



Tamar Jacoby: Immigration is not black and white

The majority of voters – the quiet 60 percent in the middle - are ambivalent and uncertain

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You've heard it all a dozen times. That the public is virulently anti-immigrant. That political leaders – including President Bush and the senators from both parties who voted last summer to overhaul the immigration system – are hopelessly out of touch with this angry tide. That millions of people across the country are going to vote on the basis of their fury.

And that the only immigration reform Americans will accept, this year and perhaps for years to come, is “reform” along the lines advocated by Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado and CNN's Lou Dobbs: harsh, anti-immigrant policies designed to drive millions of foreigners out of the United States.

The only problem: It isn't so. The situation isn't nearly so black and white.

Public opinion surveys on immigration are remarkably consistent, changing little even in the last year. An unvarying 20 percent to 25 percent of voters are bitterly anti-immigrant: determined to close the borders, send illegal workers home, cut back even legal immigration quotas. Although they are a minority, these xenophobes are loud and intense; they call in to talk radio, show up at town hall meetings, write to their members of Congress and dominate the debate.

On the other hand, 15 percent to 20 percent of voters generally are sympathetic to immigrants but are neither vocal nor intense.

The majority of voters – the 60 percent in the middle – are ambivalent and uncertain, undeniably anxious about the influx but also prepared to come to terms pragmatically with the 12 million illegal immigrants in the country.

Whatever else they feel, most voters want politicians to solve the problem.

They want the borders secured. They want immigrants to enter the country legally. They want to restore order in their neighborhoods and workplaces.

And last spring, when Congress was debating a compromise that addressed these concerns, two-thirds to three-quarters of the public supported it.

What has changed in the last six months is the nature of the debate.

Today, neither Democrats nor Republicans are offering solutions. What they're doing, each in language more incendiary and provocative than the last, is denouncing benefits for illegal immigrants: drivers' licenses, affordable college tuition, the ability to use public services such as schools and hospitals.

And although there are persuasive arguments – public-safety arguments, among others – for allowing even illegal immigrants to have access to some services, the ambivalent 60 percent don't like the idea.

The same voter who six months ago told pollsters he was in favor of the solution being debated in the Senate is ticked today by this talk of what he sees as giveaways. As a result, the debate has grown much more shrill.

What we don't know is whether voters will reward candidates for the new nativist tone. In the past, they haven't.

In 2006, also an ugly campaign, no congressional race turned on the basis of immigration, and in fact, to the degree the issue played a role, polls showed that harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric turned voters off.

Of course, this year could be different: Voters' anxieties are plainly running higher. But for all the angry talk, polls show the public still hungry for a solution.

According to a Washington Post/ABC poll that tracked changes over the last eight months, voters are losing confidence in both Democrats' and Republicans' ability to handle the issue. Barely one-quarter of voters think the one step Congress has taken – mandating a border fence – is enough to take care of the problem.

And even in the midst of today's vitriolic debate, a majority still favor a compromise package that combines tougher enforcement with a practical answer for the illegal immigrants already in the country.

A late November Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll, among others, revealed how little opinion has changed: 63 percent of Democrats, 64 percent of Republicans and 57 percent of independents favor allowing illegal immigrants who meet certain conditions – registering, being fingerprinted, paying a fine and learning English – to earn citizenship over time.

Does anyone running for office hear these voters? It doesn't seem so.

And if today's debate continues, Americans will have no chance, in the primaries or in November, to express their desire for a practical solution – one that deals realistically with the illegal immigrants already here.

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