

Change and Continuity: Public Opinion on Immigration Reform

In the first session of the 111th Congress, the President and Congress are signaling a return to the issue of comprehensive immigration reform. The President has repeatedly stated his intent to begin the immigration reform debate this year. The Senate has begun to hold a series of hearings on comprehensive immigration reform.

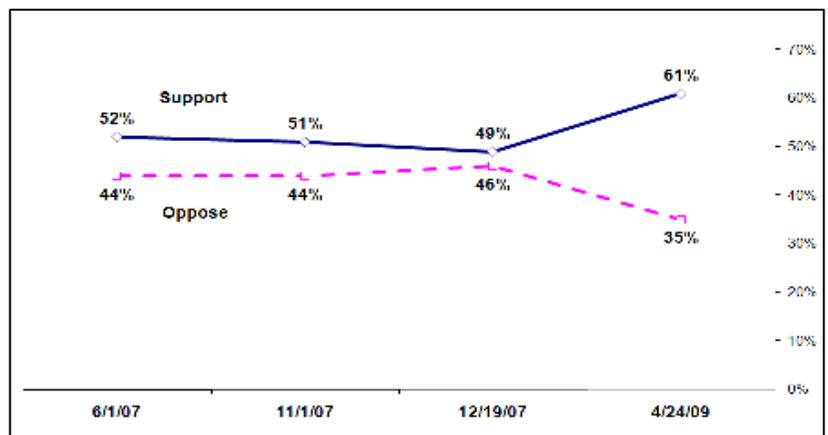
Should Congress tackle the immigration reform issue this year? What has changed since a controversial immigration reform proposal was shot down in 2007?

Recent public opinion surveys tell us one thing that has *not* changed: public support for immigration reform.

When Congress last considered immigration reform, in 2007, the media extensively probed public attitudes towards immigration reform. Poll after poll asked Americans what they thought about the kinds of proposals Congress was debating—proposals that included allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the U.S. if they met a set of conditions (including having no criminal record, paying taxes etc.). Again and again, a majority of Americans told researchers they supported such proposals. Depending on how the question was asked and what reform elements were described in the researchers' questions, support ranged from a bare majority to more than three in four.

Recent polls tell us that the public is in much the same place.

61% support legalization: On April 30th, 2009, the [Washington Post](#) and [ABC News](#) reported that **61% of respondents in their latest poll supported** “giving illegal immigrants now living in the United States the right to live here legally if they pay a fine and meeting other requirements.” This represents a 10% increase in support since November 2007, after immigration reform died in the last Congress. Support for this proposal was up across the political spectrum.



Source: [ABC News/Washington Post Poll: Hot-Button Issues](#)

65% support allowing undocumented immigrants to stay and work: Just prior to the release of the *Post/ABC* poll, on April 27th, the [New York Times](#) and [CBS News](#) released a poll that reported **a combined 65% of respondents favored** allowing “illegal immigrants who are currently working in the U.S. ... to stay in their jobs, and to eventually apply for U.S. citizenship” (44%) or to “stay as temporary guest workers” (21%).

What has changed?

In the last Congress, the immigration reform debate was conducted in an atmosphere poisoned by the harsh rhetoric of conservative talk radio, cable television, and anti-immigration reform groups. Congress was flooded with calls and faxes by the supporters of these anti-reform groups and media personalities who made call after call to express their views. Meanwhile, the harsh anti-immigrant and anti-Latino rhetoric pushed immigrants to become citizens and to register to vote in record numbers. Native-born Latinos were pushed away from politicians whose tough-on-immigration stance was perceived to be anti-Latino.

The elections provided an even playing field. Opponents of reform, who might have sent several faxes a week during the immigration debate, could only vote once. In the election booth, voters who favored a reasonable approach to immigration decisively out-numbered those who supported politicians who favored mass deportation, and many of those politicians lost their jobs.

We now have a President who is more outspoken in his support for immigration reform, and leadership in both Houses of Congress that has pledged to tackle immigration reform. We also have a new context: the last election demonstrated that the loud voices of those who oppose reform do not equal a majority in the voting booth. A political calculation to cater to the loud minority might cost a politician his career.

[A new poll by Americas Voice](#) reinforces this point. The continued harsh rhetoric being used in the media and by some politicians continues to make a big impression on the fastest-growing group of voters: Latinos. The America's Voice poll, released on May 18th, focused on Latino voters in a dozen states. Here are some interesting conclusions from that poll:

- **82%** of respondents in this poll said that the immigration issue was somewhat or very important to them and their family.
- **69%** said they personally knew an undocumented immigrant.
- **64%** said they thought discrimination against Latinos had increased in the last two years because of the negative tone of the immigration debate.
- **89%** said they supported giving undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship.
- **87%** said they would not consider voting for a political candidate who believed most undocumented immigrants should be forced to leave the country.
- **75%** said they are very likely to vote in the 2010 Congressional election.

As Congress gets ready for a new round in the battle for immigration reform, continuity will surely be provided by the shouting and harsh rhetoric of the proponents of mass deportation. The public, meanwhile, will likely be in favor of sensible immigration reform that paves the way for undocumented immigrants to stay here and become productive citizens and taxpayers. What has changed is optimism brought in after the last election, and the sense that yes, we can have change.

For a summary of the polling from 2007 referred to above, go to our Web site:
<http://www.immigrationforum.org/images/uploads/PollingSummary0407.pdf>