

New York State Public Opinion about Immigration Policy Reform

by
Max J. Pfeffer and Pilar A. Parra

What is the Issue?

Ongoing congressional debates about immigration policies are important to New Yorkers. A recent report by the PEW Hispanic Center estimated that some 650,000 undocumented immigrants live in New York, more than any other states except Florida, Texas and California. Many of these undocumented immigrants are undoubtedly in New York City, long a prominent “gateway city” for persons entering the U.S., but there is growing evidence that undocumented immigrants are found in many cities, towns and villages throughout New York State. The recently completed Empire State Poll conducted by Cornell University’s Survey Research Institute asked New Yorkers their opinions about several proposed policy measures to control undocumented immigration.

What are the Survey Highlights?

A majority of New Yorkers support a range of measures to control undocumented immigration.

- The highest proportion of respondents support greater control of border crossing.
- 87% are supportive of “a guest worker program that allows foreigners to work in the U.S. for a limited period of time.
- A smaller proportion (72%) support measures to make “it a criminal offense to enter the U.S. without valid immigration document”.
- However, about the same proportion (70%) support “giving amnesty to persons already in the U.S. so that they can stay here and work.”

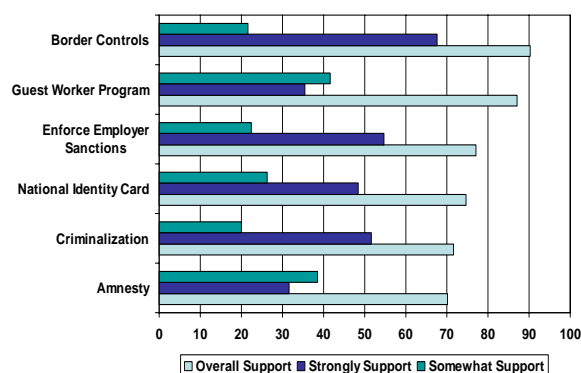
New Yorkers support various measures more strongly than others.

- Two-thirds said that they strongly support border controls while less than 40% strongly support a guest worker program.
- About half (52%) strongly support measures to criminalize undocumented immigration. In contrast, only about one-third strongly support an amnesty for immigrant workers.
- About one-half also said they strongly support “enforcing rules that make it illegal for employers to hire workers with valid immigration documents,” and “issuing a national identity card to all persons eligible to work in the U.S.”

There is broad based support for a guest worker program.

- Levels of support for this measure are similar regardless of political orientation, party affiliation, socio-economic status, religion, race, age and upstate/downstate residence.
- Support for the other measures varies depending on political orientation, race or ethnicity, upstate/downstate residence and socio-economic status.

Public Support for Selected Provisions of Proposed Federal Immigration Legislation



Political affiliation has a clear association with the level of support.

- In general, a higher proportion of persons who identified most strongly with the Republican Party are supportive of more restrictive policy measures, compared with persons more strongly identified with the Democratic Party.
- About 70% of those who considered themselves strongly Republican strongly supported the criminalization of undocumented immigration, compared with only 40% of the respondents who labeled themselves as strongly Democrat.
- Support for amnesty for undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., considered a less restrictive option, was highest among strong Democrats with about 43% expressing strong support. In contrast, only 15% of strong Republicans expressed strong support for this measure.

Race or ethnicity is another factor influencing support for some of the immigration policy measures.

- The Empire State Poll shows that Hispanics are much less supportive than Whites of measures restricting undocumented immigration like stricter border controls, more enforcement of employer hiring laws, and the criminalization of undocumented immigration.
- African-Americans are somewhere in the middle. For example, about 30% of Hispanics strongly support criminalization compared with 58% of Whites and 46% of African-Americans. In contrast, more than half of Hispanics supported amnesty for undocumented immigrants compared with only 21% of Whites and 49% of African Americans.

Upstate or downstate residence influences support for the same policies as race and ethnicity.

- Upstate residents are more supportive than their downstate counterparts of policies that restrict undocumented immigration.

Socio-economic status also influenced the level of support for some of the measures.

- The higher the income level of New Yorkers the more likely they are to favor stronger border controls and enforcement of employer sanctions.

Level of Familiarity with policies

- Most New Yorkers did not consider themselves to be well informed about immigration policies. Only 10% claim to be very familiar with “recent immigration reform proposals made by President Bush or other politicians.”
- Taking into account the level of familiarity with immigration policy proposals does not change the proportion of individuals who express support for most of the proposals.
- Those who claim to be very familiar with the policies are more supportive of a guest worker program and amnesty for undocumented immigrants already in the U.S., but this is a small proportion of New Yorkers.

To Increase, to Decrease, or to Stay the Same?

- Only 10% of New Yorkers felt that the number of immigrants coming into the U.S. should be increased.
- About 45% said that the number of immigrants should remain about the same.
- About 45% said that the number should decrease, with more than half of those indicating that the number of immigrants should decrease a lot.

How was the project conducted?

The survey results from the 2006 Empire State Poll are based on 800 statewide telephone interviews conducted between February 2 and March 24, 2006. All reported results are weighted for the population distribution between downstate and upstate areas of New York. “Downstate” is defined as New York, Rockland, Kings, Richmond, Westchester, Suffolk, Queens, Nassau and Bronx counties, with the remaining counties of the state defined as “upstate.” Results are statistically significant at a plus/minus 3.5 percent margin of error. The margin of error increases for more specific subsets of the population considered.

Visit our website at: rnyi.cornell.edu



Max J. Pfeffer is Professor and Chair of Development Sociology, Cornell University. Pilar A. Parra is a Research Associate in the Division of Nutritional Sciences, and a Lecturer in the Latino Studies Program, Cornell University.