

what the public really wants on immigration

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What does the public really want on immigration? This is currently the subject of intense debate as Congress considers various proposals to toughen enforcement and reform our immigration system in the run-up to national elections this fall. It is also the subject of the first in a monthly series of poll analyses that the Center for American Progress and The Century Foundation will conduct on topics that are sure to define the political debate in America.

We chose immigration because, at first glance, it seems to be so politically polarizing. Fortunately, polling organizations have dramatically stepped up their level of polling on the issue, turning a once modest store of relevant public data into a cornucopia of information on virtually every aspect of the immigration issue. Much of the new poll findings seem confusing, even contradictory, yet serious analysis of the data bring the public's views on immigration into sharp focus.

Our analysis shows that the public favors a tough, but not punitive, approach to immigration enforcement, combined with fairly generous views on immigration reform to deal with the illegal immigrants who are already here, including a path toward citizenship. But public support for reform includes a series of requirements and conditions that Americans feel immigrants must meet to stay in the country and, eventually, become citizens.

General Views on Immigration

Americans clearly believe that immigration is a serious problem and their concerns appear to be growing. In a March 2006 *Time* magazine poll, for example, 68 percent said illegal immigration was a very or an extremely serious problem. Similarly, a March Pew Foundation poll on immigration found that 74 percent termed immigration a very big or moderately big problem, up from 69 percent in 2002.

CONCERN ABOUT IMMIGRATION

- ❖ **68 percent** called illegal immigration a very or an extremely serious problem. (Time)
- ❖ Immigration is the **third-most cited** problem facing the country—trailing only the war in Iraq and economy/jobs. (CBS News)
- ❖ The public overwhelmingly sees illegal, not legal, immigration as the more serious problem—by **60 percent to 4 percent**. (Pew)

In addition, immigration now tends to score higher in open-ended questions about the nation's most important problem, suggesting its increased salience to the public. In a mid-May CBS News poll, immigration was actually the third-most cited problem at 12 percent—the highest ever in that poll—trailing only the war in Iraq and economy/jobs. And a late May Gallup poll also found immigration the third-most cited priority “for the President and Congress to deal with,” at 23 percent, this time behind Iraq and fuel/oil prices.

Other polls, however, report immigration as a problem still in the single digits (albeit in higher single digits than before). And a late April Democracy Corps poll found illegal immigration ranked behind nine other issues—not only jobs and the economy but also Iraq, health, Medicare/Social Security, taxes/spending, moral values, education, terrorism/national security, and corruption—in a forced-choice question on importance in making voting decisions.

Not surprisingly, the public overwhelmingly sees illegal, not legal, immigration as the more serious problem, by 60 percent to 4 percent in the Pew poll. In a Kaiser Family Foundation survey in August 2004, 42 percent said legal immigrants are good for the country, while only 23 percent said they are harmful. In the same poll, the respondents expressed negative attitudes about illegal immigrants by a margin of 54 percent to 18 percent.

VIEWS ON IMMIGRATION'S OVERALL EFFECTS DEPEND ON THE FOCUS OF THE QUESTION

- ❖ **52 percent** told Pew that “immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care,” while **70 percent** told Fox that immigrants “weaken the U.S. economy because they don't all pay taxes but use public services.”
- ❖ Yet an Ipsos poll found a **51 percent to 42 percent** majority saying immigrants make a contribution to American society rather than serve as a drain on society. A **42 percent to 30 percent plurality** told Fox that immigrants “make [the country] a better place to live.”

Also showing the relatively positive attitude toward legal immigration, recent polling in early May by CBS News still finds more respondents saying legal immigration should be kept at its present level (39 percent) or increased (22 percent), than say it should be decreased (34 percent).

Does Immigration Help or Hurt the Country?

The public's views on the impact of immigration—whether it helps or hurts the country and how it affects various aspects of the economy and social life—very much depend on how polling questions are worded and what those questions focus on. Consider a recent Pew poll, which found that 52 percent now say “immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care” (up from 38 percent in 2000), compared to 41 percent who say “immigrants today

strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents” (down from 50 percent in 2000).

Even more negative is the response to this question, asked in the early May CBS News poll: “Do you think illegal immigrants do more to strengthen the U.S. economy because they provide low-cost labor and they spend money, or do illegal immigrants do more to weaken

the U.S. economy because they don't all pay taxes but use public services?" Put this way, 70 percent say weaken and just 22 percent say strengthen.

A similarly negative result was obtained in an early April Fox News poll that asked the question, "Overall, do you think illegal immigrants provide more benefits to the nation by doing work many U.S. citizens don't want to do, or do they cost the country more because they don't pay taxes and use public services like schools and emergency rooms?" By 66 percent to 22 percent, the public selected the "cost more" option.

Yet much more positive results were obtained in a late April NBC News poll, which simply asked, "Now thinking about the topic of immigration: Would you say that immigration helps the United States more than it hurts it, or that immigration hurts the United States more than it helps it?" This time the public split evenly down the middle, with 45 percent supporting the first part of the question and 45 percent the latter.

Still more positive results were obtained in the same late April Fox poll that had the negative result just alluded to above. The poll asked, "In general, do you think immigrants who come to the United States today help the country and make it a better place to live or hurt the country and make it a worse place to live?" A 42 percent plurality thought immigrants helped make the country a better place to live only; 30 percent thought otherwise.

Similarly, a late March Ipsos-AP poll found, by a margin of 51 percent to 42 percent, that illegal immigrants were more viewed as making a contribution to American society than being a drain on society. And a mid-May poll by the same organization found immigrants were considered more a good influence (52 percent) than a bad influence (46 percent) on how things are going in the country.

Immigration, Jobs and Wages

Turning to the public's views of immigration's effect on jobs and wages, it is striking how consistently the public now says that immigrants don't displace American citizens from jobs. In the March Pew poll, for example, 65 percent said immigrants take jobs Americans don't want, rather than take jobs away from American citizens (24 percent). Even illegal immigrants are deemed more likely to take jobs Americans don't want than to take jobs away from Americans who want them, by a 53 percent to 36 percent margin in the early May CBS News poll, and by a margin of 65 percent to 29 percent in the early May Ipsos-AP poll.

Yet the public does believe immigration depresses wages. In a December 2005 Gallup poll, the public thought immigrants mostly hurt the economy by driving down wages for other workers as opposed to mostly helping the economy by providing low-cost labor. In that poll the public believed that to be the case for

IMMIGRANTS, JOBS, AND WAGES

- ❖ **65 percent** said immigrants take jobs Americans don't want, rather than take jobs away from American citizens (**24 percent**). (Pew)
- ❖ Americans believe legal immigrants depress wages by a margin of **52 percent to 42 percent**; they believe illegal immigrants depress wages by **60 percent to 32 percent**. (Gallup)

legal immigrants by a margin of 52 percent to 42 percent, and for illegal immigrants by a margin of 60 percent to 32 percent.

Data on which specific effects of immigration concern the public the most help illuminate these findings. In the early April Fox poll, 87 percent said they were very or somewhat concerned about illegal immigrants overburdening government programs and services, compared to 66 percent who were concerned about taking jobs away from American citizens and, interestingly, just 54 percent who were concerned about changing the culture of the country. Similarly, in the March *Time* poll, 61 percent were very concerned that illegal immigrants cost taxpayers too much money in providing services like health care and education, compared to 35 percent who were very concerned that they take jobs away from Americans, and 29 percent who were very concerned that they “weaken our way of life in this country.”

In summary, the public feels fairly positive about immigration’s general effects on the country, views legal immigration much more positively than illegal immigration, and tends not to believe that immigrants take jobs Americans want. But the public feels quite negative about immigration’s effect on public services and the taxpayers’ burden, views illegal immigration much more negatively than legal immigration, and thinks immigration depresses the wages of American workers.

WHAT WORRIES THE PUBLIC MOST ABOUT IMMIGRATION?

- ❖ **87 percent** said they were very or somewhat concerned about illegal immigrants overburdening government programs and services, much more than were concerned about taking jobs away from American citizens or changing the culture of the country. (Fox)
- ❖ **61 percent** were *very* concerned that illegal immigrants cost taxpayers too much money in providing services like health care and education, much more than were concerned about taking jobs away from Americans or weakening “our way of life.” (Time)

Therefore, responses to questions about immigration’s effects will fairly predictably depend on which combination of these sentiments is evoked by the questions.

Familiarity Breeds Liking?

A couple of other factors are worth noting about the public’s views on immigration. One is that positive sentiment about the characteristics of Asian and, particularly Latino, immigrants has increased over the last decade or so. According to the March Pew poll, for example, 80 percent now believe immigrants from Latin America have strong family values. That compares to 63 percent and 75 percent, respectively, in 1997. In addition, just 37 percent now believe Latino immigrants often go on welfare, and only 33 percent believe they significantly increase crime, compared to 55 percent and 43 percent, respectively, in 1997 (the data on Asian immigrants show the same trend, but not as sharp).

Secondly, data from the Pew survey shows that negative sentiment about immigrants is strongest in precisely those areas where they are the least common. In other words, the more familiar immigrants are, the less troubling they may seem in some important ways. For

example, in areas with the lowest concentrations of immigrants, Americans believe by a 65 percent to 27 percent margin that immigrants burden the country because of their effects on jobs, housing, and health care, rather than strengthen it. In areas with high concentrations of immigrants, sentiment is split down the middle: 47 percent to 47 percent.

Views on Immigration Enforcement

Polls consistently show that supermajorities believe the United States is not doing enough to stop illegal immigrants from coming into the country. In a mid-May ABC News poll, for example, 77 percent said the U.S. is “not doing enough to keep illegal immigrants from coming into this country.” And in the March *Time* poll, 82 percent of the public said the U.S. isn’t doing enough to keep illegal immigrants from crossing into the country.

AMERICANS’ CHANGING VIEWS ON THE CHARACTER OF IMMIGRANTS

- ❖ **80 percent** of Americans believe immigrants from Latin America have strong family values, up from 63 percent in 1997. (Pew)
- ❖ Just **37 percent** now believe Latino immigrants often go on welfare compared to **55 percent** in 1997. (Pew)
- ❖ **33 percent** believe they significantly increase crime, down from **43 percent** in 1997. (Pew)

Not surprisingly, then, the public strongly supports taking measures to toughen up border security. Particularly popular are increasing the number of federal agents patrolling the U.S.-Mexican border and deploying National Guard troops to bolster border enforcement. In the May Fox News poll, 79 percent favored increasing the number of federal agents, and 63 percent supported putting National Guard troops along the border. The latter proposal to use National Guard troops along the border also received the support of 64 percent of respondents in a mid-May CNN poll and 74 percent support in a mid-May *Washington Post* poll.

The public also strongly supports increased penalization of employers who hire illegal

immigrants. In the May CNN poll, 66 percent supported “increasing penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants.” In the April Fox News poll, 75 percent favored “imposing fines and criminal charges against employers who hire illegal immigrants.” And in the March *Time* poll, 71 percent supported “providing major penalties for employers convicted of hiring illegal immigrants and strongly enforcing it.”

Less Popular Enforcement Options

Considerably below those enforcement measures in popularity are proposals to build some sort of wall along the U.S.-Mexican border. Views on this option are decidedly mixed. The public opposed a physical barrier by a 53 percent to 43 percent margin in a late April Democracy Corps poll, and by a more narrow 48 percent to 47 percent margin in an April NBC News poll. In April, however, a CBS news poll found the nation split, 48 percent to 48 percent, over the same question, and earlier polls that month in March found a majority in support of some sort of wall (50 percent to 43 percent in an April CBS News poll and 56 percent to 40 percent in a March *Time* magazine poll).

But in the May CBS News poll, the public stood solidly against the construction of immigration barriers when both sides of the proposal were described to respondents (“Some people favor building a 700-mile-long fence along the U.S.-Mexico border because they say it would stop illegal immigrants from crossing the border into the U.S. Other people oppose the 700-mile-long fence because they say it would cost too much money and people would still find a way to get around it.”). Phrased that way, the proposal generated 66 percent to 29 percent opposition.

The ultimate enforcement proposal—to deport all illegal immigrants—also generates mixed sentiment. In the April Democracy Corps poll, the proposal was narrowly supported by 51 percent to 45 percent margin, but in the March *Time* poll, the proposal was narrowly opposed, 49 percent to 47 percent.

A sense of how effective the public considers these various enforcement approaches may be gleaned from an early April Gallup poll. In that poll, 52 percent deemed penalizing employers a “very effective” way to reduce illegal immigration, compared to 37 percent who said increasing the number of border agents would be very effective. Just 18 percent thought building a wall along the border would be effective. The latter figure is actually 10 points less than the number who thought “taking action to raise the standard of living in countries where large amounts of immigrants come from” would be very effective.

Similarly, in the March Pew poll, respondents were given three options to choose from as “the best way to reduce illegal immigration from Mexico.” Penalizing employers was chosen by 49 percent, compared to 33 percent who thought a larger border patrol was the best option, and just 9 percent thought building more fences was the best approach.

IMMIGRATION AND ENFORCEMENT

- ❖ **77 percent** say the U.S. is “not doing enough to keep illegal immigrants from coming into this country.” (ABC)
- ❖ **79 percent** favored increasing the number of federal agents and **63 percent** supported putting National Guard troops along the border, but support for a wall along the border is much less. (Fox)
- ❖ **52 percent** deemed penalizing employers a “very effective” way to reduce illegal immigration, ahead of both increasing the number of border agents and building a wall along the border. (Gallup)

Views on Immigration Reform

But if the public is very supportive of stronger immigration enforcement, it is also very supportive of reforming the immigration system to deal with those illegal immigrants who are already here, including providing a path to citizenship. These sentiments are captured nicely in an early May Gallup poll, which asked: “Which comes closest to your view about what government policy should be toward illegal immigrants currently residing in the United States? Should the government deport all illegal immigrants back to their home country, allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States in order to work but only for a limited amount of time, or allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens but only if they meet certain requirements over a period of time?”

Sixty-one percent selected the option of allowing illegal immigrants to stay in the U.S. and possibly become citizens if they meet “certain requirements,” compared to 15 percent who favored the limited time option and 21 percent who wanted to deport all illegal immigrants. Note the importance, however, of the “certain requirements” stipulation. If such requirements are not mentioned, the path to citizenship option and, indeed, the whole project of normalizing the status of illegal aliens meets with a decidedly more negative response.

When respondents were simply asked, with no further specifications, whether we should make it easier for illegal immigrants to become legal workers, as Quinnipiac University did in February 2006, the response was 54 percent against the proposal compared to 41 percent in favor. And when that poll asked whether we should make it easier for illegal immigrants to become citizens, 62 percent said they were opposed and only 32 percent were in favor.

No Free Lunch on Path to Citizenship

These negative reactions were obtained because the questions, which made no mention of meeting any requirements, implied a sort of free lunch for the illegal aliens who, by definition, have broken the law by being in the United States. But, as the Gallup question above illustrates, and other polling data confirms, when the need to meet requirements is highlighted and/or specific requirements are spelled out, reaction to reform proposals is much more positive.

In the March *Time* magazine poll, respondents were asked about “Allowing illegal immigrants already working in the United States to register as guest workers for a fixed period of time, so the government could keep track of them.” That received a positive response by a 79 percent to 18 percent margin. And in the same poll, the public agreed by 78 percent to 21 percent with the idea of “allowing illegal immigrants now in this country to earn U.S. citizenship if they learn to speak English, have a job and pay taxes.”

Another example, also from the *Time* poll, posed the legal worker issue this way:

“Two different approaches have been suggested to deal with illegal immigrants. Please tell me which comes closest to your views. (1) Make illegal immigration a crime and not allow anyone who entered the country illegally to work or stay in the United States under any circumstances. OR, (2) Allow illegal immigrants to get temporary work visas so the government can track them and allow them to earn permanent residence after six years if they learn English, pay a fine, pay any back taxes, and have no criminal record.”

REFORM MEASURES

- ❖ **61 percent** say illegal immigrants should be allowed to stay in the U.S. and possibly become citizens if they meet “certain requirements,” far outnumbering those who favor a limited time option or complete deportation. (Gallup)
- ❖ However, if no requirements are mentioned, **62 percent** oppose making it “easier” for illegal immigrants to become citizens. (Quinnipiac)
- ❖ Americans believe the most important requirements for offering immigrants a path toward citizenship are: a job (**89 percent**), learning to speak English (**84 percent**), passing a health screening test (**83 percent**) and paying back taxes on all earned income (**81 percent**). (Gallup)

The result: 72 percent supported the second option compared to 25 percent in favor of the first option.

What's more, public support for normalized work status and a path to citizenship for illegal aliens does not appear to hinge on the number of years these aliens have been here. For example, a May CBS News proposal to allow "illegal immigrants who have done the following to stay and work in the United States: paid a fine, been in the U.S. for at least five years, paid any back taxes they owe, can speak English, and have no criminal record" received 77 percent support. But a vaguer May CNN proposal to allow "illegal immigrants already living in the United States for a number of years to stay in this country and apply for U.S. citizenship if they had a job and paid back taxes" received 79 percent support, and an even vaguer April Democracy Corps proposal for "a guest worker program that allows immigrants to work in the United States and offers them an opportunity to apply for citizenship if they pay fines and back taxes" received 75 percent support.

Consistent with these results, an April Gallup poll found that the public's most important considerations for immigrants to earn a path towards citizenship was not the length of time in the country but rather having a job (89 percent), learning to speak English (84 percent), passing a health screening test (83 percent), and paying back taxes on all income earned in the United States (81 percent).

Conclusion

The data considered in our analysis indicates that the public favors a tough, but not punitive, approach to immigration enforcement, combined with fairly generous immigration reform provisions to deal with the illegal immigrants that are already here, including a path toward citizenship. Importantly, however, the public's support for reform rests on requirements and conditions they feel immigrants should meet to merit staying in the country and, eventually, becoming citizens. We shall see whether Congress is able to pass legislation that reflects the remarkably nuanced views of the public.