



Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration Reform

August 2013

Public opinion on immigration reform is *nuanced*, not *complicated*.

Do Americans support secure borders? YES.

Are they angry that our nation’s immigration system is broken? YES.

Do they think politicians have a responsibility to fix it? YES.

Do they think immigrants who shoulder the same responsibilities as Americans should be able to become Americans? YES.

Most polls show strong support for the tenets of comprehensive immigration reform. Results can vary based on [how much information is given](#) about the components. Many fail to capture Latino voter sentiment accurately due to [sampling and cost constraints](#). But in general, polls consistently show that Americans want Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform and are frustrated with the lack of progress in Washington.

Following is a primer on public opinion toward immigration reform, using examples taken from recent polling. The basics are:

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Immigration reform opponents promote two core myths. One holds that Republican politicians have to choose between Latino voters and their base when it comes to immigration reform. The other is that the path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants is controversial among voters overall.

In fact, Latino and non-Latino voters support the same immigration policy, and the path to citizenship is actually one of its most popular provisions.

Eight-three percent of white conservatives support a plan “allowing illegal immigrants to become citizens.”

([Gallup](#), June/July 2013)

Seventy percent of Republican primary voters support the contours of the Senate immigration bill, described as combing border security, employer verification of workers’ legal status, and a 13-year pathway to citizenship for 11 million “illegal immigrants.” Only 21% of Republican primary voters oppose the citizenship component under any circumstance, while 65% support it when coupled with border security and 8% support it either way.

([Basswood Research](#), July 2013)

General voter polling in seven key battleground districts shows support among the general electorate and Republicans for the tenets of the Senate bill. The core of the bill—a path to citizenship that includes key requirements—enjoys similar or higher support even among Republicans.

- CA-10 (Denham): 66% support tenets of reform; 69% support path to citizenship (51%/72% among Republicans)
- CA-21 (Valadao): 65% support tenets of reform; 77% support path to citizenship (61%/80% among Republicans)
- CA-31 (Miller): 65% support tenets of reform; 65% support path to citizenship (58%/70% among Republicans)
- CO-6 (Coffman): 65% support tenets of reform; 66% support path to citizenship (56%/69% among Republicans)
- MN-2 (Kline): 69% support tenets of reform; 67% support path to citizenship (66%/79% among Republicans)
- NY-11 (Grimm): 66% support tenets of reform; 69% support path to citizenship (59%/76% among Republicans)
- NV-3 (Heck): 61% support tenets of reform; 62% support path to citizenship (49%/62% among Republicans)

([PPP](#), July 2013)

In New Hampshire, the all-important presidential primary state, 57% of Republicans and 68% of all registered voters back an immigration reform bill described as “[awarding] undocumented immigrants with a pathway to citizenship before a confirmed improvement in border security.” Fergus Cullen, former chairman of the New Hampshire Republican Party, writes: “that’s not exactly language designed to get a favorable response.” Cullen also notes that support among Republicans has increased in recent years, and that politicians who embrace it are on “safe political ground.”

([New England College](#), June 2013)

Right now, Republicans are at a deep deficit with Latinos. But these voters are willing to give them a second chance if they set aside excuses and schedule a vote on immigration reform with a path to citizenship for 11 million aspiring Americans. Among Latino midterm voters in 24 battleground districts:

- 62% have voted for a Republican at some point in their lives
- 50% would be more likely to support a GOP House candidate in their district if they take a leadership role in passing immigration reform with a pathway to citizenship, even if they disagree on other issues
- 62% would feel more favorable towards Republicans in Congress if Speaker Boehner allows a bipartisan vote immigration reform

(Latino Decisions, July 2013 [toplines](#); [interactive results](#); [presentation](#))

Voters want Congress to act even if it’s not a “perfect” solution; the status quo has no support.

Seventy-eight percent of Republican primary voters—including 75% of Tea Party supporters—prefer “passing [immigration] laws that are not perfect, but do attempt to fix the serious flaws in the current system” over the status quo.

([Basswood Research](#), July 2013)

Twenty-nine percent of Americans think the House should pass the Senate bill as-is, while another 30% think the House should strengthen the bill’s enforcement provisions and then pass it. Only 13% say the House should remove the path to citizenship and then pass the Senate bill, while 20% say do nothing.

([National Journal](#)/UTI, July 2013)

Eighty-five percent of Americans want the House to vote on the Senate bill in one piece (32%) or divided up into parts (53%), including 82% of Republicans (22% say up-or-down vote on Senate plan and 60% say consider the pieces separately). Only 2% of Americans overall and 3% of Republicans would prefer that the House do nothing.

(Post/ABC [part 1](#) and [part 2](#), July 2013)

When asked if Speaker Boehner denunciation of [Steve King's recent remarks](#) were “an appropriate response, or do you think Boehner should do more to pass comprehensive immigration reform?” voters across all political ideologies want Boehner and the House to move forward on legislative reform. Fifty-eight percent of voters say the House leadership should do more to pass reform, while only 23% say that Boehner’s response was enough. Of note, 43% of Republicans want the House to act on comprehensive reform, versus 32% who felt Boehner’s reaction was appropriate and sufficient (the remaining 25% of Republicans were undecided).

(PPP, July 2013)

Details matter: Support grows when people learn a) that immigrants must meet conditions and requirements to obtain citizenship or b) that enforcement will be combined with citizenship.

Enforcement in the abstract is quite popular, but support weakens when people hear how expensive it can be.

The Senate bill, described as “a bill [that] would allow illegal immigrants already in the country to become citizens after 13 years if they pay a fine and learn English. The bill would also double the number of border patrol agents, and double the amount of fencing along the Mexican border,” is supported by 64% of voters overall and 60% of Republicans.

(Quinnipiac, August 2013)

An ABC/Washington Post poll shows majority support for “a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants now living in the United States” among all voters (fluctuating between 55 and 57%), with Republican support hovering somewhere around the 40% mark. However, as noted in the [Post's write-up](#), polls that test a path to citizenship that includes conditions and requirements show much greater support. Polling experts at the *New York Times* FiveThirtyEight blog [agree](#): “Republican support nearly doubles, on average, in polls that specify the citizenship requirements compared with those that do not.”

(Post/ABC [part 1](#) and [part 2](#), July 2013)

While the ABC/Post poll also shows strong support for enforcement, when Americans learn that the Senate border surge will cost \$46 billion dollars, support drops 10%--including among Republicans.

(Post/ABC [part 1](#) and [part 2](#), July 2013)

Even in Steve King’s backyard (Iowa’s 4th Congressional District), 51% of Republicans and 65% of all voters support a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. When explained in

greater detail and combined with enforcement, support rises to 81% of both Republican and Independent voters and 79% of overall voters.

([The Tarrance Group](#), July 2013)

Full citizenship has vastly more support than less-than-citizenship status.

When given three choices for how to deal with undocumented immigrants—path to citizenship; legal status without citizenship; and deportation—full citizenship wins overwhelmingly. Among general voters, 54% want the law to lead to citizenship, 12% prefer another type of status; and 28% said immigrants should be “required to leave” the country instead. In the same poll, equal numbers of Republican chose the citizenship track as the deportation track (41% for each), while 13% said immigrants should get a less-than-citizenship status.

([Quinnipiac](#), July 2013)

The breakdown is even starker among Latino voters—most of whom know undocumented immigrants personally. Fully 77% of Latino voters want immigration reform to include a full path to citizenship. Just 16% prefer legal status without citizenship.

(Latino Decisions, July 2013 [toplines](#); [interactive results](#); [presentation](#))

There is broad agreement that passing immigration reform would help the GOP, while continuing to block it would harm the Party nationally and in the battleground.

Fifty-nine percent of voters say [Rep. Steve King’s \(R-IA\) infamous comments](#) comparing DREAMers to drug smugglers is damaging to the Republican Party’s image, while 23% say they don’t make a difference and 16% say they help the GOP. Among Republicans, 40% say Rep. King’s comments hurt the Party’s image, 28% say they don’t make a difference, and 29% say that they help.

([PPP](#), July 2013)

Thirty-nine percent of Republicans (including 38% of Tea Party supporters) think passing immigration reform that legalizes undocumented immigrants would help the party in national elections. Only 20% of Republicans overall and 23% of Tea Party Republicans said it would hurt the Party.

([Pew Research Center/USA Today](#), June 2013)

While the issue of immigration reform has historically been important to Latino voters, this year interest and attention is at an all-time high. It has replaced jobs/economy as the top issue facing the Latino community that voters want addressed. In 24 battleground House districts, 86% of likely midterm voters have read or heard about immigration reform in the news, and

two-thirds know someone who would the law would benefit. Fully 70% of midterm voters in these districts disapprove of how Republicans in Congress are handling immigration, while only 20% approve.

(Latino Decisions, July 2013 [toplines](#); [interactive results](#); [presentation](#))

Standing up for immigration reform shows leadership and problem-solving—two characteristics that voters see lacking in Washington.

In [29 states](#), including several with 2014 Senate races, strong majorities of voters (between 62% and 80%) back immigration reform with a path to citizenship for undocumented residents. In every single state polled, “voters were much more likely to vote for politicians” who support the legislation, including 55% of voters in Alaska, 58% in Arkansas, 61% in Kentucky, 63% in Louisiana, and 60% in North Carolina. As the Republican and Democrat polling duo of Brock McCleary and Tom Jensen wrote in their memo: The bipartisan immigration reform package represents a rare opportunity to cast an affirmative vote for major legislation that enjoys overwhelming support from voters of all stripes.”

([Harper Polling/PPP](#), June 2013)

If Congress fails to enact immigration reform, 44% of Americans think Republicans would be the most to blame, while only 14% say Democrats. Twenty-one percent would put it at the feet of President Obama and 11% say all parties would share the blame. This is a dramatic increase from June 2006, when only 17% said they would blame Republicans; 15% said Democrats; 24% chose the President (George W. Bush) and 33% said all would be to blame. In the same poll in 2013, 59% of Americans said that waiting on immigration reform until the border is secure—a favored Republican talking point—is an excuse to block reform rather than a legitimate concern. This helps explain why there was such a dramatic swing from assigning equal parties blame in 2006 and zeroing in on Republicans in 2013.

([Wall Street Journal/NBC](#), July 2013)

Three-quarters of Latino “midterm voters” in 24 target districts say that hold reform hostage to the so-called “[Hastert rule](#)” give them a lower opinion of Republicans in Congress. Two-thirds say pushing a bill like the KIDS Act, without addressing the status of other undocumented immigrants, makes them less likely to support Republicans.

(Latino Decisions, July 2013 [toplines](#); [interactive results](#); [presentation](#))

However, Latino voters are willing to take a second look at GOP candidates if they schedule a vote on reform with a path to citizenship for 11 million aspiring Americans. Half of Latino midterm voters in these districts say they would be more likely to support a GOP candidate who takes a leadership role in passing reform with a path to citizenship, even if they disagree on other issues, and 62% say they would be more favorable toward Republicans in Congress if Speaker brings reform to the floor for a bipartisan vote.

(Latino Decisions, July 2013 [toplines](#); [interactive results](#); [presentation](#))