

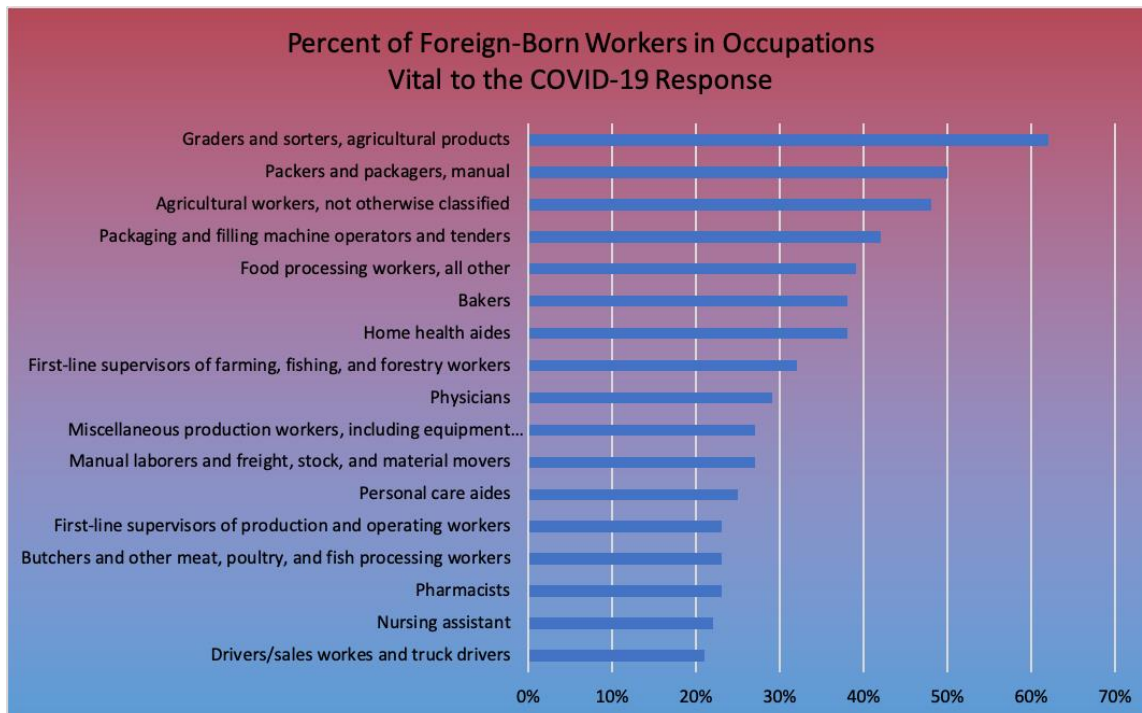


Immigration and COVID-19: Did Immigrants Lose Public Support During the Pandemic?

Introduction

Beginning in January of 2020, the Trump administration issued a series of immigration-related measures that it said were necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19. Over the spring and summer of 2020, the administration closed nearly every avenue for immigrants to come to the U.S. The administration implemented travel bans, a suspension of routine visa services, and a suspension of refugee resettlement. At the border, the administration used a 1944 public health law to bar the entry of asylum seekers and other unauthorized migrants. At the same time, processing of immigrant benefits came to a standstill when USCIS closed domestic and international offices.¹ By [executive action](#), the issuance of certain immigrant and non-immigrant visas were suspended through at least December 31, 2020 — not to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but to assist with economic recovery.²

While the administration was issuing policies that cast immigrants as a burden, Americans were seeing immigrants as essential workers working shoulder to shoulder with U.S.-born workers to help get through the pandemic. They have been on the front lines at hospitals and doctors’ offices, grocery stores, pharmacies, retail stores, and delivery services. Immigrants are cleaning our stores and health centers, harvesting our fruits and vegetables to keep us fed. Behind the scenes, they have continued working in meat processing plants even as hundreds became ill with COVID-19. They are working in information technology supporting remote work and working in laboratories searching for a COVID-19 vaccine.



Source: Migration Policy Institute, [“Immigrant Workers: Vital to the U.S. COVID-19 Response, Disproportionately Vulnerable”](#)

At the same time, immigrant workers have been hit hard by the economic fallout from the pandemic, as they are over-represented in the hotel and restaurant industries, personal services, building services, arts and entertainment, and other industries that have been decimated by measures taken to stop the spread of the virus.

Recent Public Opinion Polls

Public opinion polls during this time revealed that the public was supportive of measures to block immigrants from entering the U.S. while at the same time showing strong support for immigrants themselves.

For example, in April 2020, according to an [Ipsos poll](#), 79% of respondents agreed that immigration from all other countries should be temporarily stopped. At the same time, respondents were split on the idea of the government providing temporary financial help for *undocumented immigrants* who could not work due to layoffs or illness. Forty percent agreed that the government should provide such aid, while 42% disagreed.³ The following month, the Pew Research Center released results of a [survey](#) in which more than *two-thirds* of respondents said they thought the government should provide health care for undocumented immigrants who contracted COVID-19.⁴

On July 1, Gallup reported on a poll conducted at the end of May into early June. This poll [found](#) that, for the first time since Gallup began asking the question in 1965, the percentage of Americans who said they wanted to see an *increase* in immigration (34%) was greater than the percentage who wanted immigration to the U.S. cut (28%). Thirty-six percent said immigration should be kept at its present level. The rising preference for more immigration is being driven by Democrats (50% of whom want increased immigration compared to 22% in 2010) and independents (34%).⁵

An [NPR/Ipsos poll](#) released in August asked respondents if they supported the federal government taking certain immigration-related measures to contain the pandemic. All received majority support. Respondents said they supported temporarily closing the border (78%); preventing legal immigrants from bringing extended family members to the U.S. (60%); banning the entry of guest workers and seasonal workers (58%); and banning the entry of asylum seekers and refugees (58%). At the same time, half of respondents (49%) said they supported the federal government sending *stimulus checks to undocumented immigrants* who pay taxes. (43% opposed.) In that same poll, 71% of respondents agreed that “immigrants are an important part of our American identity.” Only 36% agreed with the statement that “most immigrants” to the U.S. “do not easily assimilate into American society.”⁶

A public opinion [survey](#) by the Pew Research Center released in September 2020 found that, since 2016, the public has moved in a positive direction when considering the impact of the growing numbers of newcomers from other countries in the U.S. Sixty percent of registered voters surveyed said that newcomers strengthen American society. In 2016 only 46% thought so. There was a stark difference between Biden and Trump voters — 84% of Biden voters said they thought newcomers strengthen America while only 32% of Trump voters thought so. However, *both groups of voters moved 13% in a positive direction since 2016*, from 71 to 84% for Biden voters, and from 19 to 32% for Trump voters.⁷

A [poll](#) conducted in battleground states by the Global Strategy Group and released in September 2020 found public sympathy for essential workers who are in the front lines of the response to the coronavirus. The poll of likely voters found that 59% agreed that “essential workers, like health care workers and farmworkers, who have worked hard, paid taxes, and helped us get through the coronavirus pandemic should be eligible for financial relief.” Just 41% agreed that “we need to

take care of U.S. citizens first and that it's wrong to give a handout to illegal immigrants who broke the law.”⁸

Another [poll](#) released in September 2020 was conducted by the New Paradigm Strategy Group on behalf of the Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. In this poll, focused on international students, 57% of respondents said they thought that students, regardless of immigration status, should be eligible for emergency grants that may be included in the next pandemic relief legislation. More than half (55%) also agreed that the government should automatically extend work permits for immigrants with permission to be in the U.S. Despite support earlier in the pandemic for the administration’s orders banning many categories of immigrants and nonimmigrants from entering the U.S., nearly half (48%) of respondents in this poll thought the government should allow new international students to enter the United States. (Only 32% were opposed.)⁹

Public Support for a Range of Measures to Stop COVID-19

Over the last several months, especially early in the pandemic, the public supported temporary bans to the entry of immigrants and nonimmigrants. As pollster Mallory Newall noted at the beginning of August [on NPR](#), “Americans do want to take steps to limit immigration right now. But that’s not because their views on immigration have changed. It’s because they want to do everything in their power to contain the spread of COVID-19.”¹⁰

In fact, other actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 ranked higher in public support. For example, in the [NPR/Ipsos poll](#) released in August, “government funding to expand COVID-19 testing and make it free of charge” received the support of 85% of respondents; “federal funding for the manufacture of protective equipment and testing supplies,” garnered 83% support; and “once a vaccine is available, federal funding to make it available to all Americans” also received 83% support. At 78% support, “temporarily closing the U.S. border, except for essential travel” was followed closely by “state law to require mask wearing in public at all times,” (76% support), and having “a single, national strategy for when businesses can reopen (62% support) ranked above “preventing legal immigrants from bringing their extended family members to the U.S.” (60%). In the same poll, respondents were asked which topics they found the “most worrying.” The top concern of respondents was COVID-19 and the coronavirus (46%), followed by healthcare (25%) and political extremism or polarization (24%). Immigration did not make the top 10 among the list of worries.¹¹

Regarding the imposition of restrictions on immigration, the NPR/Ipsos poll also found support for a ban on travel between the states. Support for this proposition, at 55%, was not far behind support for “banning the entry of foreign guest workers and seasonal workers into the U.S.” and “banning the entry of asylum seekers and refugees into the U.S.” (support for both at 58%).

Measuring public opinion regarding travel restrictions in states that have imposed them might provide additional insights on whether the people just generally support travel restrictions to prevent the spread of the pandemic. For example, New Yorkers might favor the travel restrictions placed on residents of Florida and other states (who are required to quarantine for two weeks upon arrival in New York). While there is no data directly on that point, [nearly three-quarters](#) of New Yorkers approve of the way their governor has responded to the pandemic (which has included the imposition of travel restrictions).¹²

Conclusion

The consistent favorable support for immigrants during the pandemic suggests that when respondents to public opinion surveys said they favored measures to keep immigrants out as a

way to stop the spread of coronavirus infection, they meant they were signaling their support for keeping (potentially infected) *outsiders* out — whether they were from out of the country or out of the state.

¹ For a comprehensive accounting of the policy changes put in place, see Sarah Pierce and Jessica Bolter, *Dismantling and Reconstructing the U.S. Immigration System: A Catalog of Changes under the Trump Presidency*, Migration Policy Institute, July 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/us-immigration-system-changes-trump-presidency>.

² White House, “Proclamation 10052 of June 22, 2020: Suspension of Entry of Immigrants and Nonimmigrants Who Present a Risk to the United States Labor Market During the Economic Recovery Following the 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak,” *Federal Register* 85, no. 123, June 25, 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-06-25/pdf/2020-13888.pdf>.

³ Ipsos, “Perceived level of threat COVID-19 poses to the U.S. and individuals doubles in less than a month,” April 13, 2020, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-04/topline_usa_today_coronavirus_w2_041320.pdf. Conducted: April 9-10, 2020. Sample: 1,005 adults. Relevant question: “Which of the following actions, if any, should the U.S. government take regarding coronavirus or COVID-19?” [Temporarily stop immigration from all other countries] [Provide temporary financial help for undocumented immigrants who cannot work due to layoffs or illness]

⁴ Pew Research Center, “Americans favor medical care but not economic aid for undocumented immigrants affected by COVID-19,” May 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/20/americans-favor-medical-care-but-not-economic-aid-for-undocumented-immigrants-affected-by-covid-19/>. Conducted: April 29 – May 5, 2020. Sample: 10,957 U.S. adults. Relevant question (https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/W67-Topline_revised.pdf): “Thinking about undocumented immigrants in the U.S., do you think the federal government has a responsibility to do the following: a. Provide economic help to undocumented immigrants who have lost their job due to the coronavirus outbreak? b. Provide medical care to undocumented immigrants who are ill with coronavirus?”

⁵ Gallup, “Americans Want More, Not Less, Immigration for First Time,” July 1, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/313106/americans-not-less-immigration-first-time.aspx>. Conducted: May 28-June 4, 2020. Sample: 1,034 U.S. adults. Relevant question (<https://news.gallup.com/file/poll/313139/20200701Immigration.pdf>): 1) “In your view, should immigration be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?”

⁶ NPR/Ipsos, “Most Americans support single, national strategy to combat COVID-19,” August 4, 2020, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-08/topline_npr_covid_and_immigration_080420.pdf. Conducted: July 30-31, 2020. Sample: 1,115 U.S. adults. Relevant questions: 1) “Should the federal government restrict immigration to the U.S. during the coronavirus pandemic by doing each of the following?” a.) “Preventing legal immigrants from bringing their extended family members to the U.S.,” b.) “Banning the entry of foreign guest workers and seasonal workers into the U.S.,” c.) “Banning the entry of asylum seekers and refugees into the U.S.,” d.) “Temporarily closing the U.S. border, except for essential travel;” 2) “Do you support or oppose each of the following immigration-related proposals?” f.) “Providing a federal stimulus check to undocumented immigrants who pay U.S. taxes.” 3) “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” a.) “Immigrants are an important part of our American identity.” e.) “Most immigrants to the United States do not easily assimilate into American society.”

⁷ Pew Research Center, “Voters’ Attitudes About Race and Gender Are Even More Divided Than in 2016,” September 10, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/10/voters-attitudes-about-race-and-gender-are-even-more-divided-than-in-2016/>. Conducted: July 27 – August 2. Sample: 9,114 registered voters. Relevant question: “Which statement comes closer to your own views — even if neither is exactly right? The growing number of newcomers from other countries threatens traditional American customs and values [OR] The growing number of newcomers from other countries strengthens American society.”

⁸ Global Strategy Group, “New Survey Results: Battlefield research on immigration,” September 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b60b2381aef1d8e876cd08f/t/5f5fc9c87c8574639061f90f/1600113097029/Imm+Hub-FWD.us-AV+-+August+Findings+Memo+-+FO9.14.20.pdf>.

⁹ New Paradigm Strategy Group, “Immigration and Education — NP Omnibus Results for August 2020,” <https://www.presidentsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/NPSG-Presidents-Alliance-Q-Toplines-Aug-2020-Omnibus-1.pdf>. Conducted: August 2020. Sample: 807 U.S. adults. Relevant

questions: 1) “In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, do you think that the federal government should automatically extend work permits for immigrants with permission to be in the United States?” 2) “Do you think that all students with financial need enrolled in higher education, regardless of their immigration status, should be eligible for emergency grants that Congress passes as part of legislation to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?” 3) “In response to COVID-19 trends and public health concerns, many colleges and universities are conducting courses fully online. Do you think that the federal government should allow new international students to enter the United States to enroll?”

¹⁰ National Public Radio, “Americans Back Trump On Immigration – But Only To Stop COVID-19, Poll Finds,” August 5, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/05/898915843/americans-back-trump-on-immigration-but-only-to-stop-covid-19-poll-finds>.

¹¹ NPR/Ipsos, “Most Americans support single, national strategy to combat COVID-19,” August 4, 2020, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-08/topline_npr_covid_and_immigration_080420.pdf. Conducted: July 30-31, 2020. Sample: 1,115 U.S. adults. Relevant questions: 1) “Please indicate whether you support or oppose each of the following proposals to limit the spread of COVID-19,” 2) “Should the federal government restrict immigration to the U.S. during the coronavirus pandemic by doing each of the following?”

¹² Marist Poll, “NBC 4 New York/Marist Poll Results & Analysis: Cuomo’s Job Performance Rating at New High, Buoyed by Governor’s Handling of COVID-19 and Economy... Doubts About Reopening Public Schools, July 9, 2020, <http://maristpoll.marist.edu/nbc-4-new-york-marist-poll-results-analysis-2/#sthash.Fq1pxhCA.dpbs>.