

# PUBLIC OPINION ON IMMIGRATION

## ONLY A SMALL MINORITY OF VOTERS HOLD STRONGLY ANTI-IMMIGRANT VIEWS

- According to a May 2009 poll by the Benenson Strategy Group, only a quarter of voters (26%) think Americans “would be better off if people in the U.S. illegally left the country.”<sup>1</sup>
- According to Lake Research Partners and the Tarrance Group, 85% believe it would be impossible to “deport all 12 million illegal immigrants” in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>
- According to an April 2009 New York Times/CBS News poll, only 24% think “the borders should be completely closed.”<sup>3</sup>
- Over half of Lou Dobbs’ viewers disagree with his stance on immigration: 53% favor comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship or “amnesty.”<sup>4</sup>
- Voters with strongly anti-immigrant views are disproportionately seniors. According to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, voters under 30 are half as likely as those over 65 to think “newcomers from other countries threaten traditional American customs and values” (30% to 65%).<sup>5</sup>

## EVEN IN THE RECESSION, VOTERS WANT IMMIGRATION REFORM

- Though not voters’ first priority, immigration is among the issues Americans want Congress to tackle as soon as it has taken care of the economy.<sup>6</sup>
- Consistent majorities of voters continue to consider immigration an “important” or “very important” issue.
  - According to a May 2009 Benenson Strategy Group poll, 55% think immigration should be a “high priority” for Congress.<sup>7</sup>
  - According to an August 2009 Rasmussen Reports survey, 66% consider immigration legislation “very important.”<sup>8</sup>
- According to the Benenson Strategy Group, 57% of Americans think the recession makes it more urgent for Congress to address immigration, compared to 39% who say this is not the right time.<sup>9</sup>
- The share of voters who think unauthorized immigrants should “become legal taxpayers” has risen since the start of the downturn from 62% to 71%.<sup>10</sup>
- According to a May 2009 hypothetical comparison, members of Congress who propose to “address immigration reform and deal with the economy” have a 25% advantage over members who think the economic crisis means the country should put off immigration reform.<sup>11</sup>

## **VOTERS SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT AND WANT A LEGAL, ORDERLY IMMIGRATION PROCESS**

- Large, consistent majorities support greater control at the border.
  - According to the Pew Research Center, 73% agree that “we should control people coming to live in our country more than we do now.”<sup>12</sup>
  - According to the Benenson Strategy Group, 75% think that “the federal government is not doing enough to secure the nation’s borders.”<sup>13</sup>
- According to an August 2009 Rasmussen Report, three quarters of voters want the police to verify people’s immigration status at traffic stops.<sup>14</sup>
- According to the same survey, more than two-thirds (68%) think employers who knowingly hire unauthorized immigrants should be punished.<sup>15</sup>
- Yet consistent majorities believe that trying to control immigration with enforcement alone is less likely to be successful than a comprehensive approach.
  - According to the Benenson Strategy Group, two-thirds (67%) of voters prefer comprehensive reform to an approach that “secures the border, stops taxpayer benefits and forces those who entered illegally to leave” (31%).<sup>16</sup>
- According to Rasmussen, if the border is controlled and immigration takes place “within the law,” 55% of Americans believe the U.S. should “welcome everyone except criminals, national security threats and welfare dependents.”<sup>17</sup>

## **CONSISTENT MAJORITIES SUPPORT COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM THAT COMBINES BETTER ENFORCEMENT WITH A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP**

- More than 60% of voters continue to favor immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship.
  - According to an April 2009 ABC News/Washington Post poll, 61% support allowing illegal immigrants to remain in the U.S. “if they pay a fine and meet other requirements.”<sup>18</sup>
  - According to a May 2009 Pew Research Center survey, 63% favor “a way for illegal immigrants in the United States to gain legal citizenship if they meet certain conditions, including passing background checks and paying fines.”<sup>19</sup>
  - Among Democrats and independents, support for comprehensive reform has risen since 2007 – 11 points among Democrats and 3 points among independents. GOP support has declined somewhat, but half of Republicans remain favorable.<sup>20</sup>
  - In swing districts, according to a May 2009 Benenson survey, 61% support comprehensive reform.<sup>21</sup>
- The better voters understand comprehensive reform, the more supportive they become.
  - When the Benenson Strategy Group asked voters about comprehensive reform without explaining what it entailed, 64% were supportive.<sup>22</sup>
  - When Benenson described exactly what a comprehensive reform package would include, detailing the enforcement provisions and requirements for becoming a citizen, 86% percent were favorable.<sup>23</sup>

## VOTERS HAVE MIXED FEELINGS, BUT DON'T BLAME IMMIGRANTS

- No more than 15 to 20 percent of voters hold strongly pro- or anti-immigrant views. Most – the remaining 60 percent – have mixed, ambivalent feelings.
- Many are concerned about the number of foreigners arriving but still believe the U.S. should remain a nation of immigrants.
  - In the recession, those who want to reduce the number arriving have grown from 39% to 50%, according to a July 2009 Gallup poll.<sup>24</sup>
  - Still, even during the downturn, 58% of voters say immigration is “good for the country,” according to Gallup.<sup>25</sup>
- The public holds mixed views about whether immigrants help or hurt the U.S. economy.
  - Four different national media polls (New York Times/CBS News, ABC News/Washington Post, Time Magazine and Associated Press/Ipsos) asked the same question and got the same answer in 2006. One in three voters (29% to 35%) think immigrants take jobs from Americans. But nearly twice as many (53% to 68%) think immigrants do jobs Americans don’t want to do.<sup>26</sup>
  - According to a September 2009 survey by the Public Policy Institute of California, 30% of Californians “consider immigrants a burden because they use public services.” But nearly twice as many (58%) think newcomers “benefit the state” because of “their hard work and job skills.”<sup>27</sup>
  - According to Bendixen & Associates, 41% of Florida, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada voters think immigrants in low-paying jobs “hurt” the economy by driving down wages. But an equal number (43%) think newcomers “help” the economy by providing low-cost labor.<sup>28</sup>
  - According to the Benenson Strategy Group, the public’s primary concern about unlawful immigrants is that they “don’t pay taxes and use services”: nearly half (49%) of voters believe that. In contrast, only 17% think unlawful immigrants take jobs from Americans.<sup>29</sup>
  - According to a September 2008 Transatlantic Trends report, 61% of voters believe immigrants start new businesses and create jobs for Americans.<sup>30</sup>
- Many voters are angry about the way the country handles immigration, but they don’t necessarily want to take their anger out on immigrants.
  - According to a June 2008 Rasmussen poll, a third of Americans (32%) are angry about the immigration issue. But of those voters, 83% blame the government, while only 12% blame the immigrant looking for a job.<sup>31</sup>
  - Nearly half of voters in Florida, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada (47%) blame the federal government for what’s wrong with the immigration system, while 20% blame employers who hire unlawful workers and 3% blame the immigrants.<sup>32</sup>
  - According to Benenson, voters distinguish clearly between “law-abiding employers” and their “bad-actor competitors who underpay workers without papers.” And for voters in swing districts, “creating a level playing field for honest employers and workers” is among the most compelling reasons to enact immigration reform.<sup>33</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>2</sup> Lake Research Partners & The Tarrance Group. "Key Findings from A National Survey on Immigration," April 2007.
  - <sup>3</sup> New York Times/CBS News. "Poll: April 22-26, 2009," April 27, 2009.
  - <sup>4</sup> USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center/Governance Studies at Brookings. "A Report on the Media and the Immigration Debate." Democracy in the Age of New Media. 2008.
  - <sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes, 1987-2009: Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era," May 21, 2009.
  - <sup>6</sup> New York Times/CBS News. "Poll: April 22-26, 2009," April 27, 2009.
  - <sup>7</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>8</sup> Rasmussen Reports. "Most Voters Say Immigration Reform Not Likely to Pass," Aug 13, 2009.
  - <sup>9</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>10</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>11</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>12</sup> Pew Research Center For the People & The Press. "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes, 1987-2009: Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era," May 21, 2009.
  - <sup>13</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>14</sup> Rasmussen Reports. "Most Voters Say Immigration Reform Not Likely to Pass," Aug 13, 2009.
  - <sup>15</sup> Rasmussen Reports. "Most Voters Say Immigration Reform Not Likely to Pass," Aug 13, 2009.
  - <sup>16</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>17</sup> Rasmussen Reports. "Most Voters Say Immigration Reform Not Likely to Pass," Aug 13, 2009.
  - <sup>18</sup> ABC News/Washington Post. "Poll, Hot-Button Issues: Changing Views on Social Issues. Allemande Left. Allemande Right," April 30, 2009.
  - <sup>19</sup> Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes, 1987-2009: Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era," May 21, 2009.
  - <sup>20</sup> Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes, 1987-2009: Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era," May 21, 2009.
  - <sup>21</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>22</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>23</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>24</sup> Gallup, "Special Report: Ideologically, Where Is the U.S. Moving?" July 6, 2009.
  - <sup>25</sup> Gallup, "Special Report: Ideologically, Where Is the U.S. Moving?" July 6, 2009.
  - <sup>26</sup> Pew Hispanic Center. "The State of American Public Opinion on Immigration in Spring 2006: A Review of Major Surveys," May 17, 2006.
  - <sup>27</sup> Baldassare, Mark, et al. "PPIC Statewide Survey: Californians & Their Government." Public Policy Institute of California, September 2009.
  - <sup>28</sup> NDN / Bendixen & Associates. "Statewide Surveys on Immigration Policy in Florida, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada (Expanded)," September 10, 2008.
  - <sup>29</sup> Brodnitz, Pete. "Recent Polling on Immigration Reform," Benenson Strategy Group, June 2, 2009.
  - <sup>30</sup> German Marshall Fund of the United States. "Transatlantic Trends: Immigration," September 2008.
  - <sup>31</sup> Rasmussen Reports. "Toplines – Immigration," June 10, 2008.
  - <sup>32</sup> NDN/Bendixen & Associates. "Statewide Surveys on Immigration Policy in Florida, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada (Expanded)," September 10, 2008.
  - <sup>33</sup> Benenson Strategy Group, "Immigration Reform: National and Swing District Polling," May-June 2009.