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**From Headlines to Bills: News Media Influence on California's Legislative Oversight of
Immigrant Detention Conditions**

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The United States has the worldwide largest immigration detention system, with upwards to 300,000 immigrants being detained annually within ICE detention facilities (Global Detention Project). For many years, concerns have been raised about the conditions of these detention facilities and questions have been raised if detainees receive humane treatment. However, because ICE facilities are privately operated, news media sources play a major role in reporting about the conditions within ICE detention centers. This leads to the broad question of whether greater news media coverage of detention conditions in California corresponds with an increase of legislative oversight of ICE detention centers. Specifically, does greater news media scrutiny of ICE detention conditions in California correlate with an increase in legislative oversight of California detention facilities, demonstrated through detention-related bills from 2017 to 2024? To answer this question, I will conduct a quantitative content analysis to measure the volume of US news media coverage of California detention center conditions, while comparing it to the number of California legislative bills introduced during 2017-2024. Through my data analysis, I find that there exists a positive correlation between the volume of news media coverage and the number of immigration detention bills introduced in the California legislature. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of potential strategies to strengthen legislative oversight and increase transparency over ICE detention facilities.

Context and Significance

A list of press releases by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement discusses the death of 46-year-old Vicente Caceres-Maradiaga, who died of an enlarged heart and liver in May of 2017. After being detained for nine days in the Adelanto Detention Facility located in California and being denied the proper medical care, he died under ICE custody (United States, 2020). This is only one of the many harsh conditions that detainees face within ICE detention facilities. The State of California plays a significant role within the US immigration system, due to its proximity to the San Ysidro border and its large immigrant population. California ranks third among the U.S. states with the highest number of detained migrants, with more than 3,000 individuals being detained each year (TracImmigration). A mechanism to keep ICE officials accountable is legislative oversight, which relates to bills and legislation introduced by the California State Legislature.

Additionally, when the media exposes these poor conditions within detention facilities, this places pressure on state lawmakers to act due to fear of unfavorable public opinion. This connects to agenda-setting theory and how mass media influences the importance of certain topics by determining what issues to cover (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). News media scrutiny is measured through the volume of news coverage about detention facilities in California. It is important to understand whether the increase in news media coverage of detention centers drives state legislator oversight because this promotes transparency, accountability, and helps protect human rights in California. Overall, this research also examines how effectively California legislators respond to the social injustices occurring within state ICE detention centers when media coverage places pressure on them.

Literature Review

ICE Detention Conditions

The level of immigration enforcement and number of immigrants being detained is continuously increasing in the United States. However, since ICE detention facilities are operated under private contracts, they often face minimal internal oversight and transparency, which leads to systemic issues going unmonitored. Throughout 2017-2024, the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General (OIG), has reported numerous violations across detention centers in California. During 2021, the OIG conducted an unannounced inspection of the Otay Mesa detention facility in San Diego, and found that the facility fell short of many ICE Detention standards. There was insufficient medical care for detainees during the pandemic and they failed to report staff misconduct (DHS OIG, 2021). Since many migrants seek asylum through the San Ysidro border, this leads them to be placed in nearby detention centers, which includes the Otay Mesa facility.

Moreover, David Tellez, a public health scholar from John Hopkins University, conducted an evaluation of the main detention agencies which include the US Customs and Border Protection, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and Office of Refugee Resettlement. He found that detainees are subjected to terrible conditions such as the lack of medical care, poor food quality, inadequate sanitation, and overcrowding (Tellez, 2022). Furthermore, these poor conditions are due to weak oversight mechanisms, lack of transparency, and limited accountability. This demonstrates the need for a transparent system that reports on the conditions occurring inside detention centers to ensure detainee safety and well-being.

Role of the Media

Mirian Martinez-Aranda, a Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow in Sociology at UC Davis, conducted a qualitative study through collecting previous immigrant detainee interviews after being held within a California detention center. After speaking to previous immigrant detainees, they found that most engage in precarious "legal patchworking", which consists of scrambling together legal resources, including pro bono aid, and receiving assistance from jail house lawyers (Martinez-Aranda, 2023). The lack of resources inside the facilities, disadvantages immigrant detainees, who are attempting to receive legal representation and fair hearings. This signifies that current weak oversight mechanisms could complicate or prolong an immigrant detainee's case. Since internal oversight of these ICE detention facilities are insufficient, the media plays a critical role in prompting legislative action and increasing public awareness. Media news sources discuss the same oversight failures that Martinez-Aranda discusses and summarizes the content in a way viewers can understand. It fosters public discussion where constituents can pressure their state representatives to take action on important issues.

In the American Political Science Academic Journal, Andrew Myers researches a large news outlet dataset to examine whether high levels of media coverage results in changes of legislator conduct. He focuses on newspaper coverage of state legislatures from 2000 to 2024, and the findings indicate that people learn more about their politicians when there is more press coverage. Additionally, this places pressure on the representative to support their constituents' interests at congressional hearings. High amounts of press coverage are responsible for this, since it establishes an accountable and transparent system (Myers, 2025). Thus, this shows how high visibility across the media could influence legislators to conduct themselves a certain way and promote legislative responsiveness.

Agenda-Setting Impact

Additionally, a computational political scientist, Pablo Barberá, explored the agenda setting theory by analyzing Twitter messages of legislative officials and the public during the 113th US Congress. He found that media attention coverage paves the way for legislative attention on prevalent political issues (Barberá, 2019). Media coverage shapes the way the general public understands a particular issue, and this leads them to pressure local legislative officials to take action. This demonstrates how lawmakers particularly focus on issues that are receiving media traction and public debate between their constituents.

Using the agenda setting theory, I will be able to evaluate the relationship between news media scrutiny and California legislative action. Although Barberá's work shows that media coverage can prompt legislative attention, this effect may not be consistent across all policy areas, which demonstrates the importance of understanding the relationship within the topic of immigration detention in California. Therefore, my research will focus on evaluating who leads and who follows, if news media sources drive legislative action, or if legislative officials function independently beyond news media scrutiny.

Theory, Hypotheses, and Causal Mechanism

The foundation of my research study is based on the agenda-setting theory, which demonstrates how an increase in media exposure and attention determines which topics legislative officials focus on. Since ICE detention centers are privately operated, the media plays a crucial role in covering what is occurring within these facilities and serves as one of the few external sources that help communicate valuable information to the general public. Media coverage helps spread public awareness and raises discussion towards this issue. Moreover, the media plays an important role in making this complex issue more accessible to the public, who

may not have enough time or otherwise could struggle to read lengthy reports released by immigration agencies.

My conceptual hypothesis is that greater news media coverage of detention conditions in California will lead to an increase in state legislative oversight of the detention facilities. Therefore, my operational hypothesis is that greater news media coverage of detention conditions in California will lead to an increase in state legislative oversight of the detention facilities between 2021-2024, because public accountability will influence legislative officials to take action on the contentious issue in the media. Finally, my null hypothesis is that greater news media scrutiny has no relationship with increased legislative oversight.

My causal mechanism for this study is political accountability and visibility between news media scrutiny and legislative oversight. If California news media outlets are actively reporting on the terrible ICE detention conditions, then this will generate public debate and encourage legislative officials to respond. Many legislators will be incentivized to uphold public trust and credibility by actively addressing this issue through legislative bills. Also, the pressure for re-election could drive California legislators to actively advocate for its constituents' concerns and push forward legislation that represents their interests.

Research Design and Methods

Within this study, my independent variable is news media coverage of detention conditions (X) and my dependent variable is California legislative oversight of ICE detention centers (Y). I will measure my independent variable by analyzing news media sources through the Proquest, U.S. Major Dailies database to observe news publications such as the Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Washington Post, and many more. I decided to analyze the number of news media sources published per day from January 01, 2017, to December 31, 2024. I collected

this data on an excel sheet and then collapsed the data to reflect how many news media sources were published per month. Additionally, I will measure my dependent variable by using the “California Legislature Information” website for a raw count of how many detention bills have been introduced or passed in the California legislature. I will use keywords such as “detention”, “immigration”, and “ICE Facility” to search for these bills.

Important control variables include presidential administration and party affiliation. The Trump and Biden administration could influence both high legislative oversight and larger media coverage, instead of both variables being related to each other. To address this issue, I will focus on the years 2017-2024 to analyze both a Democratic and a Republican administration. I will account for the Trump administration through creating a dummy variable, assigning a number 1 for the years he was in office (2019=1, 2020=1, 2021=0, etc).

My unit of analysis will be “years”, and there will be eight observations that will represent legislative oversight and media coverage (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). For this study, I will use a quantitative content analysis to compare trends in media coverage and California legislative oversight. I will utilize R Studio to code for news source volume over the years and use an excel sheet to organize my data. To identify if there is a correlation between both X and Y, I will use a scatter plot to see if greater media coverage corresponds to increased legislative oversight.

To analyze both my independent and dependent variables, I will be incorporating Pearson’s r correlation test because both my variables are continuous. It would measure the direction and relationship of both news media scrutiny and California legislative oversight. Also, I will run a t-test to evaluate if there exists a significant statistical relationship between both my variables.

Results

The focus of this research study is to evaluate the relationship between the volume of news media coverage and legislative oversight regarding immigration detention in California. Figure 1 shows the top 12 news media publications that were constantly reporting on the conditions detainees face within ICE facilities from 2017-2024. The Los Angeles Times had the highest number of news media articles published (2,174), followed by the New York Times (885), The Washington Post (673), and other regional media sources. Among the top publications, there were also several local news outlets based in Texas that reported a high number of ICE detention conditions.

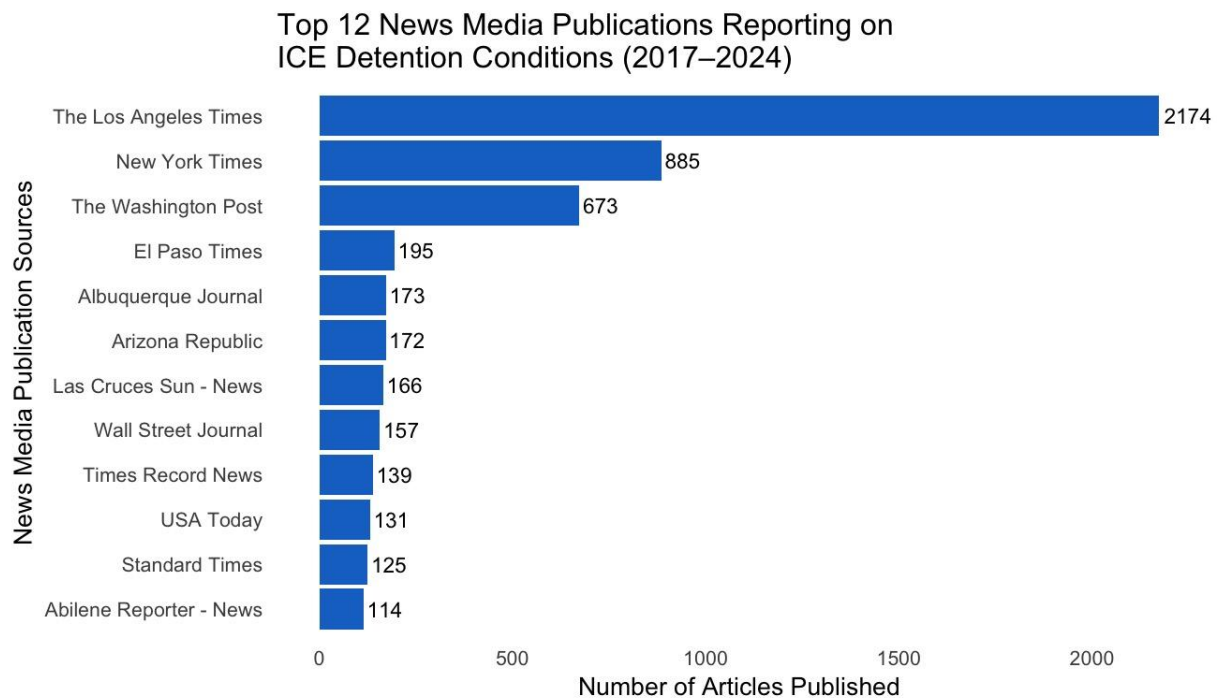


Figure 1. Data Source: ProQuest, U.S. Major Dailies

The second figure displays the relationship between the number of legislative bills introduced in the California legislature and the count of news media stories published from 2017-2024. After I conducted a Pearson correlation test, I found that $r=0.98$ and this signifies that the increased number of news media stories is associated with the increase of California legislative bills regarding detention centers. The scatterplot and upwards regression line shows a positive correlation between both variables. Specifically, during 2019, there was a spike in both news media articles and California legislation, with 1555 news stories and 18 detention-related legislative bills introduced.

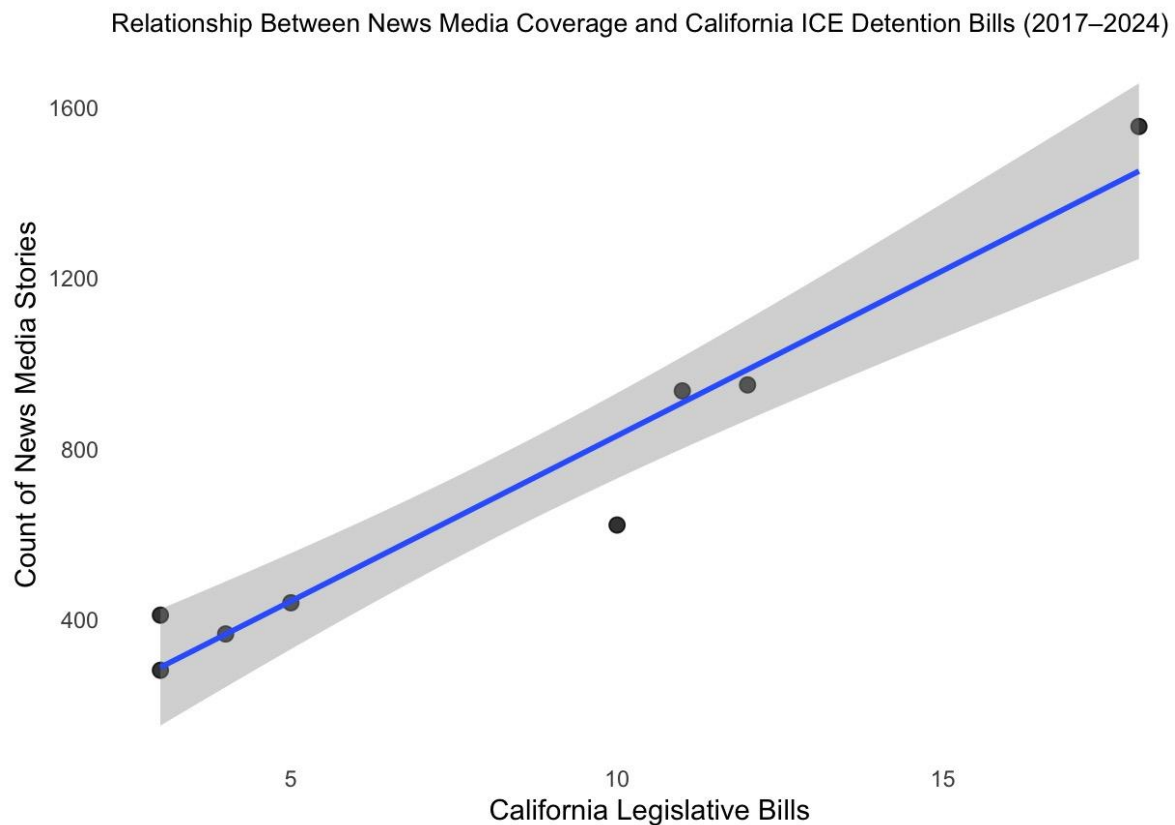


Figure 2. Data Source: California Legislature Information and ProQuest

The third figure shows the rescaled trend between California legislative bills and news media stories across 2017-2024. After running a t-test for both news stories and legislative bills, I found that $t=13.53$, which signifies a strong statistical relationship. There is a clear trend

between both variables that demonstrate a spike leading into 2019, where news media stories and legislative bills reach their highest point. However, after 2019, the amount of news media coverage sharply drops from 2020-2022, while legislative bills gradually decrease over time until 2022. Although the magnitude of the drop varies between both variables, overall both trends are parallel to each other and present a positive correlation.

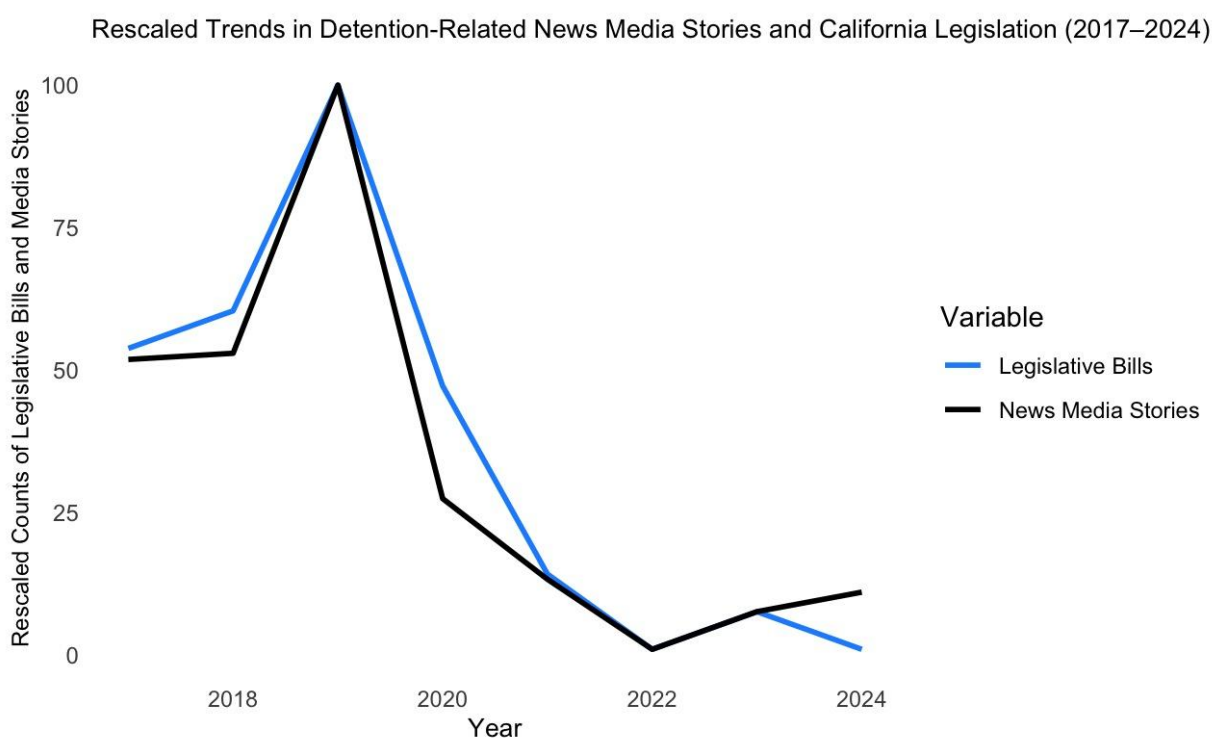


Figure 3. Data Source: California Legislature Information and ProQuest

Figure 4 compares the number of California legislative bills introduced, addressing ICE detention conditions, between a Democratic and Republican presidential administration. The Trump administration from 2019-2020, shows that the median number of bills introduced in the California legislature was higher than any other term during 2017-2024. In comparison, the Biden administration from 2021-2024, reflects an overall low number of detention-related legislative bills. However, after running a t-test for the average number of bills introduced under

both Presidential administrations, I found that $t=2.87$. This means that although the number of legislative bills decreased from the Trump to Biden Administration, there was no significant statistical difference.

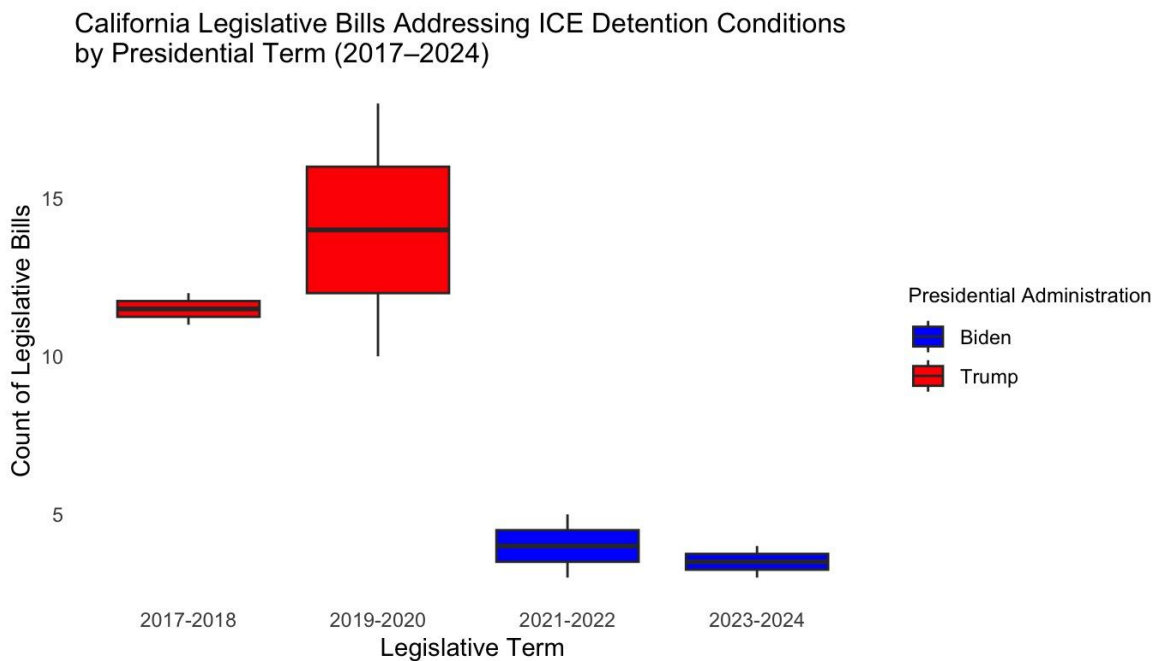


Figure 4. Data Source: California Legislature Information

Overall, these figures show that there is a correlation between news media scrutiny and California legislative bills from 2017-2024, regarding immigration detention. They depict a spike in 2019 with the most amount of media stories published and an active legislative period, where a high number of detention-related bills were introduced.

Discussion and Research Implications

The focus of the study is to evaluate the relationship between the number of news media sources reporting on ICE detention facilities and the amount of detention-related legislative bills introduced in California, from 2017-2024. After evaluating the results, I found that it supports my hypothesis, grounded on agenda-setting, and shows the correlation between both variables.

After evaluating the top news publications reporting on ICE facility conditions, I noticed that larger diverse communities were reporting at higher rates, compared to smaller cities with less migrant population. California based news media sources, specifically The Los Angeles Times, plays a major role in discussing ICE detention conditions nationwide. This suggests that California's detention system is an important issue reported on a national level, which reflects the high number of detention centers and detainees held each year. This connects to agenda-setting theory because the media within these regions is framing the significance of this issue. As news sources such as The Los Angeles Times continue to report on these terrible conditions that detainees face, this brings awareness to the general public and encourages them to communicate their concerns with their legislative officials. This places pressure on California legislators to actively address these issues and introduce legislation, which provides oversight of these private detention facilities. This supports my hypothesis that an increase in news media coverage about conditions detainees face, is associated with an increase of legislative attention of these ICE facilities.

Furthermore, after controlling for both presidential administrations and party affiliation, I found that both control variables did not influence the trend between both my independent and dependent variables. There was a huge spike in legislative bills and news media stories during the Trump administration that could have been influenced by his xenophobic rhetoric and hatred against many immigrants. Despite that, after finding no statistical significance between the average number of bills between the Biden administration and Trump administration, this shows that this parallel trend between both legislative bills and news stories, is not driven simply by external factors.

To create a more transparent system between ICE detention centers, the California Legislative Branch, and the general public, the California legislature could pass a bill to require monthly unannounced inspections of ICE detention facilities. This would allow for many detainees to receive humane treatment and would increase the safety of their lives. Additionally, legislators should establish data-sharing requirements with ICE officials. This data would include information about detainee population, facility inspection reports, health incident/deaths in custody, and any filed complaints. This information should also be shared with the general public through a state-agency website in an accessible format. This would create stronger legislative oversight mechanisms and could prevent safety risks within these facilities.

Limitations and Research Extensions

One limitation in my research study includes not analyzing more legislative oversight or activity. I was able to look at California legislative bills, yet another form of legislative oversight could have been legislative hearings. However, I was not able to access a reliable database for all legislative hearings and meetings notes from 2017-2024. Obtaining more data for legislative responsiveness could have added to my discussion section and I could have coded for specific detention conditions that legislative officials strived to address.

Further research can also focus on analyzing news media tone and sentiment when covering issues occurring within ICE detention centers. During my research study, I found 5000+ news source stories that discussed many perspectives and conditions that detainees faced during their time in detention. However, I was unable to code for the specific tone conveyed in each article from 2017-2024, and being able to look at that data could offer different immigration detention narratives that the media pushes forward.

Conclusion

Overall, this research paper examined whether there was a correlation between the increased amount of news media scrutiny and California legislative oversight, regarding detention-related bills. Using agenda-setting theory as a framework, the analysis demonstrates clear trends of how news media drives legislative action, and this shows how the media helps shape legislative priorities within California.

Although, the data shows how there was an increase of news media stories and legislative action during the Trump administration, this difference was not statistically significant. This means that California detention-related bills were not influenced by different presidential administrations. Instead, the media played an important role in educating the general public and encouraged them to communicate their concerns with their legislative officials. The media holds an important role in reporting many issues that go unnoticed and unmonitored, therefore it is essential to uphold the principles of democracy within California.

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