



# BACKGROUND

*To embrace and uphold our tradition as a nation of immigrants.*

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## Immigration and the 2006 Election

Leading up to the 2006 election, House Republican leaders conducted a series of hearings throughout the summer to drum up support for harsh measures aimed at immigrants here without legal status. Congress was in the midst of a debate on how to treat such immigrants. A Senate proposal would have offered a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants; a House proposal would have turned these persons into felons. The aim was to impress the general public to vote for candidates who offered enforcement exclusively as a response to the public's desire to see the broken immigration system fixed. The appeal to voter fears of immigrants, however, came with the risk of reversing Republican gains among the fastest-growing segment of the American electorate—new American and Latino voters.

There were signs early on, and right up to the election, that this strategy would fail. Public opinion polling conducted in the months prior to the election indicated that people who planned to vote favored immigration proposals that included a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants over proposals to simply deport those immigrants. This trend in public opinion held right through the election. Furthermore, the Republican leadership strategy fed the public perception that the 109th Congress too often chose partisan paralysis over governance through compromise. This strategy failed to sway voters. The strategy did, however, alienate Latino and immigrant voters. The result was a significant shift in preference for Democratic candidates among these voters.

Below are some statistics extracted from various polls and research documenting the sentiments of the general public on this issue and the shift in voter behavior among Latinos, Asians, and new American voters. Demographic trends noted below show that the proportion of voters who are immigrant voters or Latino voters is growing steadily, and an electoral strategy that includes alienating this voter population will present even greater risks of backfiring in the future.

**In the months leading up to the 2006 election, public opinion favored a path to citizenship over deportation for the undocumented. This trend continued through the months during which House Republican leaders were promoting enforcement-only measures.**

- Prior to the House Republican “hearings” during the summer of 2006, public support for allowing undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. under certain conditions, as surveyed by a number of mainstream news organizations, ranged from about **50% to about 80%** in some polls.<sup>1</sup>
- In a poll conducted a few days prior to the election, registered and “likely” voters stated that they preferred a candidate who advocated comprehensive immigration reform over one who advocated enforcement-only **by a margin of 57% to 37%**.<sup>2</sup>

**Public preference for a path to citizenship for the undocumented was again reflected on Election Day among voters in the 2006 election.**

- **By a margin of 19%** (57% to 38%), voters in the 2006 election preferred offering legal status to undocumented immigrants rather than deporting them, according to exit polls.<sup>3</sup>

**While the general public was not persuaded by enforcement-only proposals, the way Republicans conducted the immigration debate did alienate Latino voters, and these voters signaled they would express their displeasure on election day.**

- In a poll conducted in July, more than half of Latinos said that the immigration debate would make it more likely they would vote in the 2006 election, and **by a margin of 36%-15% they were more likely to vote for Democrats** over Republicans.<sup>4</sup>

**By election day, the tone of the immigration debate conducted during the summer prior to the election had reinforced Latinos' motivation to vote and it influenced their choice of candidates.**

- About **one-third** (32%) of Latinos said that the issue of immigration was **the most important issue in deciding their vote**. Another 19% said it was one of the most important issues in deciding their vote.<sup>5</sup>
- Just prior to the election, **53%** of Latinos reported that they **were more enthusiastic about voting** in the 2006 election than they had been in previous elections. **Seventy-five percent** rated their interest in voting a "9" or a "10" on a 10-point scale.<sup>6</sup>
- Almost **one-half** (47%) of Latinos said that the way the immigration debate had gone in the year preceding the election made them **more likely to vote Democrat**, versus **11%** who said they were more likely to vote Republican.<sup>7</sup>

**Recent advances by the Republican Party in attracting Latino voters were dramatically reversed in 2006.**

- In the presidential election of 2000, **35%** of Latino voters voted for George Bush, the Republican candidate.<sup>8</sup>
- In the presidential election of 2004, **44%** of Latino voters voted for George Bush. Republican candidates for the House of Representatives also garnered **44%** of the Latino vote.<sup>9</sup>
- In the Congressional election of 2006, Republican candidates for the House of Representatives won **30%** of the Latino vote nationally—a **drop of 14% from 2004**—and Democrats received 69% of the vote.<sup>10</sup>

**Asian voters also trended away from Republican candidates in the 2006 election.**

- In 2004, Republican candidates for the House of Representatives won **41%** of the Asian vote nationally.<sup>11</sup>
- In 2006, Asian voters gave Republican candidates for the U.S. House just **37%** of their vote nationally.<sup>12</sup>

**In the 2006 election, immigrant voters, even many who had voted Republican in the previous election, believed Democrats did a better job handling the immigration issue.**

- In a Los Angeles survey, immigrant voters were found to be **more likely to believe** that the Democratic party did a better job in handling the immigration issue (60%) than were the native-born (48%).<sup>13</sup>
- In New York, a survey found that among immigrant voters who had voted for President Bush in 2004, **about a quarter** now believe that the Democratic party handled immigration issues better than the Republican party did.<sup>14</sup>

**Looking to the future, an electoral strategy that alienates this rapidly-growing part of the electorate is even more likely to backfire. The size of the Latino and immigrant electorate is growing relative to the U.S. electorate as a whole.**

- In 2000, the share of U.S. eligible voters who were Latino was **7.4%**. In 2004, the share was **8.2%**.<sup>15</sup>
- In 2006, the share of U.S. eligible voters who were Latino was **8.6%**.<sup>16</sup>
- Of those **who voted** in 2006, **eight percent** were Latino.<sup>17</sup>
- In New York and Los Angeles, **two-thirds** of voters voting for the first time were immigrants.<sup>18</sup>

**There is a large pool of immigrants and their children who will be eligible to join the U.S. electorate by the 2008 election, and the number of immigrants applying for citizenship is increasing.**

- There are nearly **nine and a half million** immigrants who are currently eligible to naturalize, become U.S. citizens, and vote.<sup>19</sup>
- In the government's Fiscal Year 2006, more than **700,000 immigrants became U.S. Citizens**. The number of applications for citizenship in the first two months of Fiscal Year 2007 **was up 29%** over the same period the year before.<sup>20</sup>
- There are **one million** U.S.-born children of immigrants who are not yet voting age, but will reach 18 years of age by the time of the 2008 election, and will be eligible to register and to vote.<sup>21</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The National Immigration Forum summarized this polling information in a paper, “Polling Summary: Public Support for Comprehensive Immigration Reform.”

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.immigrationforum.org/documents/PressRoom/PublicOpinion/PollingSummary706.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.immigrationforum.org/documents/PressRoom/PublicOpinion/Poll110706\\_Presentation.pdf](http://www.immigrationforum.org/documents/PressRoom/PublicOpinion/Poll110706_Presentation.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ndn.org/hispanic/HSCpoll.html>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.nclr.org/files/42997\\_file\\_NCLR\\_2006\\_Latino\\_Voter\\_Poll\\_memo\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/files/42997_file_NCLR_2006_Latino_Voter_Poll_memo_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.nclr.org/files/42997\\_file\\_NCLR\\_2006\\_Latino\\_Voter\\_Poll\\_memo\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/files/42997_file_NCLR_2006_Latino_Voter_Poll_memo_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nclr.org/files/42997\\_file\\_NCLR\\_2006\\_Latino\\_Voter\\_Poll\\_memo\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/files/42997_file_NCLR_2006_Latino_Voter_Poll_memo_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/results/index.house.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.chirla.org/new/files/Los\\_Angeles\\_NAEP\\_Findings.pdf](http://www.chirla.org/new/files/Los_Angeles_NAEP_Findings.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.thenyic.org/templates/documentFinder.asp?did=616>

<sup>16</sup> <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/24.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/24.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.thenyic.org/templates/documentFinder.asp?did=616>

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.icirr.org/index\\_files/tomorrowwevote.pdf](http://www.icirr.org/index_files/tomorrowwevote.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.uscis.gov/files/article/N400\\_NATURALIZATION\\_BENEFITS\\_Nov06.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/files/article/N400_NATURALIZATION_BENEFITS_Nov06.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.icirr.org/index\\_files/tomorrowwevote.pdf](http://www.icirr.org/index_files/tomorrowwevote.pdf)