



While Debate Rages, the Public Continues to Support Realistic Immigration Solutions

December 10, 2007

In the spring of 2007, Congress engaged in a bitter debate on the issue of immigration reform. A fierce battle was fought between those who seek practical, comprehensive solutions to our broken immigration system, and those who favor only the enforcement of the broken status quo. The debate was conducted in an atmosphere poisoned by the harsh rhetoric of conservative talk radio and anti-immigration reform groups. They managed to intimidate Congress into a stalemate. Until Congress picks up immigration reform again, the nation will continue to suffer the consequences of a broken immigration system.

If recent experience proves to be a trend, however, the defenders of the broken status quo may come to regret their opposition to comprehensive immigration reform. In 2006, the Republican leadership of the House of Representatives bet their political careers on re-election strategies that involved demonizing undocumented immigrants. As election time drew near, however, poll after poll showed that a majority of Americans favored a realistic immigration policy solution that offered undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship. Election results provided the verdict on the hardliners' strategy: the American people were not impressed, and the fastest-growing segment of the electorate, Latino voters, were offended—not to mention moderate and Catholic voters, who deserted the Republicans in droves. Many hardliners lost their seats and leadership positions.

Unfortunately, lessons were not learned. Immigration hardliners continue to scream “amnesty!” to block all proposals that take a comprehensive approach. The majority of the public continues to tell opinion researchers that they don't have a problem with such proposals. Where proposals run afoul of public opinion, they focus on one side of the immigration equation to the exclusion of the other—enforcement proposals meant to block needed reform, or proposals perceived as offering leniency without a counterbalance of enforcement.

As the immigration stalemate in Congress continues, the American voter's frustration with Congress, the President, and the government has reached a level not seen in recent years.

Meanwhile, as opponents of reform use ever harsher anti-immigrant and anti-Latino rhetoric, citizenship applications have risen to record levels, and new Americans are registering to vote and are preparing to have their say in the next election.

Following is a summary of recent public opinion polls on the immigration reform debate.

Los Angeles Times / Bloomberg (November 30 – December 3, 2007)

A nationwide survey of 1,467 adults, including 1,245 registered voters (MoE \pm 3%)

- **60%** - This survey found majority support for a path to citizenship among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. Among all registered voters, **60% favor a proposal that would “allow illegal immigrants who have been living and working in the United States for a number of years, and who do not have a criminal record, to start on a path to citizenship by registering..., paying a fine, getting fingerprinted, and learning English, among other requirements.”** 63% of Democrats favored such a proposal, while 64% of Republicans and

57% of independents. When given a list of five actions and asked what they thought was the most effective in dealing with illegal immigration, “more arrests and deportations” was listed last, at 16%.

Quinnipiac University Polling Institute (November 6 – 11, 2007)

A survey of 1,231 Ohio voters (MoE \pm 2.8%)

- **55%** - A majority (55%) of Ohio voters believe that “illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the United States for at least two years...should be given a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status.” A minority (38%) think that these immigrants “should be deported back to their native country.”

Washington Post-ABC News (October 29 – November 1, 2007)

A survey of 1,131 adults (MoE \pm 3%)

- **51%** - A majority of respondents (51%), when asked if they would support or oppose “a program giving ILLEGAL immigrants now living in the United States the right to live here LEGALLY if they pay a fine and meet other requirements,” said they would support such a program. **More respondents said they trusted Democrats (42%) than Republicans (35%)** in handling the immigration issue.

ABC News-Good Morning America (September 27-30, 2007)

A survey of 1,035 adults (MoE \pm 3%)

- **58%** - Respondents favored “giving ILLEGAL immigrants now living in the United States the right to live here LEGALLY if they pay a fine and meet other requirements” by a margin of 58% to 35%.
- In this poll, 78% of respondents said they sometimes or often come into contact with people who mostly speak Spanish. Of those, **two-thirds (66%) say it does not bother them.** Taking a closer look at the data, the report authors note that the one-third of respondents who are bothered by Spanish “**are those who are more apt to call for stricter immigration rules and to have negative views on immigration generally,** particularly on illegal immigration.”

Monmouth University Polling Institute (July 16-19, 2007)

A survey of 800 New Jersey adult residents (MoE \pm 3.5%)

- **65%** - This survey of New Jersey residents found that 65% favored allowing undocumented immigrants “to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status” verses 30% who believed they should be “deported back to their native country.”

CBS News (June 26-27, 2007)

A survey of 505 adults nationwide (MoE \pm 4%)

- **65%** - In this poll, respondents were asked what they thought should happen to most “illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the United States for at least two years.” 65% said

they should “be given a chance to keep their jobs and apply for legal status” while only 28% said they “should be deported back to their native country.”

- When asked about the legislation being debated in the Senate, only 13% favored its passage, while 35% opposed passage of the bill. A majority of respondents, **51%, did not know enough about the bill to have an opinion.**

Texas Employers for Immigration Reform / Baseline & Associates **(June 13 – 17, 2007)**

A survey of 1,001 Texas registered voters (MoE \pm 3.1%)

- **59%** - Respondents were asked if they favored or opposed a bill being considered in Congress that included a number of elements **including creating “a process for illegal immigrants already in this country to gain legal status** by paying a fine, passing a criminal background check and meeting other requirements.” **Texas voters favor this proposal by 59%, versus 36% who oppose it.** There was little difference in support among Republicans (59%) versus Democrats (62%).
- **Three-quarters of Texas voters (75%) think that the immigration system is broken** and a major overhaul is needed. An even greater number, 77%, believe that illegal immigration is a “very serious” or “extremely serious” problem in Texas.

Los Angeles Times / Bloomberg (June 7 – 10, 2007)

A survey of 1,183 adults nationwide (MoE \pm 3%)

- **63%** - Respondents were asked if they would support a proposal that would “**allow undocumented immigrants who have been living and working in the United States for a number of years, and who do not have a criminal record, to start on a path to citizenship** by registering that they are in the country, paying a fine, getting fingerprinted, and learning English, among other requirements.” Nearly two-thirds of the public (63%) supports such a proposal. Among registered voters, support is slightly higher (65%). Support extends across the political spectrum, including 58% among self-described conservatives. By contrast, only 23% of the public opposes such a proposal.
- The public is very concerned about the issue of illegal immigration. **A very large majority (86%) believe it is an “important” problem**, including 31% who believe it is the “most important” problem facing the country.
- A plurality of the public, 49%, supports a “guest worker” program, versus 26% who oppose such a program.

Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll (June 5-6, 2007)

A survey of 900 registered voters nationwide (MoE \pm 3%)

- **67%** – In this survey, **more than two-thirds (67%)** of registered voters said they favor “**giving illegal immigrants who pay taxes and obey the law a second chance and allowing them to stay in the United States.**”
- Respondents in this survey were asked to choose, “**if it were possible to locate most illegal immigrants currently in the United States,**” would they “favor deporting as many as possible,” or “setting up a system for them to become legal residents.” **More than half (51%)**

said they favored setting up a system for them to become legal residents, while only 39% favored deporting as many as possible.

Miami Herald/Zogby International/WFOR-CBS4/Palm Beach Post/WPEC-CBS 12 (June 4 – 6, 2007)

A survey of 801 “likely voters” in Florida with an oversample of likely voters in Miami-Dade, Broward, Monroe and Palm Beach counties (MoE \pm 3.5%; 5% on the oversample)

- **60%** – Three fifths (60%) of Floridian voters **think that immigration reform should include “a path toward citizenship for most illegal immigrants** with no criminal record if they pay a \$5,000 fine and wait their turn behind legal immigrants to apply for permanent U.S. residency.”
- When asked which category of immigrants should have “priority when deciding to allow immigrants into the U.S.,” **42% said immigrants with family ties**, vs. 24% who said immigrants with “high-tech skills” should have priority.

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (May 30 – June 3, 2007)

A survey of 1,503 adults (MoE \pm 3%)

- **63%** – When asked if they favored “**providing a way for illegal immigrants currently in the country to gain legal citizenship** if they pass background checks, pay fines and have jobs,” 63% of respondents said they did.
- In this survey, respondents were asked about “amnesty.” **A majority, (54%), favored giving “amnesty to illegal immigrants** currently in the country if they pass background checks, pay fines and have jobs.” Only Conservative Republicans (44% support) and moderate Republicans (50% support) did not show a clear majority support for a path to citizenship characterized as “amnesty.”

Washington Post/ABC News (May 29-June 1, 2007)

A survey of 1205 adults, with an oversample of African Americans (MoE \pm 3%)

- **52%** – In this poll, 52% of respondents said they would support “**a program giving illegal immigrants now living in the United States the right to live here legally** if they pay a fine and meet other requirements.” Of those respondents, a majority (56%) are opposed to making undocumented immigrant return to their home countries before they can apply for this program. **A majority of all respondents (53%) also support “significantly expanding” a “guest worker program.”**

New York Times/CBS (May 18-13, 2007)

A survey of 1,125 adults (MoE \pm 3%)

- **62%** – Respondents favored giving undocumented immigrants “a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status” (62%) vs. 33% who thought that they “should be deported back to their native country.”

- More than half of those who favor a path to legal status oppose “requiring [undocumented immigrants] to return to their home country before applying for U.S. citizenship.”
- Respondents favor a temporary guest worker program by a **66% to 30%** margin. Of those who favor a temporary worker program, **by a three to two margin, respondents favor “allowing workers to become permanent residents”** at the end of their work period.
- **Nearly all respondents believe the system is broken**, believing that we need to “completely rebuild” our immigration policy (49%) or that it requires “fundamental changes” (41%). Furthermore, 61% of respondents believe the issue of illegal immigration is a “very serious” problem and 82% of respondents believe the U.S. “could be doing more” to “keep illegal immigrants from crossing into this country.” Only 1% believe it is not a problem.

USA Today/Gallup (April 13 – 15, 2007)

- **78%** – In this poll, respondents were asked whether they favored a government policy that required undocumented immigrants to leave and not return, to leave and return to work temporarily, to leave and be allowed to return to apply for citizenship (if they meet certain requirements), to be allowed to stay and apply for citizenship (if they meet certain requirements). **In all, 78% said they favored the two options that would allow immigrants who came to the U.S. illegally to apply for citizenship** if requirements are met.

Washington Post/ABC News (April 12 – 15, 2007)

A survey of 1,141 adults, including an oversample of African Americans (MoE \pm 3%)

- **62%** – Respondents in this poll were asked whether “illegal immigrants who are living and working in the United States now (should be offered a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status),” or should they “be deported back to their native country?” **62% said they should be offered a chance to stay**, verses 35% who thought they should be deported.

CNN/Opinion Research (April 10 – 12, 2007)

A survey of 1,218 adults (MoE \pm 3)

- **77%** – 77% of respondents favored a program that would 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.” 21% opposed such a program.

Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg (April 5 – 9, 2007)

A survey of 1,373 adults (MoE \pm 3)

- **55%** – In this survey, respondents were asked whether they favored an approach “that focuses only on tougher enforcement of immigration laws, or an approach that includes both tougher enforcement of immigration laws and also creates a guest worker program that allows undocumented workers to work legally in the U.S. on temporary visas?” **Only 40% picked enforcement only** verses 55% who chose enforcement plus a guest worker program.

University of Iowa Poll (March 19 – 31, 2007)

A survey of 1,290 Iowa registered voters (MoE \pm 3%)

- **57%** – Given four options—1) deport all undocumented immigrants, 2) allow undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. to work for a limited amount of time (a guest worker program), 3) allow undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citizens if they meet certain requirements like learning English and paying back taxes (earned citizenship), or 4) allow undocumented immigrants to become permanent residents with no requirements (amnesty)—**57% of Iowa voters state-wide favored earned citizenship. Less than one-quarter—23%—thought that all undocumented immigrants should be deported.**

The Field Poll (March 20-31, 2007)

A survey of 570 California registered voters (MoE \pm 4.5%)

- **83%** – A large majority of Californians (83%) **favor the creation of a program that would allow undocumented immigrants** “who have been living in the U.S. for a number of years an opportunity to stay in this country and apply for citizenship if they have a job, learned English and paid back taxes.”

New York Times/CBS News Poll (March 7-11, 2007)

A national survey of 1,362 voters (698 Republican voters)

- **59%** – A majority of respondents (59%) believe that “**illegal immigrants** who have lived and worked in the United States for at least two years” **should be “given a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status.**
- Among Republican voters, 49% believe that undocumented immigrants should be given a chance to apply for legal status versus 45% who believe they should be deported.
- About a third of all voters (36%) believe that these immigrants “should be deported back to their home countries.”

Gallup/USA Today (March 2-4, 2007)

A national survey of 1,010 adults (MoE \pm 3%)

- **59%** – A majority of Americans (59%) believe that the government should “**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.”
- **Less than a quarter (24%)** believe the government should “deport all illegal immigrants back to their home country.”

California State University, Sacramento (February 17 – March 8, 2007)

A Survey of 1106 adults in the Sacramento region (MoE \pm 3%)

- **71%** – 71% of residents of the Sacramento, California, area favor a proposal to allow undocumented immigrants to remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens if they meet certain requirements over a period of time.
- **Support was highest among Latino residents, 88%**, but there was majority support among all groups, **including 56% support among Republican registered voters.**

Pew Research Center For People & The Press (December 16, 2006 – January 9, 2007)

A national survey of 2,007 adults (MoE \pm 2.5%)

- **59%** – A majority of Americans (59%) continue to favor a proposal to allow undocumented immigrants who have been in the U.S. for several years to gain legal working status and the possibility of future citizenship.
- Opinion on providing a path to citizenship for long-term undocumented immigrants has not changed in the past year; in April 2006, 58% supported this idea.