

The State of American Public Opinion on Immigration in Spring 2006: A Review of Major Surveys

The debate over immigration reform grew in intensity after the U.S. House of Representatives passed an enforcement bill last December, the U.S. Senate began to take up the issue in the spring and immigrant advocates took to the streets across the country. This fact sheet offers a review of findings on immigration from some of the major public opinion polls taken since January.

Although these polls pose questions in different forms, they cover some of the same topics. Looking at this body of data as a whole indicates that the American public has generally consistent views on the flow of immigrants and the major policy options under debate. The polls do not suggest major shifts in public opinion over the spring as a result of either the immigrant marches or the policy debate with one important exception: The share of Americans who see immigration as a major problem has been increasing rapidly, and the growing concern is especially notable among Republicans.

Some of the other major findings include:

- The public appears almost evenly divided on whether immigration overall is good for the country or not.
- Americans are split over levels of legal immigration. Significant minorities of roughly a third or more favor the opposite approaches of keeping legal immigration at its present levels or decreasing it. A smaller share favors increasing legal immigration.
- A significant majority of Americans see illegal immigration as a very serious problem and most others see it at least as a serious problem.
- A majority of Americans believes that illegal immigrants are taking jobs Americans do not want.
- A majority of Americans appears to favor measures that would allow illegal immigrants currently in the U.S. to remain in the country either as permanent residents and eventual citizens or as temporary workers who will have to go home eventually. When those options are presented, only a minority favors deporting all illegal migrants or otherwise forcing them to go home.
- Americans generally express greater confidence in Democrats on immigration issues than Republicans.
- A majority of Americans disapprove of the way that President Bush is handling immigration issues.

The polls reviewed here were conducted between February 8 and May 14, 2006 by major news media or research organizations. A full listing of the polls, their sample sizes and margins of error can be found at the end of this report.

Immigration as a priority

Surveys that ask Americans to rank immigration as a priority in comparison to other issues have generally shown in recent years that it is a second tier priority, falling behind major national security and domestic concerns such as the war in Iraq or the condition of the U.S. economy. That appears to have changed this year as immigration has rapidly gained in priority.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press periodically asks survey respondents “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?” and records their verbatim responses. In a poll conducted May 2-14 the percentage of Americans who volunteer immigration as the biggest problem confronting the country had approximately doubled since a similar poll in March – from 4% to 10% – reflecting the rising national profile of the issue. Republicans in particular view immigration as a major concern. More Republicans (19%) in the May survey cite immigration as the most important national problem than cite any other issue; energy and gas prices are next, at 14%. Independents and Democrats mention the war most frequently (22% each); just 9% of independents and 6% of Democrats cite immigration as the country’s most important problem.

Most Important Problems Facing the Nation				
The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press				
	Nov 05	Jan 06	Mar 06	May 06
<i>Percent mentioning</i>	%	%	%	%
War in Iraq	29	23	20	18
Energy & gas prices	4	5	5	14
Government & politics	7	5	10	13
Immigration	2	3	4	10
Economy (general)	11	11	7	7
Terrorism	6	6	8	5
Health care & costs	5	6	6	4
Morality/Values	3	4	6	4
Unemployment/Jobs	4	7	6	3
NET: Foreign issues	42	37	34	29
NET: Economic issues	24	26	22	27

Do immigrants help or hurt?

Recent polls have taken various approaches to measuring how Americans measure the costs and benefits of immigration generally.

FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, April 25-26, 2006 (In general, do you think immigrants who come to the United States today help the country and make it a better place to live or hurt the country and make it a worse place to live?)

Help: 42%

Hurt: 30%

NBC/Wall Street Journal, April 21-24, 2006 (Would you say that: immigration helps the United States more than it hurts it, or immigration hurts the United States more than it helps it?)

Helps: 45%

Hurts: 45%

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/Pew Hispanic Center 2006 Immigration Survey, February 8-March 7, 2006. (Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents or immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care.)

Strengthen country: 41%

Burden on country: 52 %

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/Pew Hispanic Center 2006 Immigration Survey, February 8-March 7, 2006. (The growing numbers of newcomers from other countries threatens traditional American customs and values or The growing numbers of newcomers from other countries strengthens American society.)

Threaten traditional American customs and values: 48%

Strengthen American society: 45%

Should legal immigration be increased, kept at present level or decreased?

Americans are split over levels of legal immigration. Significant minorities of roughly a third or more favor the opposite approaches of keeping legal immigration at its present levels or decreasing it. A smaller share favors increasing legal immigration. The number of new immigrants admitted for permanent legal residence has averaged a bit more than 900,000 a year over the past decade compared to less than 600,000 in the 1980s and somewhat more than 400,000 in the 1970s.

New York Times Poll/CBS News Poll, May 4-8 2006 (Should legal immigration into the United States be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased?)

Kept at present level: 39%

Increased: 22%

Decreased: 34%

Quinnipiac University poll, February 21-28, 2006 (As you may know, immigrants to the United States can be here legally -- that is, they have been legally admitted to the country and are allowed to live and work here; or they can be here illegally. Such immigrants are sometimes called 'undocumented' because they do not have papers allowing them to live and work here. Should legal immigration into the United States be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased?)

Kept at present level: 33%

Increased: 24%

Decreased: 39%

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/Pew Hispanic Center 2006 Immigration Survey, February 8-March 7, 2006 (Should legal immigration into the United States be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?)

Kept at present level: 37%

Increased: 17%

Decreased: 40%

How serious a problem is illegal immigration?

A significant majority of Americans see illegal immigration as a very serious problem and most others see it at least as a serious problem.

New York Times/CBS News Poll, May 4-8, 2006 (How serious a problem do you think the issue of ILLEGAL immigration is for the country right now: very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or not at all serious?)

Very serious: 59%,

Somewhat serious: 30%

Not too serious: 9%

Not serious at all: 2%

FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, April 25-26, 2006 (How serious a problem do you believe the illegal immigration situation is in the United States today? Do you see it as a very serious problem, somewhat serious, not very serious or not at all a serious problem?)

Very serious: 63%
Somewhat serious: 28%
Not very serious: 5%
Not serious at all: 2%

Time Magazine Poll, March 29-30, 2006 (Turning to problems with illegal immigrants entering the United States -- How serious a problem is illegal immigration into the United States: extremely serious, very serious, somewhat serious, or not very serious?)

Extremely serious: 32%
Very serious: 36%
Somewhat serious: 21%
Not very serious: 8%

Quinnipiac University, February 21-28, 2006 (How serious a problem is illegal immigration into the United States: a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, not too serious a problem or not a problem at all?)

Very serious: 57%
Somewhat serious: 31%
Not too serious: 9%
Not a problem: 2%

Do illegal immigrants take jobs away from Americans or do they take jobs Americans do not want?

A majority of Americans believes that illegal immigrants are taking jobs Americans do not want. The share believing that illegal immigrants are taking jobs away from American workers is less than 40% in all the polls reviewed.

New York Times/CBS News Poll, May 4-8, 2006 (Do you think illegal immigrants coming to this country today take jobs away from American citizens, or do they mostly take jobs Americans don't want?)

Take jobs away: 36%

Take unwanted jobs: 53%

FOX/Opinion April 25-26, 2006 (Some people say that illegal immigrants are mainly doing low-paying jobs that US citizens don't want. Other people say that illegal immigrants are taking jobs away from U.S. citizens. Which is closer to how you feel?)

Take jobs away: 34%

Take unwanted jobs: 47%

ABC News/Washington Post Poll, April 6-9, 2006 (Overall do you think illegal immigrants take jobs that other people want, or take jobs that other people don't want?)

Take jobs that other people want: 29%

Take jobs that other people don't want: 68%

Time Magazine Poll, March, 29-30, 2006 (Do you think that people who are here illegally are taking jobs from United States citizens, or are they mostly taking jobs that U.S. citizens do not want or cannot do?)

Take jobs away: 35%

Take unwanted jobs: 55%

Associated Press/Ipsos March 28-30 2006 (Which comes closest to your view? Illegal immigrants take jobs that Americans don't want. Illegal immigrants take away jobs that are wanted by Americans.)

Take jobs away: 29%

Take unwanted jobs: 65%

What should be done with illegal immigrants?

Several proposals are now before Congress for dealing with the estimated 11.5 to 12 million unauthorized migrants now living in the United States. A majority of Americans appears to favor measures that would allow illegal immigrants to remain in the country either as permanent residents and eventual citizens or as temporary workers who will have to go home eventually. When those options are presented, only a minority favors deporting all illegal migrants or otherwise forcing them to go home.

New York Times/CBS News Poll, May 4-8, 2006 (What do you think should happen to illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the United States for at least two years: They should be given a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status, or they should be deported back to their native country?)

Chance to keep jobs: 61%

Deported to native country: 35%

NBC/Wall Street Journal, April 21-24, 2006

1) If you had to make a choice, would you favor deporting immigrants in America who are not legal citizens and do not have work permits, or would you favor allowing these immigrants to stay in America as long as they pass a security check, meet certain conditions and pay taxes?

Deport them: 35%

Allow to stay: 61%

2) I'm going to describe a portion of a possible new immigration law, which also would include tighter border security. This law would deal with immigrants who are here illegally in three ways, depending on how long they have been in the United States. Those who have been here for more than five years would be allowed to continue to work here for six years, and then would be allowed to apply for permanent citizenship. Those who have been here for two to five years would be required to go to a legal border entry point and register sometime in the next three years and would then be able to return to work. Those who have been here for less than two years would be required to return to their home country and apply for entry to the United States through normal channels.

Favor: 68%

Oppose: 28%

Los Angeles Times, April 21-27, 2006

1) One proposal is to create a guest worker program that would give a temporary visa to non-citizens who want to work legally in the United States. Do you support or oppose this?

Support: 64%

Oppose: 18%

Don't know: 18%

2) One proposal would allow unauthorized immigrants who have been living and working in the United States for a number of years....to start a path to citizenship by registering that they are in the country, paying a fine, getting fingerprinted and learning English, among other requirements. Do you support or oppose this?

Support: 72%

Oppose: 15%

Don't know: 13%

USA Today/Gallup, April 7-9, 2006 (Which is closest to your view about what government policy should be toward illegal immigrants....Should the government deport all illegal immigrants back to their home country, allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States in order to work but only for a limited amount of time, or allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens but only if they meet certain requirements over a period of time?)

Deport all: 18%

Remain for a limited time: 17%

Remain if meet requirements: 63%

Time Magazine Poll, March 29-30, 2006

1) Do you favor or oppose deporting all illegal immigrants back to their home countries?

Favor: 47%

Oppose: 49%

2) Favor or oppose program that would allow guest workers to remain for a fixed period of time.

Favor: 79%

Oppose 18%

Associated Press/Ipsos March 28-30, 2006 (Would you favor or oppose allowing immigrants with jobs who are in the United States illegally to apply for legal, temporary worker status?)

Favor: 56%

Oppose: 41%

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/Pew Hispanic Center 2006 Immigration Survey, February 8-March 7, 2006.

1) Should illegal immigrants be required to go home or should they be granted some kind of legal status that allows them to stay here?

Required to go home: 53%

Allowed to stay: 40%

--Asked of those who favor requiring illegal immigrants to go home:

--Should it be possible for some illegal immigrants to remain in the U.S. under a temporary worker program under the condition that they would eventually go home, or don't you think so?

Temporary workers: 53%

Don't think so: 51%

--Asked of those who favor allowing illegal immigrants to stay:

--Should they be allowed to stay only as temporary workers who must eventually return to their home countries, or should it be possible for them to stay in the U.S. permanently?

Temporary workers: 17%

Stay Permanently: 79%

Net Result of entire sample:

Allow to stay permanently: 32%

Temporary Workers: 32%

Must go home: 27%

Which political party is best at handling immigration

Americans generally express greater confidence in Democrats on immigration issues than Republicans.

New York Times/CBS News Poll, May 4-8, 2006 (Regardless of how you usually vote, do you think the Republican Party or the Democratic Party is more likely to make the right decisions when it comes to dealing with immigration issues?)

Republicans: 29%

Democrats: 45%

FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, April 25-26, 2006 (Which party do you think would do a better job handling the issue of immigration--Democrats or Republicans?)

Republicans: 24%

Democrats: 34%

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, April 7-16, 2006 (Do you think the Republican Party or the Democratic Party could do a better job of dealing with immigration?)

Republicans: 27%

Democrats: 43%

ABC News/Washington Post, April 6-9, 2006 (Which political party, the Democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job handling...immigration issues?)

Republicans: 38%

Democrats: 50%

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/Pew Hispanic Center 2006 Immigration Survey, February 8-March 7, 2006.

1) How much confidence do you have in the Democratic Party to do the right thing regarding the issue of immigration?

A lot of confidence: 11%

Some confidence: 42%

Not too much confidence: 22%

No confidence at all: 18%

2) How much confidence do you have in the Republican Party to do the right thing regarding the issue of immigration?

A lot of confidence: 10%

Some confidence: 35%

Not too much confidence: 25%

No confidence at all: 25%

President Bush and immigration

A majority of Americans disapprove of the way that President Bush is handling immigration issues.

Newsweek, May 11, 2006 (Please tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling certain aspects of his job. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling immigration policy?)

Approve: 25%

Disapprove: 61%

New York Times/CBS News Poll, May 4-8 2006 (Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the issue of immigration?)

Approve: 26%

Disapprove: 58%

Pew Center for the People and the Press, April 7-16, 2006 (Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the nation's immigration policy?)

Approve: 25%

Disapprove: 62%

Don't know/refused: 13%

Time Magazine Poll, March 29, 2006 (Do you approve or disapprove of the job President Bush is doing in handling the immigration problem?)

Approve: 25%

Disapprove: 56%

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/Pew Hispanic Center 2006 Immigration Survey, February 8-March 7, 2006 (Thinking now about our political leaders, please tell me how much confidence you have in President Bush to do the right thing regarding the issue of immigration....do you have a lot of confidence, some confidence, not too much confidence, or no confidence at all?)

A lot of confidence: 12%

Some confidence: 30%

Not too much confidence: 24%

No confidence at all: 32%

About the surveys

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press May 2006 Survey, May 2-14, 2006
N=1,001 adults nationwide, MoE±3.5

Newsweek Magazine Poll, May 11-12, 2006
N=1,007 adults nationwide, MoE±3.0
The New York Times/CBS News Poll, May 4-8, 2006
N=1,241 adults nationwide, MoE±3.0

Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Poll, April 21-27, 2006
N=1,399 registered voters nationwide, MoE±3.0

NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll, April 21-24, 2006
N=1,005 adults nationwide, MoE±3.1

FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, April 25-26, 2006
N=900 registered voters nationwide, MoE±3.0

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press April 2006 Survey, April 7-16, 2006
N=1,501 adults nationwide, MoE±3.0

USA Today/Gallup Poll, April 7-9, 2006
N=1,004 adults nationwide, MoE±3.0

ABC News/Washington Post Poll, April 6-9, 2006
N=1,027, MoE±3.0

Time Magazine Poll, March 29-30, 2006
N=1,005 adults nationwide, MoE±3.0

Associated Press/Ipsos Poll, March 28-30, 2006
N=1,003 adults nationwide, MoE±3.1

Quinnipiac University Poll, February 21-28, 2006
N=1,892 registered voters nationwide, MoE±2.3

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/Pew Hispanic Center 2006 Immigration Survey, February 8-March 7, 2006
N=2,000 adults nationwide, MoE±2.5