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The IGS Survey: Californians and Immigration Reform Alternatives

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Authors

Citrin, Jack
Levy, Morris E
Lenz, Gabriel

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Californians and Immigration Reform Alternatives

Jack Citrin
Morris Levy
Gabriel Lenz



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Californians Support Path to Citizenship, Say New Citizens Should Work and Speak English

Most California registered voters support a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, but a majority also says it is “extremely important” that the prospective new citizens have a history of holding a steady job and be able to speak English, according to a new Institute of Governmental Studies survey.

Other findings of the Internet poll, conducted as part of the IGS California Studies Program, include:

- Even when alternative reforms are included in the question, most respondents support some kind of path to citizenship for at least some illegal immigrants. In most cases, a majority supports a path to citizenship for all illegal immigrants who can pass a background check, regardless of other conditions.
- When respondents are presented with the option of the “Dream Act”—that citizenship be offered only to those who were brought here as children and who have completed high school or served in the military—39% take this option, leaving an equal 39% in support of a path to citizenship for all who can pass a background check, and 22% favoring the status quo.

- Only about a fifth of respondents supported a program that would “make every effort” to return illegal immigrants to their home countries.
- Democrats consistently were considerably more supportive of a path to citizenship than were Republicans. Strong majorities of both parties said it was “extremely important” that before being granted citizenship, illegal immigrants be able to pass an English test and prove at least two years of steady work in the U.S. or be married to someone who can do so. They also agreed that it was extremely important for the border to be secure before the legalization program was implemented. More than 60% of respondents said it was just as important that those who don’t meet the legal qualifications be returned to their home countries.

“Opinion about immigration reform remains a complex subject,” said IGS Director Jack Citrin, who led the research. “By providing voters with various alternatives, we wanted to produce a more nuanced and complete portrait of Californians’ views as the legislative debate engages many of the issues we addressed.”

Citrin, who developed the online survey with doctoral student Morris Levy and Assistant Professor of Political Science Gabriel Lenz, noted that a pathway to citizenship lies at the core of the current push for comprehensive federal immigration reform. Polls have shown majority support for a pathway to citizenship both nationally and in California, but the level of support has varied widely, due in part to the specific wording of the question.

To discover the level of support for various proposals, the IGS poll randomly assigned the overall sample of 3,160 registered voters to five groups, each with approximately 600 respondents. Polling occurred in early May 2013.

All groups were asked if they supported a path to citizenship for all of the 11 million illegal immigrants in the country today. In addition, however, the groups were asked about varying combinations of alternatives: a program restricted to those who meet the qualifications of the Dream Act, legalization programs that don't lead to citizenship, a strong effort to return illegal immigrants to their home countries, or the status quo.

When presented with only two options, 57.7% of the control group favored a path to citizenship for all who pass a background check, while 42.3% preferred the status quo. When alternatives were added, the lesser option of legal status with no chance of citizenship appealed to 10.4% of Californians, while temporary legal status appealed to 19.9%. These alternatives that offer a chance to remain in the United States but no opportunity for full-fledged citizenship mainly siphoned off some of those who would otherwise oppose any change at all. In general, the proportions who favored a path to citizenship generally remained firm. By contrast, a path to citizenship only for "Dreamers" appealed to 39.1% of Californians, reducing support for a path to citizenship for all illegal immigrants to 39.3%, and halving support for the status quo to just 21.6%.

To further probe opinions about eligibility criteria, the survey asked all respondents how important it was for illegal immigrants accorded a path to citizenship to pay a fine, pass an English test, and be able to prove at least two years' steady work in the U.S. or be married to someone who can do so. Table 2 shows that approximately two-thirds of respondents regarded passing an English test and having steady work as "extremely important" preconditions. A narrower majority regarded it as extremely important that those receiving a path to citizenship pay a fine. As to what should be done to illegal immigrants who do not meet the preferred criteria for legalization, 60% of respondents (51% of Democrats and 76% of Republicans) said it is "extremely important" that they be returned to their home countries.

The **IGS Survey** is an ongoing research project on public opinion in California. Focusing on critical issues facing the state and nation, the IGS Survey seeks to develop substantive data regarding public opinion that can be used by scholars and policymakers alike. The IGS Survey is a component of the IGS California Studies Program.

The current legislative debate has also focused on the conditions that should be met before the process of legalization takes effect. Among the controversial items are official assurances of border security, an improved visa tracking system, and the full implementation of E-Verify, an electronic check on the legal status of newly hired employees. The IGS poll found that most Californians believe it is important for these conditions to be met before legalization and a path to citizenship are implemented.

Last, the IGS survey sought to discover what Californians think are the likely consequences of immigration reform. The survey asked whether legalization and a path to citizenship would increase or decrease new illegal immigration, crime, government spending on social services, the strength of the U.S. economy, a sense of a common American identity, and use of English as the country's common language.

On these issues, the survey found mixed results. On balance, Californians expect legalization to increase new illegal immigration, a possible explanation for the strong support for assuring border security. Crime and spending on social services are expected to rise as well, while the use of English as the country's common language is expected to decline. On the other hand, legalization is expected to strengthen the country's economy and to make it easier to develop a sense of common identity. Democrats consistently have a rosier point of view than Republicans.

Given that critics of reform sometimes issue dire warnings about the failure of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), approximately half the respondents were told before answering the final questions, "Some people are pointing out that a law in 1986 offered illegal immigrants then living in the United States legal status and a chance to become citizens. Since then, the estimated number of illegal immigrants living in the U.S. has increased from 3 million to 11 million." For both Democrats and Republicans, the message about the aftermath of the 1986 reform made people more pessimistic about the possible outcome of reform now.

"This suggests that opinions about immigration reform are susceptible to persuasion," Citrin said. "Campaign messages that highlight the potential consequences of change as well as the attributes of those eligible for legalization might change public opinion."

The survey was conducted for IGS by Survey Sampling International. For the five groups represented in Table 1, the margin of error for each group ranges from 3.8% to 4.0%. The margin of error would be different for other samples within the survey. The Appendix compares the composition of the sample of registered voters to a recent Public Policy Institute of California Survey sample and the estimates of the 2010 U.S. Census. ■

The IGS Survey: Californians and Immigration Reform Alternatives

Introduction

At the core of the current push for comprehensive immigration reform is the proposal to grant legal status and a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million people living in the United States without permission. Debate continues over the precise nature of the new status, the conditions individuals must satisfy to be eligible, and the enforcement benchmarks to be met before change is implemented.

Both national and California polls show majorities favoring legalization and a pathway to citizenship. For example, a March 2013 ABC News/Washington Post poll found 57% in support and 40% opposed. The level of support found in California polls has varied widely, in part due to question wording. A statewide poll of adult residents by the Public Policy Institute of California found 59% support for a path to citizenship, but a Field Poll of registered voters that stipulated the path to citizenship would be restricted to long-term residents who learn English and pay back-taxes found 90% support in the state. However, these surveys varied in the alternatives presented to respondents and the conditions attached to legalization, and none gave people the option of sticking with the status quo.

The IGS Survey

To provide a more complete portrait of Californians' opinions about how to treat illegal immigration, in early May 2013 the Institute of Governmental Studies conducted an Internet survey of registered voters. (The demographic and political composition of the sample and how it compares to other population estimates is presented in Appendix A.)

To address the ways in which different policy alternatives would affect support for legalization and a pathway to citizenship, the survey's 3,160 respondents were randomly assigned to five different subsamples. A control group was asked whether illegal immigrants who can pass a background check should be offered permanent legal status and a path to citizenship, or whether there should be no change in the legal status of illegal immigrants. (For exact wording of all questions, see Appendix B.)

Those respondents randomly assigned to other conditions were also asked about other policy alternatives: permanent legal status without a chance to become citizens, temporary legal status, or permanent legal status and a

chance to become citizens but only if they were brought here as children and either complete high school or serve in the military. Finally, to be able to compare our results with national surveys, the final group's question had the response options of the path to citizenship, permanent legal status without citizenship, temporary legal status, and a program that would "make every effort to return them to their home countries." Thus, the final group was presented all options save the Dream Act and the status quo.

The results for the sample as a whole and for Democrats and Republicans separately are in Table 1.

Majority Supports Path to Citizenship

A majority of Californians supports a path to citizenship against most of the alternatives presented. In our control condition, 57.7% prefer a path to citizenship while 42.3% would rather stay with the status quo.

The lesser option of legal status with no chance of citizenship appeals to 10.4% of Californians, while temporary legal status appeals to 19.9%. These alternatives that offer a chance to remain in the United States but no opportunity for full-fledged citizenship mainly siphon off some voters who would otherwise oppose any change at all. In general, the proportion favoring a

path to citizenship remains firm. Furthermore, only a hard core of about 20% say they want illegal immigrants to be deported to their countries of origin.

Support for a path to citizenship is at a maximum when the question includes an alternative specifying that legal status should be available only to "Dreamers"—those who were brought here as children and who finished high school or served in the military. In this circumstance, the 42.3% favoring the status quo in the control group is sliced in half to just 21.6%. At the same time about a third of those who said they favored a path to citizenship for all illegal immigrants now say this should be reserved for the Dreamers.

As expected, Democrats in all experimental conditions are considerably more favorable toward a path to citizenship than are Republicans. In the control group, for example, 67.6% of Democrats favored a path to citizenship for all, while only 41.9% of Republicans did so. In every condition, at least 50% of Democrats favored a path to citizenship for all, whereas there was no condition in which a majority of Republicans favored that option. In two conditions, a majority of Republicans favored the status quo. However, when presented with the Dream Act option, 45% of Republican respondents supported that alternative.

In short, the overall finding is that a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants enjoys majority support among California's registered voters, but there is some disagreement

... a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants enjoys majority support among California's registered voters ...

Table 1: Support for a Path to Citizenship against Selected Policy Alternatives, by Party of Registration

Experimental Condition: Set of Alternatives Offered in Addition to Path to Citizenship and Status Quo					
All Registered Voters	Control	Legal Status, No Citizenship	Temporary Status	Dream Act	Standard Poll Q.
Path to citizenship for all	57.7%	58.1%	52.0%	39.3%	59.1%
Legal status for all, no citizenship	---	10.4%	---	---	9.0%
Temporary legal status for all, no citizenship	---	---	19.9%	---	12.1%
Path to citizenship for “dreamers”	---	---	---	39.1%	---
Return to home countries	---	---	---	---	19.8%
No change in legal status	42.3%	31.6%	28.1%	21.6%	---
<i>N</i>	612	646	663	603	636
Registered Democrats					
Path to citizenship for all	67.6%	72.5%	63.6%	50.0%	71.2%
Legal status for all, no citizenship	---	9.5%	---	---	8.8%
Temporary legal status for all, no citizenship	---	---	13.8%	---	8.0%
Path to citizenship for “dreamers”	---	---	---	35.5%	---
Return to home countries	---	---	---	---	12.0%
No change in legal status	32.4%	18.0%	22.1%	14.5%	---
<i>N</i>	250	284	283	276	274
Registered Republicans					
Path to citizenship for all	41.9%	32.7%	33.1%	17.9%	45.3%
Legal status for all, no citizenship	---	10.7%	---	---	6.8%
Temporary legal status for all, no citizenship	---	---	23.5%	---	18.6%
Path to citizenship for “dreamers”	---	---	---	45.0%	---
Return to home countries	---	---	---	---	29.1%
No change in legal status	58.1%	56.6%	43.4%	37.1%	---
<i>N</i>	160	159	166	140	161
Notes: “For all” means all illegal immigrants “who can pass a background check.” “Dreamers” were referred to as those who were brought to the United States as children and either complete high school or serve in the military.					

about appropriate eligibility criteria, and there are partisan differences. There is a general consensus—encompassing 85.5% of Democrats and 62.9% of Republicans—that at a minimum, the status of Dreamers should change.

Preconditions for the Path to Citizenship

To further probe opinions about eligibility criteria, the survey asked how important it was for illegal immigrants accorded a path to citizenship to pay a fine, pass an English

Table 2: Preferred Parameters of Path to Citizenship Program

	(1) Individual Preconditions			(2) Programmatic Preconditions			(3) Those Who Don't Qualify
	Fine	English Test	Steady Work	Border Security	Visa Tracking	E-Verify	Return to Home Countries
All Registered Voters (N=3057)							
Extremely Important	52.8%	66.4%	67.2%	69.3%	66.7%	76.9%	60.6%
Somewhat Important	29.8%	23.8%	25.6%	22.0%	25.5%	18.1%	30.2%
Not Important	17.4%	9.8%	7.2%	8.8%	7.8%	5.1%	9.2%
Registered Democrats (N=1370)							
Extremely Important	45.4%	58.8%	62.5%	63.5%	62.6%	71.0%	51.5%
Somewhat Important	33.1%	28.0%	29.4%	25.3%	28.1%	22.0%	36.1%
Not Important	21.5%	13.3%	8.1%	11.3%	9.3%	6.9%	12.3%
Registered Republicans (N=788)							
Extremely Important	64.7%	78.4%	75.6%	81.1%	77.8%	87.4%	76.1%
Somewhat Important	25.6%	18.2%	19.5%	15.7%	18.9%	11.9%	20.6%
Not Important	9.6%	3.4%	4.8%	3.2%	3.3%	0.6%	3.3%

test, and be able to prove at least two years' steady work in the U.S. or be married to someone who can do so.

Panel 1 of Table 2 shows that two-thirds of the sample regarded passing an English test and having steady work as “extremely important” preconditions. A narrower majority regarded it as extremely important that those receiving a path to citizenship should pay a fine. Although there are the usual partisan differences, there is general agreement that human capital (a job and knowledge of English) should be a criterion for legalization and a path to citizenship.

As to what should be done to the illegal immigrants who do not meet the preferred criteria for legalization, Table 2 shows that 60% of respondents (51% of Democrats and 76% of Republicans) say it is “extremely important” that they should be returned to their home countries.

The current legislative debate also addresses the conditions that should be met before the process of legalization takes effect. Among the controversial items are official assurances of border security, an improved visa tracking system, and the full implementation of E-Verify, an electronic check on the legal status of employers' hires. Panel 2 of Table 2 shows that most Californians believe it is important for these conditions to be met before legalization and a path to citizenship take effect. As an example, 69% say that it is extremely important that border security should be assured.

On balance, Californians expect legalization to increase new illegal immigration, a possible explanation for the strong support for assuring border security.

The Consequences of Reform

What do Californians think are the likely consequences of reforming the status of illegal immigrants? Our survey asked for opinions about whether legalization and a path to citizenship would decrease, increase, or leave about the same six conditions of American life: new illegal immigration, crime, government spending on social services, the strength of the U.S. economy, a sense of a common American identity, and use of English as the country's common language.

Given that critics of reform sometimes issue dire warnings about the failure of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which clearly did not stem the influx of illegal immigrants, we randomly assigned respondents to a control group in which they received no preamble, or to a second group—called “1986 + increase”—in which they were told, before being asked about likely consequences, “Some people are pointing out that a law in 1986 offered illegal immigrants then living in the United States legal status and a chance to become citizens. Since then, the estimated number of illegal immigrants living in the U.S. has increased from 3 million to 11 million.”

Table 3 shows the balance of public expectations through a figure that calculates the gap between the percentage of registered Californians saying a likely “increase” and likely “decrease,” respectively. The table also compares Democrats and Republicans. Clearly, expectations are mixed about the likely result of reform. On balance, Californians expect le-

Table 3: Expected Consequences of a Path to Citizenship

	Full Sample		Registered Democrats		Registered Republicans	
	Control	1986 + increase	Control	1986 + increase	Control	1986 + increase
New illegal immigration	20.4	42.2	6.1	36.3	42.1	57.0
Crime	8.8	22.6	-0.7	10.0	25.8	41.1
Government spending on social services	44.0	51.3	38.7	50.1	50.2	55.5
Strength of the U.S. Economy	13.8	1.4	30.9	22.6	-14.5	-35.7
A sense of common American identity	14.2	-2.8	27.6	12.6	-23.2	-9.5
Use of English as the country's common language	-6.5	-16.2	3.1	-9.2	-19.4	-30.0
<i>N</i>	1,022	1,045	457	469	283	263

galization to increase new illegal immigration, a possible explanation for the strong support for assuring border security. Crime and spending on social services are expected to rise as well, while the use of English as the country's common language is expected to decline. On the other hand, legalization is expected to strengthen the country's economy and to make it easier to develop a sense of common identity. Democrats consistently have a rosier point of view than Republicans.

However, for both groups the message about what happened after the 1986 reform makes people more pessimistic, across-the-board. This suggests that opinions about immigration reform are susceptible to persuasion through campaign messages that highlight the potential consequences of change as well as the attributes of those eligible for legalization.

Conclusion

The impact of public opinion on policy always is difficult to gauge, particularly when a broad coalition of organized interest groups is mobilized on one side. This IGS survey shows that a majority of Californians favors legalization and a path to citizenship, but also that there are reservations about the parameters of the program and concerns about the preconditions for implementation. Whether a path to citizenship finally gets over the legislative potholes that stopped earlier efforts at reform will depend in part on how the public reacts to competing arguments about who benefits and when as these are embedded in a final bill. ■

About IGS

The Institute of Governmental Studies is California's oldest public policy research center. As an Organized Research Unit of the University of California, Berkeley, IGS expands the understanding of governmental institutions and the political process through a vigorous program of research, education, public service, and publishing.

Appendix A: Sample Composition

	IGS Survey (Registered Voters; April/May 2013)	PPIC Poll (Registered Voters; September 2012)	CA Census (All Residents; 2010)
Party Registration			
Democratic	47%	46%	43%
Republican	28%	31%	30%
Neither	25%	23%	26%
Gender			
Male	43%	49%	50%
Female	57%	51%	50%
Education			
Some Highschool	2%	4%	12%
Highschool/GED	13%	15%	24%
Some College/ 2-year degree	37%	33%	34%
4-year college degree	30%	26%	18%
Graduate or Professional Degree	17%	21%	11%
Age			
65 & over	18%	30%	15%
50-64	30%	24%	24%
35-49	20%	19%	28%
25-34	17%	15%	19%
20-24	11%	9%	10%
18-19	4%	2%	4%

Note: A direct comparison on of racial and ethnic composition is not possible because the the IGS survey asked respondents to choose a single racial/ethnic category from a list that included white, black, Asian, and Hispanic rather than first identifying race and then ethnicity. As a result, the Hispanic share of the IGS sample was lower (16%) than the PPIC share (21%).

Appendix B: Question Wording

Alternatives Experiment

Preamble: There is a lot of discussion about changing the status of the approximately 11 million illegal immigrants now living in the U.S.

Control: Should illegal immigrants who can pass a background check be offered ... permanent legal status in the U.S. **and** a chance to become citizens; no change in legal status.

Legal status with no citizenship: Should illegal immigrants who can pass a background check be offered . . . permanent legal status in the U.S. **and** a chance to become citizens; no change in legal status; permanent legal status in the U.S. **but not** a chance to become citizens.

Temporary status with no citizenship: Should illegal immigrants who can pass a background check be offered . . . permanent legal status in the U.S. **and** a chance to become citizens; no change in legal status; temporary legal status in the U.S. **but not** a chance to become citizens.

Dream Act: Should illegal immigrants who can pass a background check be offered . . . permanent legal status in the U.S. **and** a chance to become citizens; no change in legal status; permanent legal status in the U.S. **and** a chance to become citizens **only if** they were brought here as children and either complete high school or serve in the military.

Standard Poll Question: Which would you prefer as a way of dealing with illegal immigrants? . . . Make every effort to return them to their home countries; offer those who can pass a background check permanent legal status **and** a chance to become citizens; offer those who can pass a background check permanent legal status **but not** a chance to become citizens; offer those who can pass a background check temporary legal status **but not** a chance to become citizens.

Consequences

Control: Would offering illegal immigrants legal status and a chance to become citizens increase, decrease, or leave about the same . . . new illegal immigration; crime; government spending on social services; strength of the U.S. econ-

omy; a sense of common American identity; use of English as the country's common language?

IRCA Information: Some people are pointing out that a law in 1986 offered illegal immigrants then living in the United States legal status and a chance to become citizens. Since then, the estimated number of illegal immigrants living in the U.S. has increased from 3 million to 11 million. Would offering illegal immigrants legal status and a chance to become citizens increase, decrease, or leave about the same . . . new illegal immigration; crime; government spending on social services; strength of the U.S. economy; a sense of common American identity; use of English as the country's common language?

Those Who Do Not Qualify

Under most proposals, some illegal immigrants will not qualify to remain here legally. How important do you think it is that these illegal immigrants be returned to their home countries? . . . extremely important; somewhat important; not important.

Individual Preconditions

Before a particular illegal immigrant is offered permanent legal status in the U.S., how important is it that he or she . . . pay a fine and back taxes; pass an English language test; prove at least two years' steady work in the U.S. (or be married to someone who does)? . . . extremely important; somewhat important; not important.

Enforcement Benchmark Preconditions

Before any illegal immigrants are offered permanent legal status in the U.S., how important is . . . Department of Homeland Security certification that the border is secure; implementing a system to track people leaving the U.S. when their visas expire; requiring employers to verify the legal status of new hires in a government database? . . . extremely important; somewhat important; not important.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jack Citrin is the director of the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is also Heller Professor of Political Science at the University, where he has taught since 1969. While at Berkeley, Citrin has been director of the State Data Program, acting director of the Survey Research Center, faculty athletics representative to the NCAA, and faculty director of the Berkeley Washington Program. His writings include *California and the American Tax Revolt* and *American Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism*. He has written frequently on trust in government, the initiative process in California, immigration and language politics, and the future of national identity in the United States and Europe. In 2004–05, he was a finalist for the Distinguished Teaching Award on the Berkeley campus.

Morris E. Levy is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley,

studying American politics and political behavior. His research explores the effects of immigration on public opinion and policy in the United States as well as the sources of Americans' immigration attitudes. He holds an A.B. degree from Harvard.

Gabriel Lenz is an assistant professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley. He recently published a book on elections with the University of Chicago Press, and his articles appear in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Political Behavior*, and *Political Analysis*, and other journals. Professor Lenz studies democratic accountability, focusing on how to help voters hold their politicians accountable.