically occurs during episodes that Baumgartner and Jones (1991) have termed "punctuated equilibrium," when the policy pendulum swings from stasis and creates potential for dramatic paradigm shifts, as appears to be the case with S.744. Wood and Doan (2003: 641) postulate that such shifts occur when the 'social interpretation of a condition' changes. That is, when the cost of tolerating a condition is thought to outweigh its benefits, individuals mobilize against it. Crucially, these interpretations are subject to manipulation. As Bovens and others (2008) argue, what matters in policymaking is not actual consequences but the political construction thereof.

#### *Problems and causality in policy conflict*

The power to define issues and 'make definitions stick' is key to policy practice (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 252). As Ezrahi (1980: 112) explains, policy conflict goes deeper than the public wrangling over potential impacts:

Political considerations are not confined to the substance of policies chosen, but are present in the decisions about what problems and conditions are to be dealt with. The identification of problems, like the policies...devised to deal with them, are as seen as part of the pursuit of

political objectives.... [Their] very selection and definition...are often means to win support, divert public attention from other problems, and express certain political commitments.

To make sense of policy conflict, then, Wood and Doan (2003: 640) argue that 'how and why conditions become defined as public problems' at the outset must first be understood. Problems are not simply 'out there' waiting to be identified, but strategically defined by political actors to elicit salience and support in advancing their own agendas (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991). In this way, policymaking is a strategic contest 'to manipulate the understanding of reality' so as to reinforce policy positions, with problem definition as the organizing axis (Baumgartner and Jones: 1049). Policy elites are thus, in Spector and Kitsuse's words, 'claims-makers' (cited in Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: p.6) who help constituents make sense of phenomena and circumscribe their response options.

While problem definition initiates the sense-making process, assigning blame for the problem forms the 'crux of public discourse' (Lawrence, 2004: 58). Causal attributions are 'beliefs about what causes a social problem' (Niederdeppe *et al.*, 2011: 297). Stone (2012: 225) contends policymakers make a political choice 'about which causal factors...to address' that once decided become 'the linchpin to a whole set of interdependent propositions that construct [the issue's] edifice' (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: 16). Linking participants' perceptions of responsibility with their social motivations, Weiner (in Niederdeppe *et al.*) concluded that rejection or support for policy depend on these causal attributions, moderated by their political ideology and worldviews. For instance, key points of contention in recent debates are whether illegal immigration is caused by lax border security or responds to market conditions, whether migrants help or harm the economy, and whether they are a risk to national security. Following Weiner's logic, the causal theory that prevails will determine if policy outcomes favor restrictive measures advocated by conservatives, or adopt a liberal approach and streamline migrant opportunities. Indeed, the multidimensionality of an issue, not least in immigration policy, enables actors to highlight aspects 'on which they enjoy a partisan advantage' (Jerit, 2008: 4).

### **Frames: making policy meaningful**

How policy actors articulate issues can powerfully shape action. Their ideas are expressed in the language with which they frame the issue, enabling participants to 'locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life space' in ways that guide their response to the

policy option presented (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 257). According to Entman (cited in Lee and Chang, 2010: 71):

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient...to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral valuation, and/or treatment recommendation.

*Issue frames*, then, ‘emphasiz[e] a subset of potentially relevant considerations’ (Lee and Chang, 2010: 71), thereby directing attention to those attributes, and shaping policy beliefs for the purpose of mobilizing support (see also Benford and Snow, 2000). For Goffman (1974: 21), however, framing forges an even deeper connection between speaker and audience: not only do frames provide context for understanding particular perspectives, they render ‘what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect...into something meaningful.’ Following Goffman, Nelson (2004: 584) proposes that frames’ ‘signature action’ is claiming the ‘special importance of a value’ that resonates with the public. As with problem definitions, frames are not simply ‘out there.’ They not only help participants make sense, but ‘*are* the sense we make [emphasis mine],’ highlighting certain aspects while relegating others to the background and ‘binding together’ features into ‘coherent and graspable’ patterns (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 259). Policy conflict is thus inextricably enmeshed in the ‘politics of signification’ (Benford and Snow), wherein framing enacts not only sense-making but meaning-making.

### *Frames in culture*

The meaning-making power of issue framing can be expounded by Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, in which perceptions are realized through the continual interplay between agents and social structures, the latter being codes of signification through which meaning is constituted. Frames, furthermore, are socially produced: ‘semantic collaboration’ between speakers and audiences establishes an ‘effective meaning [without which] utterances...have no intrinsic communicative status’ (Jamieson, 2001: 324). Meaning is thus negotiated in a dialogical process of production, consumption and re-production (Silverstone, 2005), such that ‘public reason’ over policy direction emerges from ‘communicative interaction’ (Simon and Jerit, 2007: 254).

In the policy sphere, however, where the ‘movement of meaning’ (Fairclough, 2003: 30) originates is contested. Gamson (2001) suggests that in strong democracies, public deliberation forges a consensus that government later executes, whereas Baumgartner and



Jones (1991: 1051) argue that the public ‘often come into the [policy] process following elite debate and respond to symbols generated during the elite conflict.’ Immigration policy research in the last decade shows that the connection between public opinion and legislation is weak, but strengthens when ‘demagogic political actors *elect to mobilize* [emphasis mine] popular xenophobia’ to support restrictive policies (Fetzer, 2011: 185). This suggests that issue frames deployed in policy debate are ‘not above people but among them’ (Van Gorp, 2010, p.89), drawing from and contributing to a ‘social cognition’ (Van Dijk, 1993) that organizes attitudes toward immigrants and immigration.

Policy actors seeking support for their solutions must thus tap into *frames in thought* – a pre-existing ‘set of dimensions’ that affect evaluations – in order to produce *frames in communication*, or articulations that ‘organize everyday reality by providing meaning...and promoting particular...interpretations of political issues’ (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 106–107). While meaning may be ‘in the people’ (Jamieson, 2001: 325), policy actors actively mediate culturally embedded frames-in-thought and empower these cognitions by actually using them in frames-in-communication (Van Gorp, 2010). Political elites therefore have the power to produce frames that persuade: they are key agents in the mobilization of bias. In their ability to ‘texture’ meaning (Fairclough, 2003: 12), they can generally lead the public but are nonetheless constrained by culturally available frames (Elliott, 2005; Simon and Jerit, 2007).

### *Causal issue frames*

The literature strongly suggests, however, that communicative frames do channel reactions, particularly when they isolate causal agents. D. Stone (1989) posits that attributing blame is the most powerful positioning strategy in policy conflict, noting that how an actor chooses to portray an issue can substantially affect beliefs about what – or more compellingly, *who* – is to blame for the problem as they define it. According to Sayer, actors explain the causal links by ‘postulating and identifying mechanisms...capable of producing’ the problem (cited in Stones, 2012: 6). In elaborating the ‘structuration’ of such frames, Stones (2012: 6) notes that phenomena become more meaningful once conceptualized ‘as already being caught up in the flow of the positioned-practices of variously located actors and their relations.’

Thus, by constraining ‘the range of...”reasonable” solutions and strategies’ (Benford and Snow, 2000: 616), *causal issue framing*, as it were, links worldviews and ideology to what Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith call ‘secondary beliefs’ about policy implementation (cited in

McBeth *et al.*, 2007: 89), paying special attention to agency. In analytic terms, *diagnostic framing*, or the ‘identification of the source of causality, blame and/or culpable agents,’ is strongly correlated to *prognostic framing*, ‘the articulation of a proposed solution’ (Benford and Snow: 615–616). Frames are thus ‘normative-prescriptive stories,’ or ‘organizing framework[s of] understanding’ that narratives weave into a ‘collective centering’ of policy choices (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 256–257). That is, ‘causal stories’ (Stone, 1989) advance causal issue frames, using the latter as ‘underlying structures of belief[s]’ about how the world ought to be, thereby constructing realities and connecting them to policy action (Boswell *et al.*, 2011: 4): in the immigration debate, to welcome or to build walls. By this logic, framing the cause of the immigration problem in relation to the nation’s social constitution would trigger policy responses dependent on the beliefs used to invoke a particular interpretation of identity or social order.

## **Debating immigration**

### *Policy perception revisited: narratives, discourse and society*

Treating the policy sphere as site where interpretations of a phenomenon compete (i.e., through causal issue frames) produces a social constructivist, ‘linguistic account’ of policymaking, in which actors build ‘an image of the world that is acted upon and constitutes the world at the same time’ (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 264). Because these interpretations already circulate in the social realm, they are in effect *discourses* that guide discussion about the issue and are furthermore institutionalized in social practices (Hajer and Laws). It follows, then, that more fervid debates involve more divergent popular discourses, which Hayes (2011) makes evident in his research on ‘welcoming’ and ‘restrictive’ frames employed in recent immigration debates. Coinciding with Lawrence’s (2004: 54) assertion that frames are merely ‘anchoring poles in a continuum of discourse,’ Patterson and Monroe (1998) re-orient the locus of competition to narratives, such that *political narratives*, strategically constructed and shaped in the pursuit of popular support, become the ‘lifeblood of politics’ (Shanahan, McBeth, *et al.*, 2011: 374). Shenhav (2006) defines political narratives as discourses emerging from political settings or contain themes considered political, such as power relations and collective decision-making. Crucially, he sees them as necessarily products of perspectives: they originate and conclude in particular viewpoints. As such, political narratives are ‘loaded’ with embedded meanings, and framed within the constraints of existing beliefs and cultural assumptions (Feldman *et al.*, 2004: 150).

Narratives draw on ideology and at the same time have ideological effects. Policy actors can use them to maintain the status quo or ‘transform...the wider culture’ (Elliott, 2005: 50); either way, as social discourses they reflect the basic aims and values of certain social groups. Political narratives are thus fundamentally about the struggle for dominance and hegemony, whereby power is achieved when one group manages to impose their way of thinking on the rest of society (Matheson, 2005; Hajer and Laws, 2008). These beliefs are embedded in a ‘primary social framework’ (Goffman, 1974) through which the group understands social organization, perceptions that are in turn enacted in public discourse (Jones, 2009). In the immigration debate, then, narratives have the power to structure social relations in ways that bound citizenship, ‘shifting and blurring’ (Jones, 2009: 189) as competing frameworks reify pre-existing interpretations (Mouffe, 1992).

### *Citizenship: Stories of the Self and Other*

Talk of immigration cannot avoid talk of nation (Lynn and Lea, 2003). Anderson famously defined nation as ‘an imagined political community’ (cited in Andrews, 2007: 195) whose collective identity Andrews (2007: 196) posits ‘can be accessed through the stories it tells about [itself].’ As Yuval-Davis suggests, identities are in fact ‘stories people tell...about who they are’ (cited in Andrews, 2007: 9). Drake (2010: 54) further proposes that identity is ‘a social classification that can be imposed or claimed’ by a group or individual and is thus contestable, negotiable, and open to re-evaluation. Citizenship is, in this sense, the legal recognition of a constructed identity, whose attributes change over time and according to socio-political configurations.

Crucially, identity formation depends on defining an Other, a “constitutive outside”...that is the very condition of [the group’s] existence’ (Mouffe, 1992: 30). Notions of citizenship are no exception; they inevitably create insiders who benefit from legitimacy, and outsiders whose very exclusion gives meaning to membership (Stone, 2012). According to social identity theory, individuals tend to organize the world into *in-groups* and *out groups*, which can be reinforced by labels and ethnic cues such as ‘illegal’ or ‘Mexican’ (Knoll *et al.*, 2011). These identifiers carry ‘a range of emotive, practical and moral connotations’ (Drake, 2010: 55) invoked to defend the in-group’s dominant status, and can consequently provoke intergroup anxiety (Knoll *et al.*).

If the politics of policy perception is value-laden, then narratives can build causal frames ‘around exaggerations and outright lies playing on the fears and prejudices of the public’

(Chong and Druckman, 2007: 111). Integrated Threat Theory postulates that anxiety develops from realistic threats to an in-group's political and economic power, as well as symbolic threats that arise from 'perceived differences in morals, values [and] norms' (Stephan *et al.*, 2000: 241). While both can lead to prejudice, the latter subjective threat is most relevant to 'symbolic racism' wherein the out-group, due to the 'cognitive classification' attributed to them, is perceived to violate the moral status quo (Osborne *et al.*, 2008: 63–64; see also Stephan *et al.*, 2000). As Westen (2009: 13) notes, individuals do not easily empathize with those 'who do not share their language or...their culture.' Jost and others (2003: 349) attribute this inclination to a desire to 'minimize group conflict by developing...belief systems that justify the hegemony of some groups over others.' Narratives assist these attitudes by distilling certain understandings of political reality and therefore beliefs about participants' places in the world (Feldman *et al.*, 2004), socially and, in the immigration context, territorially.

### *Ideology, identity and the question of immigration*

The ideologies embedded in narratives are key to constructing the physical borders and social boundaries that are at the heart of the immigration debate. Fairclough (2003: 9) defines ideologies as 'representations of aspects of the world' that shape societal arrangements and power relations. Policy narratives, then, preach specific interpretations of how 'the world ought to be' in an attempt to 'resolve the imbalance' precipitated by the perceived problem (Patterson and Monroe, 1998: 320–321). Causal issue frames anchor those interpretations. On the one hand a technically complex 'hard issue' that should theoretically attract low interest, immigration is simultaneously an 'easy issue,' a familiar, long-unresolved conflict that triggers gut responses (Nelson, 2004; Lee and Chang, 2010). Immigration, therefore, is what Rittel and Weber call a 'wicked problem,' where disagreement on 'what the problem really is' make compromise difficult to attain (cited in Hajer and Laws, 2008: 251). In such cases, decisions become dependent on principles and belief systems (McBeth *et al.*, 2007).

Although pivotal, ideology is only part of the persuasive formula in the immigration debate. At its core, immigration policy and the discourses surrounding it establish a bond between people and place, and in so doing, stir a 'reaffirmation of national identity' (Lynn and Lea, 2003: 426). Narratives play a key role here: they enable the expression of ideas of belonging and 'contribute to understanding[s] of the political universe' (Andrews, 2007: 2). The immigration debate thus represents a 'deep-seated conflict' over values as well as group interests (Boswell *et al.*, 2011: 3). In their cultural cognition thesis, Kahan and others (2007)

assert that groups seek to protect their identities on the basis of perceptions of risk that are in turn informed by their core values. As discussed, narratives not only have the power to organize those understandings but also construct *relational* identities. Thus, facilitated by narratives, causal frames in the immigration debate anchor ideologically resonant meanings within policy positions, guiding participants in selecting identity-protective courses of action. At the heart of the debate over immigration reform, then, lies the question of who is in and who is out, and more precisely: Who is American?

### **Conceptual framework**

Defining ‘American’ speaks to more than mere belonging: when discourses that form the basis of policy draw boundaries on identity, they are legitimized and become legally enforceable. Thus, while following structuration theory, present analysis is also rooted in both social constructivism and constructionism. Together with a perception-driven, neo-institutionalist view of policymaking, these approaches enable the inquiry to assume that causal issue framing is ‘a deliberate act...to make others follow particular patterns of signification’ (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 258), whereby policy elites ‘in their role as narrators’ can dominate, though not determine, discourse production in ways that have implications for policy output as well as the social (Hammer, 2010: 270). Two main concepts emerge: Hajer and Laws’ *ordering devices* (2008: 252-254) conceptual tools that ‘mediate between actor and structure’ and capture how policy actors ‘allocate particular significance’ to their interpretations; and Lascoumes and Les Gales’ *political sociological approach* (2007), wherein policy is translated from dominant values and beliefs about social relations, thereby transforming ideology into political reality.

#### *The political sociology of policy*

The political sociological approach to policymaking postulates that ordering devices reify particular beliefs, and at the same time produce artefacts in the form of policy themselves. The social constructivist take on policymaking emphasizes the role of problem portrayal, and views political reality as ‘an organized universe of meanings’ derived from assumptions ‘influenced by politics and power’ (Bovens *et al.*, 2008: 326). Furthermore, as opposed to a strictly functionalist view of policymaking whereby measures are technical tools for meeting objectives, Lascoumes and Les Gales (2007: 3–4,12) contend that policy instrumentation is both product and producer of political effects:

Every instrument constitutes a condensed form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it, [thereby] organiz[ing] specific social relations.... They are bearers of values fuelled by one interpretation of the social..., set out values and interests protected by the state..., [and] direct social behavior.

From a social constructionist perspective, then, policies ‘incorporate differentials of power’ (Giddens, 1984: 31): by containing structures of signification, they possess a dimension of social organization that can be institutionalized, such as when policy is signed into law. Even when policy proposals fail, once they have entered the realm of discourse, their underlying beliefs

are transmitted through social institutions...and day-to-day interactions [that] quickly become part of everyday life...internalized as ‘truth’ or ‘fact’ [and] passed into the realm of ‘common knowledge’ (Lynn and Lea, 2003: 428).

### *Ordering devices*

Hajer and Laws (2008: 255–257) conceptualize these structures of signification as ordering devices: beliefs, frames and narratives. In the policy sphere, *belief systems* ‘build societal explanations of policy’ from a coalition of individuals with ‘clearly defined and stable value preferences,’ informing not only their choices but their associations. In other words, collective identities are bound together by the pursuit of core values, which produces a ‘distinctive ordering’ that bound social borders and illuminate an actor’s ‘search for a causal theory.’ Belief systems are contained in *frames*, in ways that enable policy elites to meaningfully ‘articulate and align’ events with their causal theories.

Traditional framing analysis, however, focuses on the minutiae of word choice, ‘foreclos[ing] any examination of the broader content’ (Simon and Jerit, 2007: 256–257). A deeper analysis of causal framing thus requires examining a higher level of ordering, the *narrative*. Through emphasis, inclusion and exclusion, policy narratives are an elaborate form of framing that provide a web of ‘evaluative commentary’ on the perceived social problem and suggest ‘recipes for change’ (Feldman *et al.*, 2004: 148), prompting Boswell and others (2011) to term them as ‘narratives of steering.’ Present analysis therefore seeks to specifically investigate causal stories, which frame issues by explaining relationships of causality in a storyline that includes characterizations and justificatory statements, and woven through the ‘symbolic convergence’ (McGrath, 2007: 271) of perceptions between speaker and audience (see also Stone, 2012). Indeed, Hajer and Laws (2008: 255) propose that ordering devices help

explain social ordering by illuminating ‘elements of exchange and coalition-building,’ and how these are tied to policy action. As ordering devices, narratives can thus extract not only dominant assumptions, but as artefacts of structuration, can likewise reveal deeply embedded beliefs.

### **Research question**

Following a political sociological approach, present analysis accepts policymaking as privileging certain actors and groups over others, ‘ordered’ through attributions of blame. These causal theories are framed through policy narratives that, in the context of immigration reform, promote particular notions of the national identity that not only speak to territorial borders but also social boundaries. This study further presumes that the ‘invidious rhetoric’ (The Economist, 2013) characterizing the debate over immigration reform results from competing interpretations of the underlying problem, themselves rooted in different understandings of what constitutes the American identity. Given that conflict over immigration reform is most palpable within the ranks of the Republican Party, this inquiry seeks to uncover:

1. *What causal attributions do Republicans make to frame their policy claims?*
2. *How do these attributions fit into beliefs about social boundaries and identity?*
3. *What are the implications of these attributions to hegemonic relations, and what it means to be American?*

By exploring the causal frames embedded in policy narratives, this paper hopes to empirically converge theorizations of policy perception and causal attribution in policy studies to structuration and framing theories located in political communications scholarship. Furthermore, the findings hope to make explicit the underlying assumptions behind the conflict over immigration reform, thus contributing to an understanding of how immigration rhetoric is not only politically divisive, but can likewise shape social boundaries and what defines ‘American’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study explores causal issue frames employed in the debate over immigration reform as embedded in policy narratives, with a special interest in how American identity is conceptualized, potentially carving social boundaries. Present analysis takes a top-down perspective, given that elites 'have special access to discourse' and therefore leverage in promoting their 'preferred social cognitions' onto the 'public mind' (Van Dijk, 1993: 255,280). A narrative approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was therefore applied to political speeches, the 'rhetorical scaffolding' upon which policy actors launch their interventions (Grube, 2010: 565), which, as acts of 'public persuasion on public issues' (De Landtsheer, 1998: 3), are expected to contain fuller steering narratives than other genres. This chapter details the rationale for methodological selection as well as its limitations, and outlines the procedures for data selection and analysis.

### **Research strategy**

This inquiry has advanced the claim that policies are 'translations of beliefs' communicated through narratives (Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011: 540); yet as Nisbet (2010: 46) points out, policy studies have tended to overlook 'latent meanings...directly applicable to understanding' policy issues. It is therefore important to analyze not only the functional outputs of policy, but the meanings embedded in the narratives used to frame the issue, and to furthermore ask as Rochefort and Cobb (1994: 9) exhort: 'who is speaking, and to what end?' So while policymaking is inseparable from the public, present analysis takes Van Dijk's (1993: 250) critical approach, focusing on 'elites and their discursive strategies for the maintenance of inequality,' whether deliberate or inadvertent. Moreover, even when taking a government-responsiveness view of decision-making, Shanahan, Jones and others maintain that public-driven opinions will be reflected in elite narratives.

CDA is thus a natural component to a political sociological analysis of policymaking. Qualitative methods, because they seek to shed light on the cognitions influencing the decision-to-action process (Elliott, 2005), are especially suited for examining policymaking as a politics of perception. Particularly, CDA's Foucauldian roots, in which discourse is seen as irreducible from social relations and identity, enables the examination of ordering devices in the 'exercise of social power' (Van Dijk, 1993: 249) by extracting linguistic representations of the social world that can then be identified as performing a political function, not the least as 'agent[s] of cultural or racial domination' (De Landtsheer, 1998: 10; see also Matheson, 2005). Indeed, Stone (2012) argues that analyzing policy demands an examination of its



mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, which CDA directly addresses in seeking to unwrap the ideologies that ‘reflect the basic aims, interests and values’ of social groups as embedded in political discourse, and how such discourse in turn organizes social attitudes and interactions (Van Dijk, 1993: 258; Patterson and Monroe, 1998).

If CDA is fundamentally a critique of dominant discourses and their influence on socially shared ideologies, narrative analysis is a subset thereof, given its preoccupation with ‘conscious as well as unconscious meanings’ (Andrews *et al.*, 2008: 3). Specifically, Narrative Policy Analysis (NPA) ‘gets at the “why” of policy opinion (Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011: 250). By uncovering the tactical selection of such ‘culturally embedded’ (Van Gorp, 2010) values and goals in the strategic advancement of policy positions, NPA can help researchers understand ‘complex policy controversies’ (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 260). Employed here as a variation of framing analysis, NPA can examine ‘latent aspects’ and ‘internal structures’ of meaning connected to the ‘web of culture’ in which the narratives are produced, thus not only uncovering the ‘taken-for-granted beliefs’ circulating in society (Reese, 2010: 20–21,25), but also crucially suggests the ways policy actors navigate these ‘cultural maps’ to bring their proposed interventions ‘within the horizon of the meaningful’ (Matheson, 2005: 18). In this way, a critical narrative approach delves into the threads, the weavers and ‘their contribution to the cultural fabric of society’ (Elliott, 2005: 51).

## **Limitations**

While NPA is useful in analytically deconstructing ordering devices, Fairclough (2003) warns that the meaning-making process itself is difficult to access without complementary audience-side research, which this inquiry is unable to perform due to resource constraints. It is thus important to consider that this analysis cannot differentiate between how society understands the issue in theory versus in practice, and that conclusions made herein are ‘inevitably partial’ (Fairclough, 2003: 14). Indeed, any CDA-based interpretation is ‘provisional’ because researchers are inevitably colored by their own ‘intellectual biography’ (Elliott, 2005: 154). In this way, researchers are themselves narrators positioned within a perspective such that they are involved in mediating particular interpretations just as the policy actors they seek to critique are involved in mediations of meaning (Elliott; Gready, 2008; Andrews, 2008).

On the other hand, because they are necessarily products of perspectives, political narratives are uniquely useful in engaging with patterns of meaning-making (Shenhav, 2006). Shenhav

asserts that the ‘political realities’ narratives represent can never claim to form an exclusive truth. Consequently, narrative analysis is not concerned with external validity nor does it need to verify internal consistency (Hajer and Laws, 2008; Feldman *et al.*, 2004). Following Elliott’s (2005: 148) advice then, this inquiry does not aim to ‘impose immutable or definitive interpretations...[nor] challenge meanings,’ but attempts to expose rather than uphold beliefs taken-for-granted in the ‘hegemonic tales’ surrounding immigration.

## **Analytic framework**

Present analysis employs a modification of the *Narrative Policy Framework* (NPF), a nascent form of critical NPA that enables the study of policy debate by capturing the ‘socially constructed elements’ to which ‘actors ascribe meaning’ (Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011: 536). NPF focuses specifically on the narratives deployed to solicit public attention and support, seeking to understand the ways these ‘contain beliefs [and] mobilize citizens’ (Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011: 540). Unlike CDA, however, NPF is ultimately interested in the deployment of ideologies in influencing policy outcomes rather than broader social implications. A modified framework was tested on immigration speeches to accommodate the latter concern while disregarding components relevant only in assessing autonomous effects (Tan, 2013). The pilot successfully extracted identity construal and furthermore confirmed that problem definitions are intricately linked to causal theories such that the latter are elaborations of the former. The pilot’s weaknesses in assessing implicit assumptions and group formations have been addressed in the final coding frame applied in this study.<sup>3</sup>

A social constructivist approach to policy analysis requires illuminating the ‘discursive space’ of policy conflict; specifically, what is discussed and what goes unnoticed (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 260). In analytic terms, these are descriptive variables and critical evaluations scrutinized over three levels:

### *1. Narrative Structure (micro)*

Basic narrative structures such as plotlines constitute the micro-level units of analysis. Plots, however, are more than just the rise and fall of action; they express causality by linking *problems* and *solutions* to *characters* (Elliott, 2005; Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011), who are cast in ‘Proto-Roles’ as agents or passive receivers of causality (Chilton,

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A (Coding Frame)

2004: 53–54). In this way, *characterization* and *causal theories* are inseparable evaluative elements. Research has found that ‘affect for characters’ can powerfully shape opinion (Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011: 538); speakers thus project them as victims, heroes and villains, with the latter often portrayed to extremes in what is termed ‘the devil shift’ (Sabatier *et al.*, 1987).

## 2. *Coalition-building (meso)*

The above caricatures are rooted in *belief systems*, ‘the glue that binds’ coalitions towards a common purpose and likewise ‘glue’ syllogisms together (Van Gorp, 2010; Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011: 546). These worldviews are explicitly expressed as *presuppositions* (Chilton, 2004), or unspoken in *enthymemes*, the latter being ‘careless logical inferences’ based on cultural assumptions that both speaker and receiver subscribe to (Feldman *et al.*, 2004: 152). They build off each other to create ‘consensual reality’ (Chilton, 2004: 64), and can furthermore be manifested in *meta-narratives*, or ‘constellation[s] of stories and non-stories’ representing ideologies at stake in the policy debate (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 260).

Belief systems are also manoeuvred through *narrative strategies*. Those detailed in NPF were matched to Benford and Snow’s (2000: 616, 624–625) frame re-alignment processes:

- a) Policy surrogates as *frame bridging* or linking two structurally disconnected but ‘ideologically congruent’ issues;
- b) Policy symbols as *frame amplification*, which ‘invigorate[s] existing values and beliefs,’ where attributions that ‘delineate boundaries between “good” and “evil”’ tend to be made; and
- c) Counter-discourse as *frame transformation*, or re-aligning old understandings to generate new meanings, potentially ‘constructing a powerful and compelling counter-diagnosis of the problem.’

## 3. *Social Deixis (macro)*

Narrative components are anchored according to an axis with a dialectical center plotted as the speaker (Chilton, 2004; Patterson and Monroe, 1998). As variables, the deixis is congruent with the plot in that it provides the narrative’s *temporal* and *spatial settings*, and flags *social identities* articulated by the speaker. Using the

coalitions detected on the meso-evaluative level, the social and spatial are further interpreted as situated within the realm of social relations such that on the macro-evaluative level, the deixis indicates *social distance* (Chilton, 2004: 58).

Evaluations, according to Elliott (2005: 9), are ‘socially the most important component of the narrative,’ the locus where actors attribute meaning and indicate response options. Van Dijk (1993: 258) further suggests that these ‘evaluative social representations...have a schematic form, featuring specific categories’ that bear beliefs, including about immigrants. As such, this framework takes micro- and meso-evaluative components as constituting the causal issue frame. The NPF facilitates these evaluations by first assessing whether characterization and causality affirm (identify with) or threaten (oppose) the conceptualized identity, which then enables the identification of coalitions (social identities) the speaker intends to form in advancing their position on immigration. Because coalition-building is an exercise in defining an ‘us,’ an Other is inevitably produced, such that the causal issue frame suggests a wide or narrow social distance between natives and immigrants, depending on how these identities are treated. Given NPA’s political sociological insistence on the ‘social relationality of power and meanings’ (Hajer and Laws, 2008: 262), present analysis is interested in policy output at the macro-level, or the institutionalization of beliefs about how immigrants belong in the polity.

## **Data collection**

The analyzed texts consist of seven GOP speeches, representing a spectrum of policy beliefs on immigration from the political right. Senators were chosen over congressmen due to what Van Dijk (1993) might argue as their possessing a wider scope of access and influence. While three of the speeches were delivered to outside audiences whereas the rest were to Senate peers, the corpus shares a ‘secondary audience, namely the media...and the public at large’ (Van Dijk, 1993: 275).

The senators were shortlisted based on their votes on two motions: to continue deliberation and for passage. Senators Rubio and Graham from the Gang of Eight (vote: yea, yea) represent those decidedly pro-reform, while three senators (vote: yea, nay) are apparent fence-sitters: according to depictions in the media and by lobby groups,<sup>4</sup> Senator Paul was seen as a reform-leaner, whereas Senators Cornyn and Cruz professed to be open to passage

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<sup>4</sup> Parada, 2013, personal communication

pending amendments. Finally, Senators Grassley and Sessions (vote: nay, nay) represent the decidedly anti-reform section of the GOP. The speeches were collected from featured releases on their websites and social media channels, with some recommended by their staff over e-mail or by phone. The final corpus was selected to randomize speakers in terms of re-election years, and to ensure representation from both border and non-border states experiencing various immigration-related demographic trends.<sup>5</sup>

## **FINDINGS**

In keeping with the research objectives, the findings presented here are catalogued in terms of attributions of blame for varying definitions of the ‘immigration problem,’ explicated through the identification of causal frames that in turn reveal conceptualizations of identity and social boundaries.

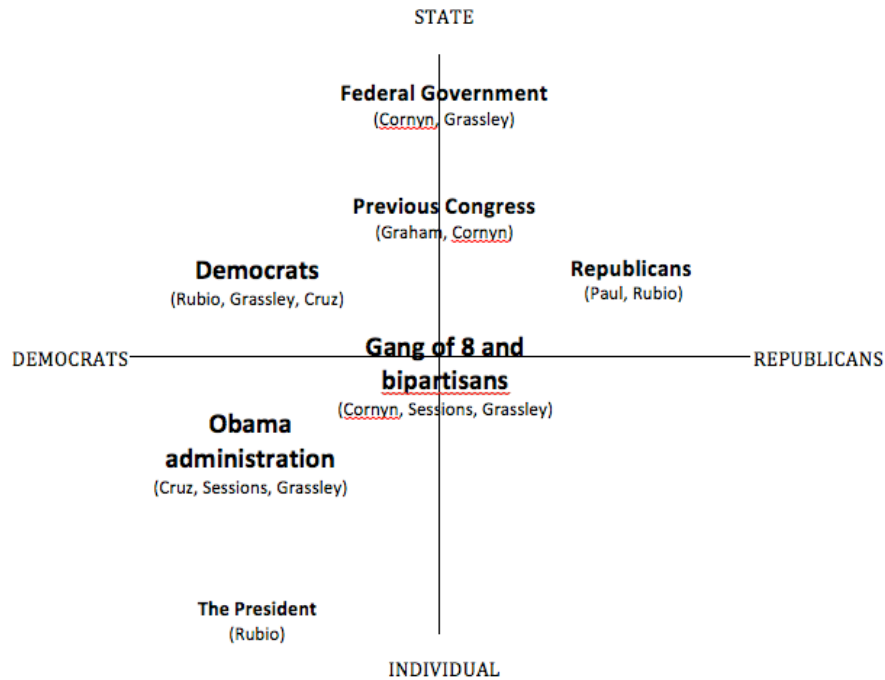
A brief discussion of the ostensible problem is first necessary to contextualize the complexity of the debate over reform, illuminating the crucial role cultural assumptions and political ideologies play in characterizing the narratives’ protagonists and antagonists. The speeches were found to concur that the status quo is unacceptable, but highlight various aspects of the immigration system viewed as ‘broken,’ and place blame on an array of actors across the political spectrum (Figure 1). These causal attributions are superficial, however; they do not directly address why amnesty, lax border security or poor visa mechanisms harm Americans and their interests. This suggests that the syllogistic leaps conceal powerful, readily shared beliefs regarding immigrants, immigration, and what constitutes being American.

What follows, then, is a breakdown of the causal frames the selected politicians used to advance or reject reforms, on the basis of *how* they see immigration as a problem, and who is to blame. This discussion compares the treatment of belief systems and social identities – particularizing the Self and Other (Lynn and Lea, 2003) and employing the devil shift – in the speakers’ framing of immigration as either 1) a problem constitutive of the American identity, 2) a political management problem, 3) problematic due to immigrants themselves, or 4) a problem that threatens American interests.

### **Figure 1 – Blame Matrix for the Ostensible Problem (Broken System)**

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B (Corpus)



The narratives are placed in conversation with one another, capturing a snapshot of the broader Republican discourse on immigration.

### *Immigration as a defining component of American identity*

The idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants has been an enduring part of the ‘American Story’ not only in myth but in historical record (Fryberg *et al.*, 2012: 107). While fears of migrants upsetting an Anglocentric culture predates the United States’ formation as a polity (Fraga and Segura, 2006), modern-day nationals, including 62-percent of Republicans, do not necessarily view immigration as a ‘bad thing’ (Gallup, 2012). Seen instead as an affirmation of identity, immigration is advocated as a good and necessary problem:

#### *Extract 1*

If they have to walk through the desert or swim a river with a kid on their back, they will come. And that’s a testament to what we’ve done as a nation for 200 years.... America is an idea. No one owns it. It’s not owned by race or ethnic group or any particular religion.... For 200 years it’s grown and gotten better. We will always have a problem – as long as we keep that idea intact – of people wanting to come here. That’s the good news. (Graham, 18 April)

to the extent that eliminating immigration poses an existential threat:

*Extract 2*

Without immigration, there would be no America. And we would be just like everybody else.  
(Rubio, 27 January)

The American identity is conceptualized in these extracts as constituted in a belief system, as opposed to an ethnic polity (Hammer, 2010). Extract 1 intimates that citizenship is open to any individual regardless of color or creed who swears ‘allegiance to [the same] constitutive ethico-political principles’ (Mouffe, 1992: 30), here encompassed in an unstated ‘idea.’ If coalitions are created and motivated by belief systems, then by leaving the idea ambiguous, the speaker allows the audience to apply any belief system so as to ‘synchronize diverse...expectations and values [into] collective action’ (Stone, 2012: 179) with the broadest possible support (see also Hammer; Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011). In so doing, he has crafted an inclusive national narrative in which the Other is absorbed into and even contributes to the improvement of the polity; however the audience chooses to conceptualize it. Extract 2 offers a more precise notion of identity, one rooted in the ‘nation of immigrants’ meta-narrative. The speaker further suggests that immigration is elemental to American Exceptionalism, a popular abstraction among the political right in which the United States possesses a privileged, manifest destiny unique from any other country (Ceaser, 2012).

*Particularizing the Self*

*Extract 3*

The American dream of economic empowerment... [is] the reason why people come here..., why they work two jobs..., why your parents gave up their own hopes and...dreams so that you could do the things they couldn’t, so you could be what they could not be, so you could go where they could not go, so the doors that were closed to them were open for you. Which community in our country understands that better than ours [Hispanics], there is none. It typifies our life. It’s who we are; it’s why we’re here. And it’s what’s made our country great.  
(Rubio)

If ‘American-ness’ is embedded in belief systems, and making sense of the world ‘and our place in it’ depends on understandings of others also occupying it (Patterson and Monroe, 1998: 322), then centrally locating immigrants in the American Story effectively weaves them into the fabric of national identity. In the speaker’s comprehensive re-telling, separating the United States from the rest of the world is the American Dream as pursued by the immigrant,

an endeavor the speaker exceptionally attributes to Hispanics' 'core American values' of hard work and family-orientation (Westen, 2009: 19). The Hispanic community, popularly associated with the immigration issue, is therefore particularized as the exceptional bearers of the American Creed, a set of negotiable principles relating to liberty and equality under which the nation unites (Fraga and Segura, 2006; Hammer, 2010). The speaker thus appears to insinuate that Hispanics embody the American identity more than other ethnic groups – possibly the Anglo majority, from whom Hispanic-Americans are rhetorically differentiated in the preface of the speech, albeit in jest. As Billig (1985) notes, categorization does not necessarily imply prejudice; thus, Extract 3 may simply offer a reaffirmation of belonging within the polity. Alternatively, as Lynn and Lea (2003: 427) argue, the focus on ethnicity may 'encourage a sense of identity' demarcated in ways that connote hierarchies. The speaker is clearly presenting characters as 'adherents to [American] principles,' but the heroic treatment does not indicate 'post-ethnicism' (Hammer, 2010: 279), which otherwise attempts to address heritage without deference to group superiority (see also Condor, 2000). Contrary to the social narrowing that Extracts 1 and 2 may effect, Extract 3 could threaten identity among non-Hispanic audiences and provoke resistance to proposed integrative reforms.

### **Immigration as a political/management problem**

In establishing commonality and cooperation between established nationals and potential compatriots, reformist narratives reinforce the notion that immigration is not a people problem but a political one:

#### *Extract 4*

The Republican Party...stand[s] for freedom and family values.... The vast majority of Latino voters agree with us on in these issues but Republicans have pushed them away with harsh rhetoric over immigration.... In our zeal for border control, we have sometimes obscured our respect and admiration for immigrants and their contribution to America.... Many have faced intolerance and bigotry...but through our rich history, and for many millions of immigrants who came to America, such sacrifice and hardship was worth it. They wanted what all Americans want—better lives for themselves, their children and grandchildren. (Paul, 14 March)

Patterson and Monroe (1998: 321) observe that narratives seeking change must also "challenge the understanding of people within...society," as the frame transformation in this



extract appears to do. As in Extracts 1 to 3, the speaker depicts immigrants as members that enrich society. He notably generalizes them to be ethnically Hispanic while interchangeably referring to them as a voting bloc and cultural group, but always associated with a Republican articulation of the American Creed. In this way, the speaker is constructing multiple identities intersecting under a common political ethos, thereby creating a fluid yet substantial political community congruent with American ideals, which, taking the belief-system approach, connotes a collective identity. The speaker continues to build the counter-discourse through concerted efforts to contradict stereotypes, notably reversing the role of Hispanics/immigrants to victims of a causality performed by political peers. Agency is crucial in storytelling due to its capacity to affect lives in ways that involve intent (Chilton, 2004; Goffman, 1974); moreover, social acceptance ‘appears [dependent on] how closely prospective “candidates” resemble...the “true” inhabitant’ (Lynn and Lea, 2003: 427). Thus, by shifting blame to Republicans and describing immigrants as not only sharing native values but also as having motivations similar to ‘all Americans,’ Extract 4 is ‘trigger[ing] a new way of thinking about...a gridlocked problem’ (Nisbet, 2010: 44): that the trouble lies with how the GOP has managed its politics on the issue, which coincides with the prescription to alter the party’s views toward immigrants.

### *Particularizing the Other*

#### *Extract 5*

The people we should be welcoming are those who are coming here to seek the American Dream, to work hard.... If you want legal immigration improved so that we welcome high-skilled workers, we welcome those seeking the American Dream. (Cruz, 11 June)

Some who oppose reform agree that politicians have mismanaged immigration policy, but widely depart from the closing social distance their peers have advocated: they view the problem as having overlooked the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants. The implicit contrast in Extract 5 suggests that certain migrants – tacitly, the low-skilled – do not work hard and therefore do not share the American Dream, thereby disqualifying them from becoming part of the polity. Because outcomes tend to favor those viewed as ‘deserving and entitled’ (Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011: 522), portraying the problem in terms of qualities inherent to certain types of migrants requires characterizations to that effect, and consequently its opposite. The speaker’s discretion in selecting a ‘feature space’ (Billig, 1985) or element of potential differentiation helps frame these stereotypes. In this case, the feature space is a presumed exclusive possession of hard work and the American Dream, traits that

are exaggerated through the rhetorical opposition between types of immigrants perceived to be fundamentally different with respect to that feature space. In so doing, the speaker particularizes some immigrants as welcome, provided they share these American values; the prejudice lies in the unjustified assumption that only the high-skilled can identify with them. Such evaluations are a form of social judgment made ‘about people rather than on discreet behaviors’ (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007: 17). The solution calling for better border management thus obscures a social prejudice associating certain immigrants as a category of people with qualities considered incongruent with the ideals that constitute the national identity, thereby making the case against their legal integration.

### *Immigration as a political/management problem*

As noted, ‘societal perceptions’ of the beneficiaries generally determine policy support (Rocheftort and Cobb, 1994: 23). Defending restrictive decisions therefore compels the use of ‘extensive statements about the negative properties of immigration’ (Van Dijk, 1993: 267), not least via cultural conflicts and stereotyping immigrants themselves, as the previous extract demonstrates. Whereas in Extract 5 the speaker obscures immigrant agency, here he dramatizes their actions through extreme acts of illegality to justify tougher border control:

#### *Extract 6*

I’ve spent real time...with people living on the border who every week have people coming in across their property, who no longer lock their doors at home because...they just get broken into.... Border Patrol reported 463 deaths, 549 assaults, and 1312 rescues. Let me point out that this current system is the opposite of humane. [It] ends up having vulnerable people coming here seeking freedom, entrusting themselves to coyotes, to drug cartels ...sometimes subject to sexual assault, to exploitation.... And when it comes to drug cartels and their role in facilitating illegal immigration the volume is staggering. Between 2006-2013 there were 9.28 million pounds of marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamine seized in Texas alone, ...two space shuttles worth of illegal drugs seized, trafficked across the border. (Cruz)

The speaker constructs an ‘enemy in our midst’ discourse (Lynn and Lea, 2003), whereby immigrants are portrayed as present in the here and now, inextricable from criminal activity and unwilling to play by the rules at the natives’ expense. And while the speaker constructs the enemy as both victim and villain, even as victims, immigrants continue to cause societal problems. This forms the core of the speaker’s problem definition: deliberately or not, immigrants inevitably bring with them unsavory people, behaviors and commodities. The speaker furthermore takes pains to underline immorality, suggesting that immigrants

threaten not only national security, but the American belief in ‘their [own] magnanimity in pursuing a “noble course,”’ considered to be a defining feature of their exceptionalism (Ceaser, 2012: 14). ‘Benign racism’ is thus enacted, hiding ‘behind a gloss of fairness’ while drawing on extreme cases and categories that allows the speaker to eschew racism while propagating it (Lynn and Lea, 2003: 435).

To paint this unsavory picture of the immigrant, the speaker plants inexplicit, ‘minimal cues’ that trigger ‘mental representations,’ cleverly affording plausible deniability in encouraging negative stereotypes (Chilton, 2004: 122). The speaker can claim he *never actually said* the number of deaths or breaking-and-entering were performed by immigrants or their associates, just that they occurred at the border. Yet, without making explicit attributions, by stringing together cues like ‘border,’ ‘people,’ and ‘homes broken into,’ he is suggesting a causal connection that an uncritical audience may readily accept. For instance, the speaker links immigrants to the ‘staggering volume’ of trafficked drugs because both cross the border, yet no explanation as to how one facilitates the other is offered, *it just is*. In so doing, the speaker is not only subliminally blaming immigrants for problems occurring along the border, he also obscures external factors that impel what he paints to be malicious intent against natives’ physical and symbolic security (Suro, 2009).

### *The Devil Shift*

These ‘simplified framework[s] of illegality’ create conditions where ‘moralizing...dominate[s] the debate’ (Suro, 2009: 19). If identity is understood as ‘a resource to set up a moral worldview and warrant [one’s] position in it’ (Phoenix, 2008: 69), Extract 6 positions the Self against traffickers and trespassers, as benevolent victims who are disadvantaged by immigrants’ actions. Presenting the Self from this perspective ‘affords a greater opportunity to maximize the sense of injustice and heighten feelings of animosity’ toward the Other (Lynn and Lea, 2003: 437). This appears to the speaker sufficient in justifying an anti-immigrant stance, despite a narrative incoherence that Westen (2008) posits is typical of Republican discourse: the failure to explicate the villain’s intent. The Manichaeian exaggeration of these unexplained but nevertheless ‘malicious motives, behaviors and influence...leads to polarization, intractability’ and inhibits reform (Shanahan, Jones, *et al.*, 2011: 554). In devil shifting, actors perceive their adversaries as ‘more evil than they actually are’ while portraying themselves favorably (Sabatier *et al.*, 1987: 450), as evident in the labeling here (overleaf):

*Extract 7*

Serious consideration must be given to amendments that strengthen our ability to remove criminal gang members, hold perpetrators of fraud and abuse accountable.... We must be willing to...prevent criminals and evildoers from gaining immigration benefits and ensure that we're improving our ability to protect our homeland.... I need to know that future lawbreakers won't be rewarded.... Future generations of Americans will be thankful for our efforts to...preserve the value of one of the most sacred possessions of our people: American citizenship. (Grassley, 11 June)

In 'demarcating a position for [the Self] as distant...from others...described as deviant' (Elliott, 2005: 130), the speaker manages to maintain a positive sense of identity, specified here as citizenship. Mouffe (1992) defines citizenship as belonging to a political community that subscribes to the same rules, or in this context, laws; Extract 7 roots American identity in the 'nation of laws' meta-narrative.<sup>6</sup> By referring to immigrants as 'criminals and evildoers' and 'future lawbreakers' within the contexts of 'gangs,' 'fraud and abuse,' and 'homeland' security but without the particularizations to special types of immigrants as in Extract 5, the speaker is unequivocally inviting negative, threatening perceptions that typically lead voters to endorse blanket exclusionary policies (Fryberg *et al.*, 2012). As Lynn and Lea (2003: 428) explain, because designations tend to determine 'all subsequent interpretations of [the designee's] actions,' naming categories set the boundaries of 'apparent reality' in ways that facilitate prejudiced attitudes. According to devil shift theory, the degree of distortion correlates to 'the distance between one's beliefs and those of [their] opponents' (Sabatier *et al.*, 1987: 451); congruently, labeled repeatedly and irrevocably as threats to the rule of law, immigrants are deemed not welcome in order to 'preserve' the nation's composition. Admittedly, Extract 7 may imply the existence of a particularized, possibly benevolent immigrant as in Extract 5; however, no provisions are made in the text for them, if such a typology exists to the speaker.

*Immigration as against American interests*

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<sup>6</sup> See Hoffer, 2010

In a complete turnaround from the first causal frame discussed, this final set of attributions asserts that immigration is a problem because it is in the interests of those who do not share American values. To these speakers, blame may, though not necessarily, lie with the immigrants themselves, but certainly with those who use immigration to advance interests that run counter to the United States'. The speakers present immigration as a threat by distancing particular groups from the collective identity, and bridge these notions to assaults on the economy or to national security. The proposed solutions emphasize law enforcement and weaken access through the border or to the job market. Nevertheless, ethnic cues persist. In the economic frame bridge illustrated by the following extract, these cues are subsumed under the pejorative 'special interest groups,' a label commonly used in Republican discourse to delegitimize opponents, strategically applied to any group seen to undermine the perceived common good (Anderson, 1991):

*Extract 8*

Powerful groups met, excluding the interests of the American people.... Even foreign countries had a say in drafting our law.... "Mexico's new ambassador to the US...has had a number of meetings with the administration where the issue of immigration has come up".... This [reform] bill is far weaker than the 2007 legislation...rejected by the American people.... But the people who came illegally get exactly what they wanted immediately.... They'll be able to compete for the jobs our husbands and sons and daughters...might be competing for out there.... The special interests, La Raza, the unions, the corporate world, the big agriculture businesses...they are the ones that made the agreement in this process.... What's wrong is members of...the United States Senate need to be representing the national interest. The people's interests. (Sessions, 7-8 June)

While powerful lobbies such as agribusiness are mentioned as being part of special interests, Mexico and the Hispanic-American party La Raza are especially named, pulling 'the fuzzy frontiers of national identity...into sharper focus' (Lynn and Lea, 2003: 427). The reference to the 'United States Senate' indicates that identity is on the surface viewed in terms of citizenship as in Extract 7; however, the repeated intimation of peoplehood seems to suggest that the speaker's concept of American identity is more deeply embedded within a specific culture having a common interest. According to Lynn and Lea (2003: 427), 'the language of culture and nation...invoke[s] a "hidden racial narrative."' Thus, by constructing a narrative asserting the dislodgment of US institutions from the negotiation process to make room for foreign or foreign-sounding parties, the 'American people' are bounded in clear opposition to immigrants, who are accused of serving and even benefitting from the interests of the 'foreign' Others. He explicates the antagonism by declaring that millions of 'our' family

members are ‘immediately’ disadvantaged by the influx of immigrants, thanks to provisions that were not only agreed between the posited anti-American interests, but were also rejected by the native collective.

A contrast between the interests of the Self as opposed to the Other’s is likewise applied in the following extract. Unlike the security frame in Extract 7, which blames aberrant immigrant behavior, Extract 9 attributes causality to annihilative intent. The speaker invokes the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, triggering associations with ‘rogue states that “hate [America] and everything for which it stands”’ (Reese and Lewis, 2009: 779):

*Extract 9*

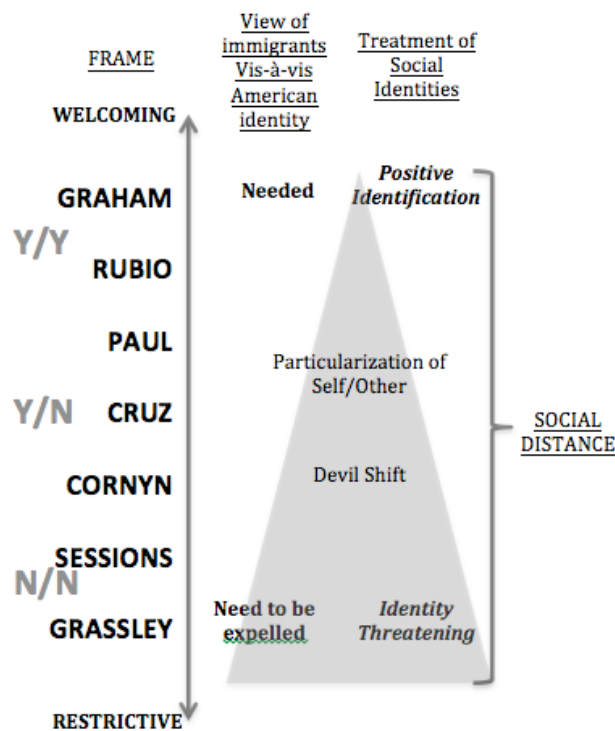
If we don't guarantee to the American people that we are serious about stopping the flow of people illegally crossing our south-western or northern border for that matter, I think we guarantee failure.... Securing our borders...became more urgent after 9/11, when we finally realized that although we were removed from places like the Middle East, we were not insulated by our lack of proximity to these places. So we are not safe in America just by ourselves...we are vulnerable to attacks. (Cornyn, 11 June)

He connects immigration to the United States’ seemingly isolated cultural – and by some accounts, existential<sup>7</sup>– conflict with the Muslim world, as cued by the mention of ‘attacks’ and ‘the Middle East.’ The image of terrorists prompted in the narrative is somehow transported to the south-western border, to which the speaker pointedly refers in prefacing his exposition of the immigration problem that he then immediately links to the ostensible problem of reform: the pathway to citizenship. The juxtaposition can lead audiences to infer that Middle Eastern terrorists are among them, and to eliminate the threat, the United States must secure its border with Mexico. Although an absurd and arguably racist conclusion, the incoherence is ‘neutralized...within a culturally acceptable discourse of “nation”’ (Condor, 2000: 177). Phoenix (2008: 67) contends that actors develop and rework narratives considered key to their histories ‘to explain and justify...actions and decisions’; moreover, Fryberg (2012) notes that activating the terrorism frame draws Americans toward leaders who can ensure self-preservation. To rationalize his solution, then, the speaker masks otherwise prejudiced theories about Muslims and Hispanics in Extract 9 through ‘apparently neutral appeals to patriotism’ (Condor, 2000: 177), while clearly positioning the Self across a wide chasm from two culturally and geographically distinct social groups portrayed as the same.

### Discussion

These findings demonstrate how causal attributions contain beliefs about social organization, which hinge on constructing identities and delineating their boundaries. Particularly, the extracts reveal that among the Republican elite, reforming immigration is seen as a matter of national survival, rendering it a defining issue of 21<sup>st</sup> Century American identity. Their views on the same notion, however, create a scale from welcoming, whereby immigration is essential to the national identity, to restrictive, which is consistent with previous studies concluding anti-reformists believe immigrants ‘need to be expelled in order to preserve the nation’ (Suro, 2009: 19). This range corresponds to social distancing that narrows with identifications and widens with threats (Figure 2), such that ‘powerful discursive work is accomplished’ in differentiating the Other from the Self (Lynn and Lea, 2003: 432).

**Figure 2 – Frame/Social Distance across Corpus**



Also consistent with existing research, this analysis finds that ‘race-neutral language’ is rare in American political talk on immigration (Knoll *et al.*, 2011: 449), as evident in the

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<sup>7</sup> See Center for Strategic Intelligence, 2004

particularizations of Self and Other discussed. Worth noting is the categorization of Hispanics in Extract 4, which corroborates Billig's (1985: 95) assertion that classifying groups of people is not necessarily intolerant, thus highlighting the role of language in prejudice by treating social identities as 'acceptable' or 'non-acceptable.' Interestingly, however, not all forms of distancing, especially devil shifts, appear to feature ethnic cues, suggesting that American nativism may not necessarily be linked to racism, although this begs further investigation.

Regardless of amity or animosity, all speeches attributed agency to migrants, either as active participants in the construction of American-ness, or actively threatening or inducing threats to the collective identity. As Stone (1989) suggests, causality situated in the realm of agency and intent is a more powerful motivator for policy support than is passivity. Agency also enables participants to confront specific actors responsible for events such that characterizing immigrants as heroes or villains can help strengthen policy opinion and therefore action (Goffman, 1974; Stone; Shanahan, McBeth, *et al.*, 2011).

These characterizations embedded in the causal frames were utilized to affirm positions in the socio-spatial deixis, where identities were in turn formed through attachment to belief systems and cultural assumptions. Particularly, there was heavy use of meta-narratives containing abstractions of the American identity, as well as enthymemes, where these notions are tacitly negotiated. These reveal beliefs in circulation about immigrants and immigration, since politicians are to an extent constrained to "refer to the same framework that their constituents see as... 'political reality'" (Shenhav, 2006: 249). Benford and Snow (2000: 624) contend that the amplification of values systems is particularly compelling in situations where 'constituents are strikingly different from...beneficiaries.' This narrative strategy was evident in extracts containing labels and stereotypes, which were found to facilitate negative assumptions. Because these 'hegemonic assumptions' are implicit, they reproduce beliefs about social organization that are difficult to openly challenge (Elliott, 2005: 146) and can help maintain social inequality.

## CONCLUSION

This paper introduced the concept of causal issue frames as a discursive tool for organizing worldviews in the policy sphere. Following a neo-institutionalist tradition, policymaking is seen as the manipulation of 'problems, enemies [and] crises' to portray a 'series of threats



and reassurances' in a bid for policy support, where the struggle over causal definitions is at the core of this 'political spectacle' (Gamson, 2001: 60). In-group/out-group boundaries are delineated within culturally embedded causal issue frames, which can 'attribute responsibility for grievances and form the basis of a politicized collective identity' (Drury and Reicher, 2005: 36). In understanding the conflict over immigration reform, then, causal issue frames can uncover notions of national identity and order social relations. Those employed in selected speeches were identified using a narrative approach to CDA, which captured beliefs, preferences and group alignments underlying the causal attributions made, enabling a deeper social analysis of the policy conflict.

The analysis found causal frames to be rich sources of perceptions of social boundaries and identity. The findings show that policy actors appear to rely heavily on characterizing immigrants as either heroes or villains to bolster their causal theories and create coalitions that would support their policy options. In causal frames where immigrants were vilified, social boundaries were delineated in terms of 'us versus them,' whereas inclusive frames embraced a 'we are them' narrative. Opponents of reform stereotyped immigrants as threats to American values, characterizing them as bringers of 'crime, crisis and controversy' (Suro, 2009: 2) and thus detrimental to the nation and its sense of identity. On the other hand, reformists cast immigrants as the backbone of the collective identity who must thus be welcomed to preserve the polity. The discrepancy appears to stem from a conflict between dominant belief systems: America as a nation of immigrants, of laws, and of opportunity, as well as to some degree its sense of exceptionalism. The speakers variably invoked these meta-narratives to gel their coalitions and trigger identity-protective responses on the basis of these conceptualizations.

While the findings confirmed expectations that causal attributions carry beliefs about social organization – and in the immigration context, nationhood – the assertion that policy legitimizes discursive ordering among the public through policy could not be ascertained. As Elliott notes, narratives' evaluative aspects, which the analysis focused on, depend on audience agreement. Indeed, for policy actors, the strength of a narrative lies in their audience's ability to fill in the blanks, but narrative analysis cannot tap into this very fillip, leaving how audiences interpret speakers' cues to guesswork. Furthermore, because narratives are a 'perpetual process of renegotiation, reconstruction and retelling' (Andrews, 2007: 189), this study can also only offer one researcher's perspective on the debate. Thus, while this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the different ways identity and social boundaries are construed in America at this point in history, it cannot offer answers as to whether these ultimately construct political reality today or in the future.

Further research into audience reception is thus recommended to complement the findings herein, in order to understand how society sees the ideas contained in elite discourse, and whether elite positions or popular sentiment is the stronger force in directing policy. Used in conjunction with the results of present analysis, such learnings can hopefully help communicators erase hegemonic discourse from the policy arena and, taking a political sociological view, from political reality.

Indeed, this study has strongly suggested that policies and the narratives justifying them are not isolated but made in social contexts, helping contribute to a 'social maintenance' (Simon and Jerit, 2007: 267) of beliefs that have implications for social relations and what it means to be American. The findings revealed assumptions about identity, race, social boundaries and beliefs about nation and peoplehood that can be institutionalized if the House ultimately agrees with those who oppose immigration reform and blocks its passage into law. Hope for inclusive policies remain, however, if Billig is right in claiming that discourse does not remain unchanged even if tolerant views are rejected. Furthermore, as Hajer and Laws point out, beliefs may be the foundation of social coalitions, but the narratives that carry them also have the power to change deeply embedded beliefs. This study exposed a selection of assumptions underlying the beliefs that bind different visions of who belongs in America in the hopes of contributing to a more reflexive discussion of an issue fundamentally defining how – and who – 21<sup>st</sup> Century America chooses to be.

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## APPENDIX A: Coding Frame

Level of Analysis	MICRO (elements)	MESO (subsystem)	MACRO (social world) <sup>8</sup>
Unit of Analysis	<i>P o l i c y   N a r r a t i v e</i>		
<b>^ VARIABLES</b> <b>(descriptive/ discussed)</b> 	<u>Narrative structure (Plot)</u> ^Problem ^Characters    =Proto-Roles (P-Agent; P-Target) ^Solutions	<u>^Belief System (explicit)</u> =Presupposition +Meta-narratives	<u>Deixis</u> =Social =Spatial =Temporal
<b>★ EVALUATION</b> <b>(critical/ unnoticed)</b>	<i>C a u s a l   i s s u e   f r a m e</i>		<u>Socio-Spatial Deixis</u>  = <i>Social distancing</i>
	<u>Narrative structure (Plot)</u> ^Causal Theory ^Characterization (Villains/Heroes/Victims)	<u>^Belief System (implicit)</u> = Enthymemes  <u>^Narrative Strategy</u> ♦Frame bridging ♦Frame amplification ♦Frame transformation	
	<u>^Identity affirmation (identification)</u> <u>^Identity threatening (opposition)</u>	 <u>Coalitions</u> 	
<b>*POLICY OUTPUT</b>		<u>*Functional Approach</u> ^Policy beliefs ^Public opinion	<u>*Political Sociological Approach</u>  <i>beliefs about social organization</i>

### Notes:

^ present in original NPF, although may have been modified from its original place (Shanahan et al., 2011)

= based on Chilton's (2004) narrative components and modal axis

★ based on Labov and Waletzky's evaluation model of narrative analysis (cited in Elliott, 2005, p.42)

\* adapted from Lascoumes and Le Gales (2007)

♦ adapted from Benford and Snow (2000)

+ adapted from Hajer and Laws (2008)

<sup>8</sup> The Macro Level in the original NPF is largely left "unspecified" but indicates analysis referring to institutional and social configurations.

## APPENDIX B: Corpus

<u>11- Jun</u> <sup>9</sup>	<u>27- Jun</u> <sup>10</sup>	<u>SENATOR</u>	<u>STATE</u>	<u>BOR DER</u>	<u>TERM END</u>	<u>FOREIG N BORN POPLN IN 2011</u> <sup>11</sup>	<u>CHANGE SINCE 2000</u>	<u>Speech Source</u>
YEA	YEA	GRAHAM, Lindsey	SC	No	2015	4.70%	91%	Video Transcript <b>Remarks on the Gang of Eight's Immigration Reform Bill Press Briefing on April 18, 2013</b> Transcribed from: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRdnUXeMMj0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRdnUXeMMj0</a>
YEA	YEA	RUBIO, Marco	FL	Gulf	2017	19.40%	39%	Press Release <b>Hispanic Leaders Conference Keynote Speech on January 27, 2013</b> Retrieved from: <a href="http://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2012/1/icymi-rubio-delivers-keynote-speech-at-hln-conference-in-miami">http://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2012/1/icymi-rubio-delivers-keynote-speech-at-hln-conference-in-miami</a>
YEA	NAY	PAUL, Rand	KY	No	2017	3.20%	75%	News Transcript <b>Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Conservative Political Action Conference Keynote Speech on March 14, 2013</b> Retrieved from: <a href="http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/03/19/text-of-rand-pauls-immigration-speech/">http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/03/19/text-of-rand-pauls-immigration-speech/</a>
YEA	NAY	CRUZ, Ted	TX	Mex	2019	16.40%	45%	Video Transcript <b>On Motion to Proceed to Measure S.744 in Senate Senate Floor Speech on June 11, 2013</b> Transcribed from: <a href="http://www.cruz.senate.gov/record.cfm?id=344031">http://www.cruz.senate.gov/record.cfm?id=344031</a>
YEA	NAY	CORNYN, John	TX	Mex	2015	16.40%	45%	Video Transcript <b>On Motion to Proceed to Measure S.744 in Senate Senate Floor Speech on June 11, 2013</b> Transcribed from: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79-DHqW5MWU">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79-DHqW5MWU</a>
NAY	NAY	SESSIONS, Jeff	AL	Gulf	2015	3.40%	85%	Video Transcript <b>On Motion to Proceed to Measure S.744 in Senate, Staff- selected excerpts Senate Floor Speeches on June 7-8 and 11, 2013</b> Transcribed from: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-mhbGPYwMk">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-mhbGPYwMk</a> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdVFjnEKapE">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdVFjnEKapE</a> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_kMCn7-FWY">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_kMCn7-FWY</a> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNEQIYieVyA">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNEQIYieVyA</a> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5yyvLvql_8">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5yyvLvql_8</a>
NAY	NAY	GRASSLEY, Chuck	IA	No	2017	4.40%	47%	Press Release <b>On Motion to Proceed to Measure S.744 in Senate Senate Floor Speech on June 11, 2013</b> Retrieved from: <a href="http://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/Article.cfm?customel_d ataPageID_1502=46191">http://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/Article.cfm?customel_d ataPageID_1502=46191</a>

<sup>9</sup> Source: Senate Roll-call vote on the Motion to Proceed to S.744  
[http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\\_call\\_lists/roll\\_call\\_vote\\_cfm.cfm?congress=113&session=1&vote=00147](http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=113&session=1&vote=00147)

<sup>10</sup> Source: Senate Roll-call vote on the Passage of the Bill S.744 as Amended  
[http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\\_call\\_lists/roll\\_call\\_vote\\_cfm.cfm?congress=113&session=1&vote=00168](http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=113&session=1&vote=00168)

<sup>11</sup> Source: Migration Policy Institute <http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/state.cfm?ID=a1>



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