



Polling Summary: Presidential Campaign Messaging Out of Step with General Electorate Attitudes on Immigration

July 2015

Introduction

In the first half of 2015, the immigration debate was dominated by President Obama's executive action on immigration and Republican efforts to stop it. It was also marked by an abatement of refugee flows across the southern border that, for a time, created a climate of public opinion on the immigration issue that was more cautious and skeptical than it had been in a long time. In 2015, however, [illegal border crossings are down dramatically from the previous year](#), and are again near all-time lows.

Meanwhile, the presidential election cycle has begun, and so has another cycle of commentary about the stance of candidates on immigration. Most Republican candidates are trying to show they are tougher than the next candidate on immigration. As public polling shows, the primary season immigration message, however, is out of step with the general electorate attitude toward immigration reform.

As they have been for several years, a majority of Americans are supportive of allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. under certain conditions.

Public Support for a Path to Citizenship Remains Steady Even as Prospects for Reform are Remote

Following is a discussion of some recent public opinion surveys—most by mainstream news organizations, but some by other firms. All these surveys show majority support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Another consistent finding in the latest and in older polling: when survey questions describe conditions that undocumented immigrants would have to meet to gain citizenship, public support is greater. That is, when the questions mirror conditions placed in actual legislation—learning English, a criminal background check, etc.—the public is more supportive than if they were just asked if they support a path to citizenship without mention of conditions.

Some of the more recent polls also ask the about President Obama's executive action on immigration, which would protect millions of otherwise law-abiding undocumented immigrants from deportation and which have very much been part of the public debate on immigration in the first half of 2015. In general, public opinion surveys show support for the *policy* (allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. legally), but there is less support for the president's *method* (acting without congressional approval).

Below this discussion of polls conducted in 2015 is a list of polls, and their results, going back to the beginning of 2014, showing the consistency of public support for immigration reform with a path to citizenship.

- [Pew Research Center](#) (May 12 to 18, 2015, of 2,002 U.S. adults): In this survey, nearly three in four Americans (**72%**) agreed that “there should be a way for [undocumented immigrants] to stay in the country legally, if certain requirements are met.” Included in that total is 42% who said undocumented immigrants should be allowed to apply for citizenship, and another 26% who said they should be allowed to apply for permanent status but not citizenship. (Another 4% did not specify.)

Democrats, Independents and Republicans all favored allowing undocumented immigrants to remain in the country legally (80%, 76% and 56%). Like a number of other surveys, this survey finds that young people are among the greatest supporters of the path to legal status—**81% of those younger than 30**.

This survey asked respondents if they felt that giving undocumented immigrants a path to legal status “is like rewarding them for doing something wrong.” Only 36% felt that way. The survey also asked respondents if they felt their party was doing a good job representing their views on immigration. Among Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents, only 34% said that Republicans were doing a good job representing their views.

- [Burning Glass Consulting](#) (May 6 to 11, 2015, of 800 voters in “battleground” states—CO, FL, IA, MI, NV, NH, NC, OH, VA, WI). This poll, commissioned by the Partnership for a New American Economy, found that voters in battleground states—states considered swing states in a national election—have views towards undocumented immigrants very similar to views of Americans elsewhere. Overall, **49%** said they favored allowing undocumented immigrants to eventually apply for citizenship “after meeting requirements like a background check and paying fines.” An **additional 23%** said they favored letting undocumented immigrants gain legal status but not citizenship. Only 22% said that undocumented immigrants should be required to leave the U.S.

Breaking this down by party affiliation, **40% of Republicans, 48% of independents, and 59% of Democrats** favored citizenship for undocumented immigrants, while an additional 27% of Republicans, 16% of independents, and 22% of Democrats favored legal status but not citizenship. Other groups very supportive of the citizenship option were **Latinos (62%), African Americans (61%) and young voters 18 to 34 years old (60%)**.

In this poll, **54%** of voters said they would be much or somewhat more likely to support a presidential candidate who favored securing the borders and also provide a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Only 28% said they would be much or somewhat more likely to support a candidate who wanted to send undocumented immigrants back to their own countries.

- [CBS News/New York Times](#) (April 30 to May 3, 2015, of 1,027 U.S. adults): This poll asked respondents, “Which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are living in the U.S.?” A majority, **57%**, favored allowing undocumented immigrants to “stay in the U.S. and eventually apply for citizenship,” while an **additional 11%** agreed that undocumented immigrants should be allowed “to stay in the U.S. legally, but not be allowed to apply for citizenship.” Only 29% thought they should be “required to leave the U.S.”

In this survey, a plurality of Republicans favored deportation (46%), while **majorities of Democrats and Independents favored citizenship** (71 and 55%, respectively).

Results for this survey, asking the identical question as a CBS survey in January (see below), suggests slightly more polarization between Republican respondents and Democrats and Independents (although within the statistical margin of error of 3%).

- [AP-GfK](#) (April 23 to April 27, 2015, of 1,077 U.S. adults): This survey asked a number of questions related to immigration. Half the respondents in this survey were asked if they favored or opposed “providing a legal way for illegal immigrants already in the United States to become U.S. citizens. Even without the mention of any conditions to be met, **53% said they favored** the proposition. When asked whether they favored or opposed “providing a way for immigrants who were brought to the United States illegally as children to stay legally, **59% of respondents said they favored a way**. Slightly fewer, **57%**, said they favor allowing parents of U.S. citizen or permanent resident children to stay legally.

When asked how President Obama’s executive order on immigration might affect their presidential candidate choices, **49% of respondents said they would be more likely to support a presidential candidate who wanted to keep the president’s executive order in place**, while 47% said they would be more likely to support someone who wanted to undo it. In general, [the issue is not a deal-breaker](#) for those considering whom to support in the presidential elections. For example, while three quarters of Republicans said they would *prefer* to vote for a candidate who would undo the president’s executive order, 55% said they would either support a candidate who would keep the order in place, or they could imagine voting for such a candidate. For Latinos, however, the issue is a deal-breaker: **53% said they definitely could not support a candidate who wants to undo the president’s order**.

- [MSNBC/Telemundo/Marist](#) (March 23 to April 5, 2015, of 1,446 U.S. adults, including 1,091 registered voters and an oversample of 362 Latinos): Respondents were asked whether “passing immigration legislation that would create a pathway to U.S. citizenship for foreigners who are currently staying illegally in the United States” should be a priority for Congress and the president this year. **41% of respondents said it should be a priority**, while 33% said it should not be pursued. For Latinos, **59%** thought it should be a priority while 16% thought such legislation should not be pursued. Respondents were asked whether it was more important for immigration reform to pass without a pathway to citizenship, or if no bill should pass *unless* it had a pathway to citizenship. A majority of all respondents, **52%**, **thought a reform bill should not pass unless it included a pathway to citizenship**. (49% of Latinos felt that way.)

After the president’s executive action on immigration was described, respondents were asked whether they approved of the president’s action. **57% of respondents overall said they approved**, but approval rose to 78% among Latinos. Even among those who disapproved of the president’s action, the majority (56%) said they did so because the president acted without approval of Congress. **Only 29%** of those disapproving of executive action did so because they **actually opposed the president’s immigration policy**.

Respondents were asked who they would blame if “Congress is unable to come to agreement on an immigration bill before the end of its current term.” **A plurality, 43%, said they would blame Republicans in Congress**. Obama would be blamed by 26%, and Democrats in Congress would be blamed by 11% of respondents.

- [Public Policy Institute of California](#) (Released March 25, 2015, of 1,706 California adults): In the mid-1990's, Californians approved a ballot initiative that would have harshly cracked down on undocumented immigrants. This survey finds that, 20 years later, a whopping **80% of Californians favor “providing a path to citizenship** for illegal immigrants in the U.S. if they meet certain requirements including a waiting period, paying fines and back taxes, passing criminal background checks, and learning English.” While Californians may be more welcoming than people in other states, other surveys have also found that approval for a “path to citizenship” goes up as conditions are detailed (paying fines, passing criminal checks, etc.) Such conditions are included in all actual legislation that has been proposed in the past.

In California, supporters of the path to citizenship crosses party lines, with **two-thirds of Republicans (66%) supportive**. The president's executive action on immigration is also supported by a large majority of Californians, 70%, but here there is a split between Democrats and Independents on one side (80% and 68%) and Republicans on the other (30%).

- [Lifeway Research](#) (February 17 to 27, 2015, of 1,000 self identified evangelical Christians): This survey of evangelical Christians found mixed views on immigration and immigrants, but significant support for Congressional action on immigration this year (85% said it was “very important,” “important,” or “somewhat important.”) **A majority of evangelicals (61%) believe that “immigration reform legislation should establish a path toward citizenship** for those who are here illegally, are interested, and meet certain qualifications for citizenship.”

As with other surveys, this one found increased support when conditions on the path to citizenship are described and combined with other elements that have been featured in actual reform legislation. **Support rose to 68%** when respondents were asked if they would “support changes to U.S. immigration laws that would both increase border security measures and establish a process so that those immigrants in the U.S. unlawfully could earn permanent legal status and eventually apply for citizenship if they pay a fine, pass a criminal background check, and complete other requirements during a probationary period.” Also like other surveys, this one finds younger people (age 18 to 34) more likely to support a path to citizenship (72%) than other age groups.

- [Public Religion Research Institute](#) (February 4 to 8, 2015, of 1,015 U.S. adults): This survey found majority support (59%) for the proposition that the immigration system should allow immigrants currently living in the U.S. illegally “to become citizens provided they meet certain requirements.” **An additional 19%** favored allowing undocumented immigrants to “become permanent legal residents but not citizens.” Only 18% said these immigrants should be deported.

As with earlier surveys, the Public Religion Research Institute found more support for the policies of the president's executive action on immigration than the president's methods. Respondents were asked if they favored “allowing illegal immigrants who are the parents of children with legal status to stay in the U.S. for three years without being subject to deportation, if they pass a background check and have lived in the country for at least five years.” (This is part of the president's policy known as Deferred Action for Parents of Americans, now placed on hold while it is being challenged in the courts.) **Three in four respondents (76%) support the policy**. Half of respondents were asked that question. The other half was asked if they supported “*President Obama's* policy allowing illegal

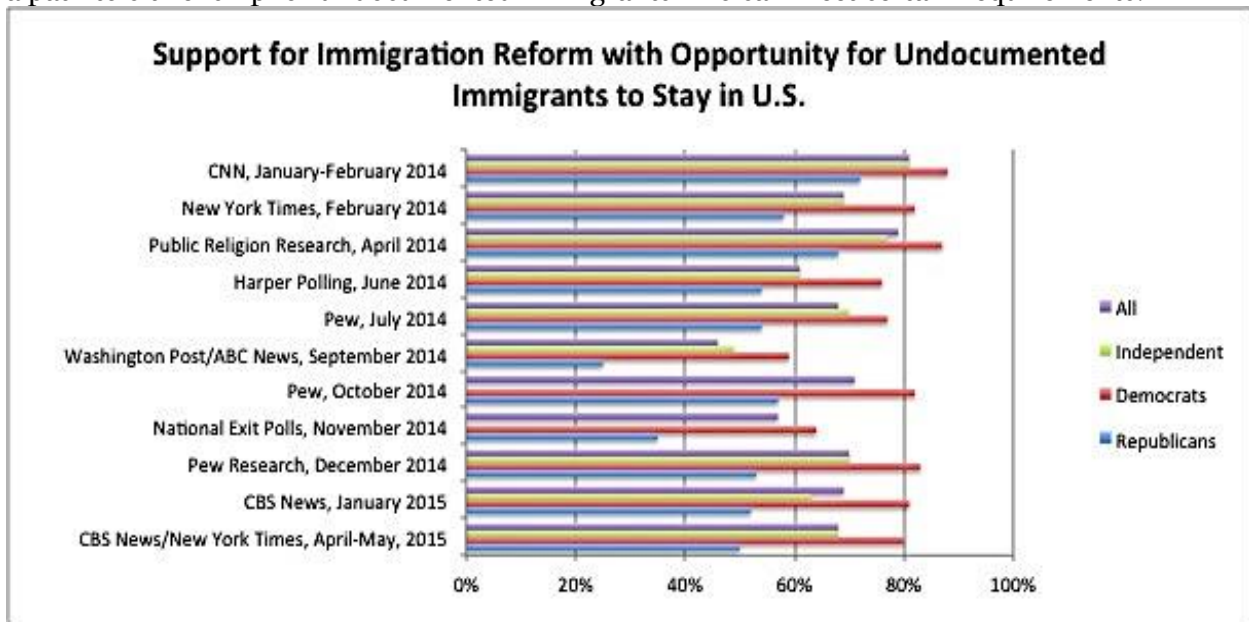
immigrants...” Merely by associating the action with the president, support dropped to 65%. Asked whether the president should have acted “given that Congress has not yet acted to address the immigration issue,” a slight majority, 52%, said the president was right to act.

The Public Religion Research Institute has [data for every state](#) on the question of support for allowing immigrants currently living in the U.S. illegally to become citizens provided they meet certain conditions. **There is majority support in every state**, ranging from a low of 52% in Wyoming to a high of 66% in Delaware. There is *additional* support for allowing these immigrants to gain legal residency, but not citizenship.

- **CBS News** (January 9 to 12, 2015, of 1,001 U.S. adults): This poll asked respondents, “Which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are living in the U.S.?” A majority, **54%**, favored allowing undocumented immigrants “to stay in the U.S. and eventually apply for citizenship.” An additional 15% favored allowing them “to stay in the U.S. legally, but not [allowing them] to apply for citizenship.” Only 27% said they should be “required to leave the U.S.” In this survey, a plurality of Republicans favored deportation (43%), while **majorities of Democrats and Independents favored citizenship** (68 and 53%, respectively).

The same survey asked respondents about President Obama’s executive action and what Congress should do about it. Nearly two thirds of respondents (**62%**) favored the president’s action to “allow some illegal immigrants already in the U.S. to stay here temporarily and apply for a work permit if certain requirements are met.” Large majorities of Democrats (**79%**) and Independents (**63%**) favored the president’s action, while only 37% of Republicans did. Similarly, 79% of Democrats and 56% of Independents thought that Congress should let the executive order on immigration stand.

The following graph illustrates the consistent support of the public for immigration reform with a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who can meet certain requirements.



Previous Polling Summaries can be found [here](#).