

AMNESTY IS NOT A FOUR-LETTER WORD

By Tamar Jacoby

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Sometimes a boogeyman is just that – a boogeyman. Consider the dreaded A-word: amnesty. It's hard to think of a word that scares today's elected officials more. Yet it turns out that voters – Democrats and Republicans – are much less knee-jerk about the word and what lies behind it than most politicians think.

In the last year or so, the Manhattan Institute has conducted several polls on immigration, and at first we stayed away from questions about what we thought was a misleading buzzword. But in the last few months, as more people have warmed to the package of reforms favored by President Bush and the Senate – combining tougher border and workplace enforcement with more worker visas and a path to legalization for the illegal immigrants already here – we wanted to put that package to the hardest possible test, and we started asking about the A-word.

What we found: No one likes amnesty. No one wants to reward illegal behavior or encourage more of it in years ahead. But voters are so hungry to solve the problem of illegal immigration, to retake control of the border and restore the rule of law where they live, that they are willing to accept even something they consider to be amnesty.

This is the way the Manhattan Institute and the National Immigration Forum put the question in a poll released this week: "Which would you prefer: Congress does nothing about immigration reform this year, or Congress passes an immigration reform bill that provides for increased border security and tougher enforcement but also contains things you do not like, such as amnesty for current illegal immigrants?"

The results: 55% of likely voters want to do the pragmatic thing – recognize this underground population and bring it onto the right side of the law – as opposed to 33% who would rather stand pat and ignore the problem. (In fact, Republicans favor pragmatism more strongly than Democrats. And last month, in an earlier poll, when the institute asked likely GOP voters what they thought about the Senate bill, 39% said that a package that included legalization was amnesty – but 75% supported it anyway.)

Other surveys find much the same thing, albeit without using the dreaded shibboleth. In the past three months, virtually every major media outlet has conducted a poll on immigration, and the results are remarkably uniform. Yes, Americans are deeply troubled by the illegal influx. Yes, they want tougher, more effective enforcement. But voters also see, and perhaps it's only common sense, that we as a nation cannot hope to solve the problem of illegal immigration without dealing with the 12 million illegal immigrants already living and working here.

The Gallup Poll, Washington Post/ABC News, Time, NBC News/Wall Street Journal, CNN and the Republican National Committee have all come to the same conclusion: Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the public would be willing to let illegal immigrants stay in the country and earn eventual citizenship, provided they meet requirements such as paying back taxes and learning English.

The problem is the other 20% to 25% – and, survey after survey show that's the extent of their numbers. A USA Today poll in May painted their portrait in vivid detail: Mostly male,

white and without a college degree, they believe immigrants are bad for the economy; they want to build a wall along the border; and they adamantly oppose allowing illegal immigrants to become citizens. Only about half are Republicans, and if we assume that GOP voters make up roughly half of the electorate, then these diehards account for no more than a quarter of the party.

But many Republican candidates, particularly in the House, are convinced that this group is more intense – more concerned, more motivated, more likely to vote on the basis of this single issue – than anyone else likely to go to the polls. So they have become the tail wagging the dog of the national debate about immigration, leading many House Republicans to conclude that blocking reform could be a political winner.

But what if this Republican calculus is wrong? Our new poll suggests that some voters, albeit still a minority, are likely to punish Congress if it fails to deal with immigration before Election Day. Right now, they blame both Democrats and Republicans. But that could change, and if anything, House Republicans could be setting themselves up for a fall. How can they travel around the country all summer, hold hearings and insist that immigration is the most pressing domestic policy problem we face, and then come back to Washington in September and sit on their hands? They risk losing not only Latinos and swing voters (both of whom are more likely than other voters to be put off by the GOP's anti-immigrant rhetoric) but also staunch Republicans (who feel most strongly, by a 75% margin, that it is "very" or "extremely important" for Congress to come to grips with illegal immigration this year).

Will most ordinary Americans – beyond that dedicated 20% to 25% – base their vote this November on immigration? Probably not. But it could play into a larger sense of dissatisfaction with the federal government. According to our new poll, voters feel that Congress is not doing "a good job at solving the problems that are important" to them -- and 44% might just stay home from the polls or vote against their member of Congress as a result.

Which would you rather see your representative do: Let the tail wag the dog and ignore this pressing issue, or risk being attacked with the A-word for facing up to the failed policies of the past – doing what needs to be done, whatever the consequences?