



Polling Update: Public Attitudes on Immigration and Trump Administration Immigration Initiatives

July 2017

Introduction

As a candidate, Donald Trump promised a different approach to immigration policy. As president he is seeking congressional funding to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border and to hire thousands more immigration agents to arrest and deport immigrants in the U.S. Immigration agents are now, more than in recent times, routinely picking up and deporting immigrants with no criminal history who have lived and worked in the U.S. for many years.

Researchers have attempted to gauge public reaction to these initiatives through public opinion surveys. Overall public reaction so far has been negative, but the answers to questions about the administration's immigration initiatives reveal a partisan divide.

One thing has not changed despite the wide swing in policy in recent months. The public has supported policy solutions that allow undocumented immigrants — most of whom have lived in the U.S. for many years — to remain in the U.S. and gain legal status if they meet certain conditions. Support for this idea crosses party lines in most surveys, with Republicans, Independents, and Democrats all in favor.

This paper takes a look at public opinion surveys conducted by mainstream media and other sources since the November 2016 election. These polls have included questions about a path to earned legality for undocumented immigrants, about the administration's deportation policies, and about other immigration-related actions.

General Views on Immigration and Illegal Immigration

Some of the surveys conducted since the November election have asked general questions to gauge public attitudes toward immigration and diversity, about the importance of immigration as an issue facing this country, about their concern over illegal immigration, and about President Trump's performance on the immigration issue. In this time frame, the public has been somewhat more positive toward immigrants and immigration than in the past.

A [Pew Research Survey](#) in February 2017 asked respondents whether they believed "having an increasing number of many different races, ethnic groups, and nationalities in the United States makes this country a better place to live ...". **Nearly two-thirds** (64 percent) **said that diversity makes the country a better place** to live. Only 5 percent

said it makes the country a worse place to live, while 29 percent said it doesn't make much difference. Democrats were more supportive of diversity — three-quarters (76 percent) said that growing diversity makes the country a better place to live, while half of Republicans (51 percent) thought so.¹

In April 2017, an **NBC News-Wall Street Journal** [poll](#) asked whether respondents thought that “immigration helps the United States more than it hurts, or immigration hurts the United States more than it helps.” **By a nearly 2-to-1 margin, respondents said that immigration helps more than hurts** (60 percent vs. 32 percent). **This is the largest margin since the questions was first asked in 2005.**²

In June 2017, the **Washington Post and Kaiser Family Foundation** released a [poll](#) conducted in April to gauge differences between Americans living in rural, suburban and urban areas. Asked whether they thought that “immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work” or that “immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing, and health care,” **a majority of respondents overall (62 percent) said that immigrants helped strengthen our country.** Urban dwellers were most positive (71 percent said that immigrants strengthen the country) while a plurality of rural residents (48 percent) took the positive view. Suburbanites were in between at 62 percent.³

Shortly after the election, in November 2016, [Quinnipiac University](#) asked an open-ended question about what respondents thought should be President Trump's top priority when he assumed office. Only **6 percent said immigration**, with **1 percent saying building the border wall** should be the top priority, and another 1 percent saying border security should be the top priority.⁴

A [poll](#) by **Politico and Harvard University** conducted in December 2016 asked its nationwide sample of adults how serious a problem they thought it was that there were “currently millions of unauthorized immigrants living in the U.S.” For Trump voters, the presence of undocumented immigrants was a big deal — 90 percent of them thought it was a “very serious problem” or a “somewhat serious problem.” The general public overall was less concerned — 30 percent considered it a “very serious problem,” and an additional 27 percent thought it was a “somewhat serious problem.”⁵

Treatment of Undocumented Immigrants

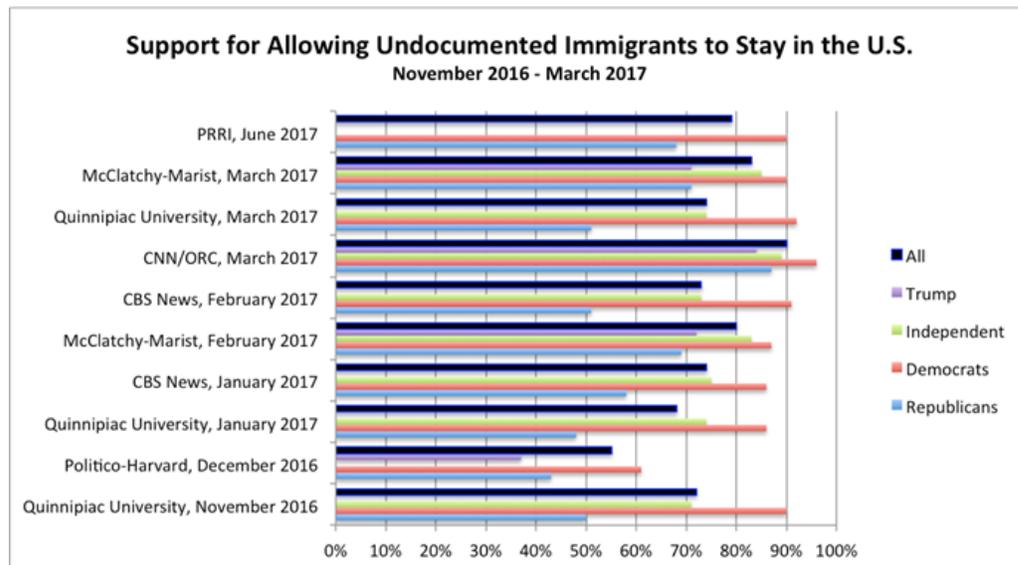
For more than a decade, public opinion surveys have been asking Americans how they feel about a proposal that would allow undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. and eventually become citizens or remain in the U.S. with legal status but not citizenship. The questions have tracked policy ideas that have been part of actual immigration reform legislation Congress has considered but never passed. In general, the pattern in responses to these questions has been that the more detailed the question is (by including some of the proposed requirements — learning English, paying back taxes, passing a criminal background check, etc.), the more likely the public favors allowing undocumented immigrants to stay. Majority support for providing the opportunity for earned legal status or citizenship for the undocumented crosses party lines.

A different pattern emerges in opinion surveys conducted since the election of November 2016. President Trump's initiatives to deport more undocumented immigrants yields a sharp partisan divide in responses. Unlike the idea of an opportunity for earned

citizenship, which majorities of both Democrats and Republicans support, the Republican president's deportation initiatives in most surveys draw overwhelming opposition from Democrats and enthusiastic support from Republicans. Independents fall between Democrats and Republicans but, in general, a majority of Independents have opposed the president's deportation and other immigration initiatives.

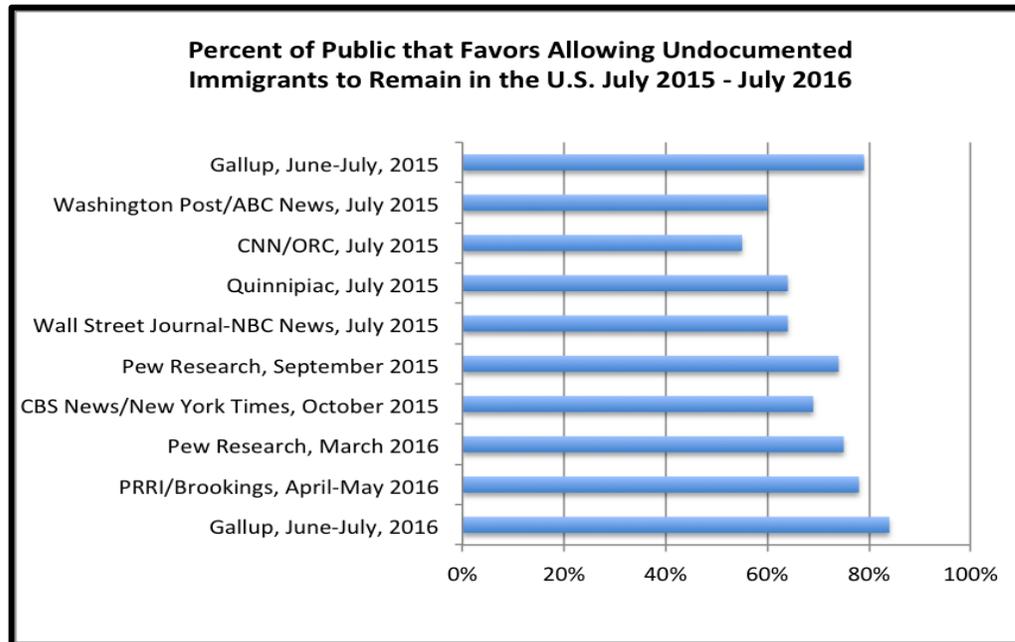
Earned Legal Status

For more than a decade, the American people have supported proposals that will allow undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. if they meet certain conditions. The National Immigration Forum has documented this support in past [reports summarizing public opinion surveys](#).⁶ Even as a new president has begun to enforce immigration laws more strictly, public support for allowing undocumented immigrants to stay has not wavered. In most surveys conducted since the presidential election, support crosses party lines, with Republicans, Democrats, and Independents all supporting a proposal to allow undocumented immigrants to stay. Even respondents who said they were Trump supporters were supportive in the surveys breaking out that demographic.



The first chart above shows the level of support for allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. —with the opportunity either for citizenship or for legal status without citizenship. These data come from surveys conducted between November 2016 and March 2017 and show support broken down by party and among Trump supporters.

As the next chart indicates, this support has been steady for the past two years, through a campaign season and change in government marked by harsh immigration rhetoric. Public support for allowing undocumented immigrants to stay actually has *increased* slightly.



Shortly after the election, **Quinnipiac University** conducted a survey in which it asked a sample of voters across the U.S. which came closest to their views on the treatment of “illegal immigrants who are currently living in the United States.” **A majority (72 percent) thought they should be allowed to stay.** In this and other surveys, respondents are given the option to choose whether these undocumented immigrants should be allowed “to eventually apply for citizenship” (60 percent chose that option) or “to stay but not be allowed to apply for citizenship” (an additional 12 percent). Breaking this down by party affiliation, 90 percent of Democrats, 71 percent of Independents, and 50 percent of Republicans supported allowing undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. and either apply for citizenship or to remain without the option of citizenship.⁷

In the **Politico-Harvard University** poll conducted in December 2016, respondents were asked which approach to unauthorized immigrants came closest to their views. A majority (**55 percent**) said that undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay — including 46 percent who favored eventual citizenship, provided the immigrants “meet certain requirements,” and another 9 percent who favored legal status but not citizenship.⁸

A **Quinnipiac University** poll in January 2017 asked a sample of voters which came closest to their views on the treatment of “illegal immigrants who are currently living in the United States.” A majority (**68 percent**) thought they should be allowed to stay “and to eventually apply for citizenship” (59 percent) or to stay but not be allowed to apply for citizenship (9 percent). By party affiliation, 86 percent of Democrats, 74 percent of Independents, and just under half of Republicans (48 percent) supported allowing undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. **This was the last poll during this time frame in which support for allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. was below 70 percent.**⁹

In a **CBS News** [poll](#) conducted in January 2017, respondents were asked which came closest to their views about “illegal immigrants who are living in the U.S.” The top response, of 61 percent of respondents, was that they “**should be allowed** to stay in the

U.S. and eventually **apply for citizenship**” (emphasis added). An additional 13 percent said they should be allowed to stay but not allowed to apply for citizenship (for a total of **74 percent** favoring allowing them to stay). Democrats were most favorable toward allowing undocumented immigrants to stay (86 percent), followed by Independents (75 percent). A majority of Republicans (58 percent) also favored the path to citizenship or legal status.¹⁰

Respondents in a February 2017 **McClatchy-Marist poll** were asked whether they “favor or oppose Congress providing a way for undocumented immigrants who are currently in the U.S. to gain legal citizenship if they learn English, pay fines, and have jobs that pay taxes.” More than three-quarters (**80 percent**) of respondents favored allowing undocumented immigrants to gain citizenship under those terms. Only 15 percent were opposed. Respondents of all party affiliations supported citizenship for undocumented immigrants in this poll – 87 percent of Democrats, 69 percent of Republicans and 83 percent of Independents. This survey found favor for the proposal even among Trump supporters (72 percent).¹¹

In another **CBS News** survey in mid-February 2017, respondents were asked which came closest to their views about “illegal immigrants who are living in the U.S.,” and only 23 percent overall favored requiring them to leave. A majority (60 percent) of respondents thought they should be allowed to “stay in the U.S. and eventually apply for citizenship.” An additional 13 percent thought that they should be allowed to “stay in the U.S. legally, but not be allowed to apply for citizenship,” for a **total of 73 percent who favored allowing them to stay in the U.S.** Respondents across party lines favored allowing undocumented immigrants to remain— including 51 percent of Republicans, 91 percent of Democrats, and 73 percent of Independents.¹²

In a poll by **CNN/ORC** in March, respondents were asked which policy goal should be the government’s top priority in dealing “with the issue of illegal immigration.” The top response, chosen by **60 percent** of respondents, was “**developing a plan to allow those in the U.S. illegally who have jobs to become legal residents.**” This option was the top choice for 81 percent of Democrats, 60 percent of Independents, and 37 percent of Republicans.¹³

Another question, using more detailed language than most other polls to describe undocumented immigrants and policy options for them, showed overwhelming support for allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. if they meet certain conditions. Asked “how the U.S. government should treat illegal immigrants who have been in this country for a number of years, hold a job, speak English and are willing to pay any back taxes that they owe,” **90 percent** of respondents said they would favor “a bill that allowed those immigrants to stay in this country rather than being deported and eventually **allow them to apply for U.S. citizenship.**” Only 9 percent opposed this proposal. This proposal was heavily favored across party lines: 96 percent of Democrats, 89 percent of Independents, and 87 percent of Republicans. Even Trump supporters overwhelmingly favored this proposal, with 84 percent support compared with 15 percent opposition.¹⁴

In the March 2017 **Quinnipiac University** poll mentioned above, respondents were asked which came closest to their views on the treatment of “illegal immigrants who are currently living in the United States.” A majority (**74 percent**) thought they should be allowed to stay and either “eventually apply for citizenship” (63 percent) or to stay but not be allowed to apply for citizenship (11 percent). Again, respondents across party lines

avored allowing undocumented immigrants to stay, including 92 percent of Democrats, 74 percent of Independents and 51 percent of Republicans. Requiring these individuals to leave the U.S. was favored by 23 percent of respondents.¹⁵

Respondents in a March **McClatchy-Marist** [poll](#) were asked if they favored or opposed “Congress providing a way for undocumented immigrants who are currently in the U.S. to gain legal citizenship if they learn English, pay fines and have jobs that pay taxes.” As with other polls that describe in some detail the policy options considered for undocumented immigrants, support was very strong among all respondents: **83 percent** were in favor of the proposal, an increase from a similar poll conducted the previous month. Respondents across party lines favored the proposal by significant margins, including 90 percent of Democrats, 85 percent of Independents, and 71 percent of Republicans. Seventy-one percent of Trump supporters favored the proposal.¹⁶

An April 2017 **Texas Lyceum** poll asked a sample of Texas adults whether they supported or opposed “allowing illegal immigrants living in the U.S. the opportunity to become citizens after a long waiting period if they pay taxes and a penalty, pass a criminal background check, and learn English.” **Most Texans (90 percent) support the idea.** Just 9 percent are opposed. On this issue, there was broad agreement along partisan lines, with 91 percent of Republicans, 90 percent of Democrats, and 90 percent of Independents “strongly” or “somewhat” in favor. These results reinforce the correlation of broad support and an immigration proposal that is described in some detail.¹⁷

In June, 2017, the **Public Religion Research Institute** released the results of interviews with 40,000 persons across the U.S., conducted between May 18, 2016 and January 10, 2017. In this massive [survey](#), **64 percent** of Americans said that “immigrants who are currently living in the U.S. illegally” should be allowed “to become citizens provided that meet certain requirements.” An **additional 15 percent** said that these immigrants should be allowed to become permanent residents but not citizens. Only 16 percent said the immigrants should be identified and deported. Large majorities of Democrats (90 percent) and Republicans (68 percent) favor allowing undocumented immigrants to stay and either become citizens or permanent residents. This survey was large enough to include a sample of respondents from every state, and **in every state there was majority support for a path to citizenship.** Support ranged from a high of 74 percent in Maryland to a low of 55 percent in Wyoming.¹⁸

Attitude toward Mass Deportation

The Trump Administration has stepped up deportations of undocumented immigrants, and the president’s executive order on immigration enforcement calls for the hiring of 10,000 additional immigration enforcement agents. Many opinion surveys since December have tested public attitudes toward the increase in deportations.

In general, a majority of the respondents in these public opinion polls have opposed the idea of deporting all undocumented immigrants, and the public thinks the administration has moved too aggressively. But answers are split along partisan lines. Republicans and Trump voters are generally supportive of stepped-up enforcement. There was more unity when surveys asked about support for deportation of immigrants who had committed crimes. When this subset of immigrants was the focus, support for deportation grew.

In the December 2016 **Politico-Harvard University** poll on domestic priorities for the president's first 100 days, respondents were asked whether they favored or opposed several of the president-elect's proposals. A majority (**55 percent**) opposed "deporting unauthorized immigrants who are currently in the U.S." Trump voters (61 percent) and Republicans (64 percent) favored the proposal, while Democrats were opposed (76 percent). In a separate question about how the government should treat undocumented immigrants, 42 percent favored deportation, but respondents were given the choice between "identify and deport those with criminal records," and "identify and deport all of them." Only 8 percent of the general public favored deportation of all undocumented immigrants, and support was not much greater among Republicans or Trump voters (13 percent each).¹⁹

The March 2017 **CNN/ORC** [poll](#) included several questions on deportation. When asked what the government's top priority should be in dealing "with the issue of illegal immigration," just 13 percent of respondents chose "deporting immigrants already in the U.S. illegally." This choice came in last among all three partisan groups, chosen by 5 percent of Democrats, 21 percent of Republicans, and 14 percent of Independents. (The top choice was "developing a plan to allow those in the U.S. illegally who have jobs to become legal residents.")²⁰

In a separate question about deportation, respondents were asked whether the government "should attempt to deport all people currently living in the country illegally." Nearly three-quarters (**71 percent**) said the government should not. A majority of Republicans (55 percent) said the government should not attempt to deport all undocumented immigrants, along with 86 percent of Democrats and 71 percent of Independents. However, when asked whether the government "should attempt to deport all people currently living in the country illegally who have been convicted of other crimes while living in the U.S.," the response flipped, with more than three-quarters (78 percent) saying the government should attempt to deport these individuals.²¹

Respondents in this same survey were asked whether they were more concerned that immigration enforcement efforts would go too far, or would not go far enough. The majority, **58 percent**, said they were more concerned that "deportation efforts will go too far and result in deportation of people who haven't committed serious crimes." Forty percent said they were more concerned that "deportation efforts won't go far enough and dangerous criminals will remain in the United States." There was a partisan split on this question, with 80 percent of Democrats and 61 percent of Independents concerned that deportation efforts would go too far, and 68 percent of Republicans concerned deportation efforts would not go far enough.²²

A **Quinnipiac University** [survey](#) in March 2017 asked respondents whether they thought the Trump administration has "been too aggressive in deporting immigrants who are here illegally," or if it has not been aggressive enough. A plurality of all respondents (**49 percent**) thought the administration has been acting too aggressively. Only 9 percent of respondents overall thought the administration was not being aggressive enough. Thirty-four percent of respondents thought the administration was acting appropriately. Both Democrats (81 percent) and Independents (52 percent) thought the administration was being too aggressive, while a majority of Republicans (71 percent) thought the administration was acting appropriately.²³

Another question in this survey tried to break out treatment of the undocumented population depending on whether individuals had committed crimes or not, and whether any crimes committed were serious. Respondents were asked whom they thought should be deported: “Should no illegal immigrants be deported, only illegal immigrants that have committed a serious crime, only illegal immigrants that have committed any crime, or should all illegal immigrants be deported?” A majority, **55 percent**, said they thought only those who had committed serious crimes should be deported. This includes nearly half of Republicans (48 percent) as well as 53 percent of Democrats and 54 percent of Independents.²⁴

In the April 2017 **Texas Lyceum poll**, a sample of Texas adults were asked whether they wanted the president to “deport millions of illegal immigrants currently living in the U.S.” Only 31 percent said yes. Nearly two-thirds (**61 percent**) were opposed. A majority of Republicans (59 percent) favored mass deportation, while Democrats (84 percent) and Independents (65 percent) were opposed.²⁵

Another **Quinnipiac University poll** in April 2017 asked respondents whether they thought the Trump administration has “been too aggressive in deporting immigrants who are here illegally,” not aggressive enough, or if the level of deportations was appropriate. A plurality of Independents (46 percent) and a majority of Democrats (79 percent) thought the administration was too aggressive. Most Republicans thought the current level of deportations was appropriate (72 percent) or that the administration was not aggressive enough (17 percent). Overall, a plurality, 47 percent, thought the administration’s deportation policy was too aggressive. Only 9 percent thought the policy was not aggressive enough.²⁶

¹ Pew Research Center, “In First Month, Views of Trump Are Already Strongly Felt, Deeply Polarized.” February 16, 2017. <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/02/17094915/02-16-17-Political-release.pdf>. This document summarizes a poll conducted February 7-12, 2017. The sample was 1,503 U.S. adults.

² NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey. [http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/TODAY/z_Creative/17119%20NBCWSJ%20April%20Poll%20\(Full%20Release\).pdf](http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/TODAY/z_Creative/17119%20NBCWSJ%20April%20Poll%20(Full%20Release).pdf). This survey was conducted April 17-20, 2017, with a sample of 900 adults nationwide.

³ Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation rural and small-town America poll, June 17, 2017, <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/national/washington-post-kaiser-family-foundation-rural-and-small-town-america-poll/2217/>. This poll was conducted April 13-May 1, 2017, with a sample of 1,070 adults in rural counties, 303 adults in urban counties, and 307 adults in suburban counties.

⁴ Quinnipiac University Poll, “American Voters Support Abortion, Oppose the Wall, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Voters Differ with Trump on Guns, Taxes, Other Issues,” November 23, 2016, https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us11232016_U23ujk.pdf. This poll surveyed 1,071 voters nationwide, and was conducted November 17-20, 2016.

⁵ Politico and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, “Americans’ Views on Domestic Priorities for President Trump’s First 100 Days,” January 2017, <https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/94/2017/01/POLITICO-Harvard-Poll-Jan-2017-Trumps-First-100-Days.pdf>. This survey included 1,023 U.S. adults nationwide, conducted December 16-20, 2016.

⁶ See, for example, “Polling Update: Heated Political Rhetoric on Immigration has not Changed Decade-Long Public Opinion,” August 31, 2016, <http://immigrationforum.org/blog/august-2016-polling-update/>; “Polling Summary: Presidential Campaign Messaging Out of Step with General

Electorate Attitudes on Immigration,” July 31, 2015, <http://immigrationforum.org/blog/polling-summary-presidential-campaign-messaging-out-of-step-with-general-electorate-attitudes-on-immigration/>; “On Left and Right, Consensus Support for Immigration Reform,” July 10, 2014, <http://immigrationforum.org/blog/on-left-and-right-consensus-support-for-immigration-reform-2/>

⁷ Quinnipiac University Poll, November 23, 2016.

⁸ Politico-Harvard University, January 2017. It may be that the reason for the lower percentage of approval (compared to other surveys) for allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in this survey is because one of the answer choices was to deport immigrants with criminal records. A different question may have found respondents in favor both of deporting undocumented immigrants with criminal records *and* of allowing undocumented immigrants to stay if they did not have a criminal record.

⁹ Quinnipiac University Poll, “American Voters Want Second Opinion on Obamacare, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Voters Support Immigrants, but also Back Muslim List,” January 12, 2017, https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us01122017_Ugwrn92.pdf/. This survey included a sample of 899 voters nationwide, conducted January 5-9, 2017.

¹⁰ CBS News Poll, “Expectations for the Trump Presidency,” January 18, 2017, <https://www.scribd.com/document/337097734/CBS-News-poll-toplines-Trump-and-the-presidency>. This poll was conducted January 13-17, 2017, with a sample of 1,257 adults nationwide.

¹¹ McClatchy-Marist Poll, “Most Americans Support Pathway to Citizenship, Issue of Sanctuary Cities More Divided,” March 2, 2017, <http://maristpoll.marist.edu/32-most-americans-support-pathway-to-citizenship-issue-of-sanctuary-cities-more-divided/>; Complete poll: http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/misc/usapolls/us170215/McClatchy-Marist%20Poll_National%20Nature%20of%20the%20Sample%20and%20Tables_Immigration_February%202017.pdf. This poll was conducted February 15-19, 2017, on a sample of 1,073 adults nationwide.

¹² CBS News Poll, February 23, 2017.

¹³ CNN-ORC Poll, March 17, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Quinnipiac University Poll, March 8, 2017.

¹⁶ McClatchy-Marist Poll, “Trump Approval Rating Slips to 38%... Cracks Forming in Republican Base,” March 31, 2017, <http://maristpoll.marist.edu/331-trump-approval-rating-slips-to-38-cracks-forming-in-republican-base/>; Complete poll: http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/misc/usapolls/us170323_MCC_HBO/UPDATED_McClatchy_Marist%20Poll_National%20Nature%20of%20the%20Sample%20and%20Tables_March%202017.pdf. This poll was conducted March 22-27, 2017, with a sample of 1,062 adults, including 906 registered voters.

¹⁷ Texas Lyceum Poll, April 18, 2017.

¹⁸ Jones, Robert P., Daniel Cox, and Rachel Lienesch. “Who Sees Discrimination? Attitudes on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Race, and Immigration Status | Findings from PRRI’s American Values Atlas.” Public Religion Research Institute, June 21, 2017. <https://www.prrri.org/research/americans-views-discrimination-immigrants-blacks-lgbt-sex-marriage-immigration-reform/>

¹⁹ Politico-Harvard University, January 2017.

²⁰ CNN-ORC Poll, March 17, 2017, <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/03/17/rel4g.-immigration.pdf>. This poll was conducted March 1-4, 2017, with a nationwide sample of 1,025 adults.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Quinnipiac University Poll, “U.S. Voters Say Sessions Lied And Should Resign, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Support for Immigrant ‘path To Citizenship’ At New High,” March 8, 2017, <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2437>. This poll was conducted March 2-6, 2017, with a sample of 1,283 voters nationwide.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Texas Lyceum Poll, “2017 Texas Statewide Survey,” April 18, 2017, <http://www.texaslyceum.org/resources/Pictures/2017%20Topline%20Results.pdf>. Crosstabs:

<http://www.texaslyceum.org/resources/Pictures/2017%20Crosstabs.pdf>. This survey was conducted April 3-9 with a sample of 1,000 Texas adults.

²⁶ Quinnipiac University Poll, "U.S. Voter Support for Marijuana Hits New High, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; 76 Percent Say Their Finances are Excellent or Good," April 20, 2017, <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2453>. This poll was included a sample of 1,062 voters nationwide, and was conducted April 12-18, 2017.