

# MIGRATING ATTITUDES, SHIFTING OPINIONS

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

**E.J. DIONNE, JR.**

Americans regularly change their minds about immigration. While certain political and demographic subgroups are fairly constant in their opinions, overall attitudes can shift sharply in response to changes in the economy, fears of terrorism, organized media campaigns, the way the issue is framed and the centrality of the issue to debates in Congress.

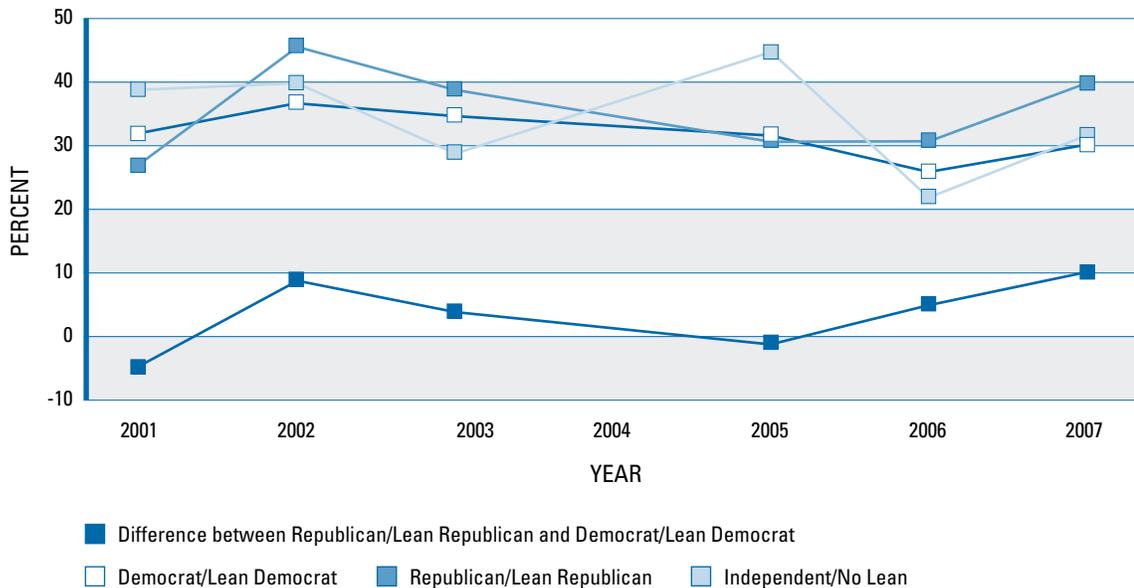
On the whole, immigration is not at the top of the list of concerns for the vast majority of Americans. It occasionally breaks through as an important issue, but that almost always happens in response to outside stimuli. And on the rare occasions when worries about immigration have reached double digits, it was still less important to voters than problems related to war and peace and economic well-being. Precisely because immigration tends to be a major issue for only a modest minority of voters, relatively small groups can disproportionately influence the debate. So can media figures who choose to make immigration one of their central causes.

One of the most important changes in public opinion over the past decade is the rise of immigration as a specific concern for conservatives and Republicans. While conservatives and Republicans have, over time, been somewhat more sympathetic to restrictions on immigration than liberals and Democrats, this issue has not until now been defined by the usual divides of ideology and partisanship. Indeed, conservatives have been split on immigration. Free market, libertarian and business-oriented conservatives gravitated toward a more open or permissive view, and cultural conservatives toward a more restrictionist view. Liberals with strong ties to organized labor have sometimes favored more

restrictive policies (with an eye toward pushing up wage rates by increasing the competition for labor) while other liberals (Latinos notably, but also cultural liberals, civil libertarians and, more recently, leaders in the service-oriented parts of the labor movement) have sympathized with more open policies. If the two dominant ideological groups split within themselves, so, too, have Republicans and Democrats. At times of economic stress, opposition to immigration has increased among liberals and Democrats, again reflecting their concerns over job opportunities and wages.

But there is evidence that the link between restrictionist views on immigration and Republican political identification has strengthened during the Bush years, despite President Bush's advocacy of immigration reform. For many years, Gallup has asked its respondents: "On the whole, do you think immigration is a good thing or a bad thing for this country today?" In the first year of the Bush presidency, as Chart One shows, Democrats were slightly more likely than Republicans to see immigration as "a bad thing." Then came two noticeable spikes in Republican opposition to immigration. In June 2002, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the proportion of Republicans with a negative view of immigration soared. The post-9/11 reaction

**CHART ONE AMERICANS ON IMMIGRATION (PERCENT BY POLITICAL PARTY WHO SAY IMMIGRATION IS BAD FOR THE COUNTRY)**



Source: The Gallup Organization, Inc. The surveys were conducted in June 4–24, 2007; June 8–25, 2006; June 12–18, 2003; June 3–9, 2002; and June 11–17, 2001.

against immigration was much stronger among Republicans than among Democrats or independents.

For much of the rest of the Bush presidency, negative views of immigration among Republicans declined. Then came the second sharp rise in June 2007, just as the debate over the immigration reform bill was raging in Congress. As we'll see in a moment, there is evidence that the shift among Republicans was related to the energetic advocacy of a restrictionist position on conservative talk radio. The general, if irregular, trend toward greater hostility to immigration was captured in other surveys as well. For example, the Pew Research Center found that the proportion of Americans who view immigrants as a burden to the country has grown. In 2000, 38 percent agreed that "immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care." This sentiment rose to 52 percent in 2006.

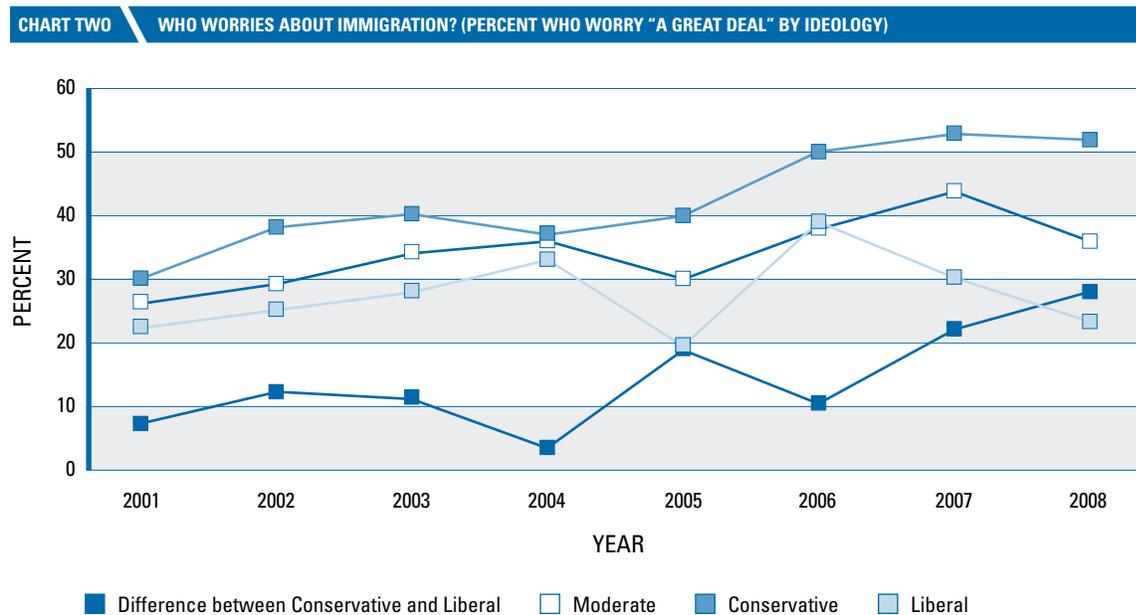
Chart Two suggests a steady increase in concern over immigration on the part of conservatives through the years of the Bush presidency. In Bush's first year in office, there were only modest differences among liberals, moderates and conservatives on a Gallup question asking respondents whether they personally worried about immigration "a great deal, a fair amount, only a little or not at all." In March 2001, only 31 percent of self-described conservatives said they worried a great deal about immigration, compared with 27 percent of moderates and 23 percent of liberals.

The proportion of conservatives worrying a great deal about immigration reached 53 percent by March 2008 (comparable to a peak of 54 percent in 2007). By contrast, the proportion of liberals who worried a great deal about immigration in 2008 stood almost exactly where it stood in 2001. (The peak for liberal concern, at 40 percent, came in

March 2006, when pro-immigration groups, particularly Latinos, organized rallies in support of immigrants.) Moderates worried more about immigration over time than liberals, but still far less so than conservatives. Again, it is significant that the greatest polarization between liberals and conservatives on this measure—reflected by the line at the bottom on Chart Two—came in and after 2007, the year of the immigration reform debate in Congress.

The most recent data suggest that immigration continues to be of far more concern to conservatives than liberals but that it is not a partisan issue. Tables One and Two report the findings of a survey conducted by The Washington Post and ABC News in July 2008. The survey gave respondents a long list of issues and asked them to rank each issue's importance. Not surprisingly, the economy ranked as the most important, followed by gasoline prices, the war in Iraq, education and health care.

Immigration ranked relatively low on the scale, just below relations with other countries and just above appointments to the Supreme Court. But there were striking demographic and ideological differences among respondents' judgments of the importance of the immigration issue, as Table Two makes clear. As we'll see in more detail later, lower income respondents and those with less formal education were more likely to see immigration as an important issue—and especially more likely to rank it as an “extremely” important issue. Voters who felt financially insecure were also more likely to rank immigration as more important. The ideological differences were even more stark: While 39 percent of conservatives rated immigration as “extremely” important, only 18 percent of liberals and 21 percent of moderates did so. At the other end of the scale, liberals and college graduates were the only two groups to reach double digits in giving an extremely low ranking of the immigration issue. Interestingly,



Source: The Gallup Organization, Inc. The surveys were conducted in March 6–9, 2008; March 11–14, 2007; March 13–16, 2006; March 7–10, 2005; March 8–11, 2004; March 24–25, 2003; March 4–7, 2002; March 5–7, 2001.

TABLE ONE AMERICANS' RANKING OF MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES IN 2008 ELECTION (JULY 2008)

**WORDING OF QUESTION:** "For each item I name, please tell me how important it will be in your vote for president this year. Will it be an extremely important issue, very important, somewhat important or less important than that?"

	IMPORTANT			NOT AS IMPORTANT			NO OP.
	NET	EXTREMELY	VERY	NET	SOMEWHAT	LESS	
The economy	92	50	41	8	7	1	0
Gasoline prices and energy policy	85	48	37	15	11	4	*
The war in Iraq	83	42	41	17	14	3	*
Education	81	37	44	19	15	4	0
Health care	78	39	39	22	15	7	*
The US campaign against terrorism	74	37	36	26	21	5	*
Social Security	73	38	35	27	23	3	0
Ethics in government	72	37	34	26	20	6	2
The federal budget deficit	72	34	38	27	21	5	1
Taxes	70	30	40	30	23	6	1
Relations with other countries	69	28	41	30	24	6	1
<b>Immigration Issues</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>
Appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court	60	26	35	36	25	11	3
Global warming and other environmental issues	58	27	31	42	26	16	*
Gun control	50	23	27	49	29	20	*
The candidates' choice for vice presidential running mates	48	15	33	49	35	14	3
Social issues such as abortion and gay civil unions	39	19	20	61	30	31	1

Source: Washington Post/ABC News Poll conducted July 10–13, 2008, among a random national sample of 1,119 adults, including additional interviews with randomly selected African Americans, for a total of 209 black respondents.

Note: Net values may not total 100 percent because of rounding.

**TABLE TWO** HOW IMMIGRATION AFFECTS AMERICANS' 2008 PRESIDENTIAL VOTE (% BY SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC AND POLITICAL GROUPS JULY 2008)

**WORDING OF QUESTION:** "For each item I name, please tell me how important it will be in your vote for president this year. Will it be an extremely important issue, very important, somewhat important or less important than that?" Analyzed below are those saying immigration issues.

	IMPORTANT			NOT AS IMPORTANT			NO OP.
	NET	EXTREMELY	VERY	NET	SOMEWHAT	LESS	
All	63	27	36	37	29	7	1
18-64	61	26	35	39	31	8	*
65+	71	31	40	27	21	6	2
Non-college	69	31	38	30	25	5	1
College grad	47	17	31	53	39	13	0
<b>Among whites:</b>							
Non-college	67	30	38	32	27	5	1
College grad	47	16	31	53	40	13	0
<b>Household income:</b>							
Less than \$50,000	70	32	39	28	23	5	1
\$50,000 or more	56	21	35	44	34	9	0
<b>HH income among whites:</b>							
Less than \$50,000	69	32	37	29	23	6	2
\$50,000 or more	56	21	36	44	35	9	0
<b>Feelings of financial security:</b>							
Very/Somewhat secure	60	23	37	40	32	7	*
Very/Somewhat insecure	67	33	34	32	24	8	1
Liberal	54	18	36	45	33	13	1
Moderate	58	21	36	42	35	7	0
Conservative	73	39	34	27	21	6	0
Democrat	61	26	35	38	29	9	1
Republican	65	24	41	35	29	6	0
Independent	61	24	37	39	31	8	0
<b>2008 vote preference:</b>							
McCain	69	26	43	31	25	6	0
Obama	58	26	32	41	33	3	1

Source: Washington Post/ABC News Poll conducted July 10-13, 2008, among a random national sample of 1,119 adults, including additional interviews with randomly selected African Americans, for a total of 209 black respondents.

Note: Net values may not total 100 percent because of rounding.

differences between Republicans and Democrats in rating the importance of immigration were minimal, though supporters of John McCain assigned the issue greater importance than did supporters of Barack Obama—in part because of McCain’s relative strength among conservatives and Obama’s relative strength among the college educated.

*Conservative talk radio has played an important role in the rise of immigration as an ideological issue on the right. At the least, it reinforced the restrictionist views that many conservative Republicans already held. But it may also have moved a significant share of conservative Republicans toward more restrictionist views generally and a more forceful position against illegal immigration in particular.*

Conservative talk radio has played an important role in the rise of immigration as an ideological issue on the right. At the least, it reinforced the restrictionist views that many conservative Republicans already held. But it may also have moved a significant share of conservative Republicans toward more restrictionist views generally and a more forceful position against illegal immigration in particular. At the request of this project, the Pew Research Center included questions on its December 2007 survey that probed respondents’ attitudes toward immigration and their media consumption habits. Because the survey was largely about the presidential campaign, the media questions specifically asked respondents about the sources of their election information.

To test the impact of different ways of framing the immigration question, Pew split its sample and

asked two forms of the same question. Half of the sample was asked: “Thinking about immigrants who are currently living in the U.S. illegally. ... Do you favor or oppose providing amnesty to illegal immigrants currently in the country if they pass background checks, pay fines and have jobs?” The other half was asked: “Thinking about immigrants who are currently living in the U.S. illegally. ... Do you favor or oppose providing a way for illegal immigrants currently in the country to gain legal citizenship if they pass background checks, pay fines and have jobs?” Note that the second version of the question dropped the word “amnesty,” an important buzzword for those favoring more stringent immigration restrictions.

Strikingly, both versions of the question drew a positive response. When asked about a solution that included “amnesty,” 50 percent said they were in favor and 42 percent were opposed. When asked about a path to citizenship without reference to “amnesty,” 58 percent were in favor and 35 percent were opposed. The eight-point swing is testimony to the power of the word “amnesty” in pushing respondents away from support for a comprehensive solution. At the same time, a plurality was still willing to back a path to legalization even when the word “amnesty” was used.

But the most striking findings came when these data were analyzed to take into account whether respondents relied on talk radio as a primary source of political information. Table Three summarizes attitudes toward a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants broken down by talk radio listenership, party and ideology. (Because of splits in the sample, talk radio listeners were asked only the form of the question that did not use the word “amnesty.”) For the public at large, views on the immigration question among listeners to talk radio were not much different from those of non-listeners. But

**TABLE THREE**    **IMPACT OF TALK RADIO ON AMERICANS' ATTITUDE TOWARD IMMIGRATION**

**WORDING OF QUESTIONS:** “Now I’d like to ask you about some specific ways in which you might be getting news about the presidential campaign. For each item that I read, please tell me how often, if ever, you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates from this source. How often, if ever, do you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates from ... talk radio shows—regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never?”

“Thinking about immigrants who are currently living in the U.S. illegally. ... Do you favor or oppose providing a way for illegal immigrants currently in the country to gain legal citizenship if they pass background checks, pay fines and have jobs?”

	GET INFORMATION ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FROM TALK RADIO REGULARLY/SOMETIMES			GET INFORMATION ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FROM TALK RADIO HARDLY EVER/NEVER		
	PATH TO CITIZENSHIP OR AMNESTY					
	FAVOR	OPPOSE		FAVOR	OPPOSE	
Total	57	36	(284)	59	35	(419)
Republicans	49	48	(82)	61	35	(109)
Democrats	60	32	(80)	63	32	(141)
Independents	64	29	(104)	54	37	(135)
Rep/Rep Lean	54	43	(129)	59	37	(146)
Dem/Dem Lean	64	29	(124)	62	31	(223)
Conservatives	47	47	(141)	52	39	(150)
Moderates	56	37	(88)	60	36	(165)
Liberals	90	10	(46)	73	21	(82)
Conserv Reps	41	54	(66)	62	34	(70)
Mod/Lib Reps	69	31	(16)	61	38	(39)
Cons/Mod Dems	51	45	(52)	55	39	(88)
Liberal Dems	89	11	(24)	79	18	(50)

Source: Pew Research Center, December 2007.

Notes: The only statistically significant differences within groups across talk radio habits are among liberals (significant difference on favor) and among conservative Republicans (significant difference on oppose). The non-listening group also includes the categories “Don’t Listen” and “Don’t Know.”

conservative Republicans who listened to talk radio were distinctive in their views. Among the 24 groups examined, conservative Republicans who listened to talk radio constituted the single group firmly opposed to a path to citizenship (by 54 to 41 percent). By contrast, conservative Republicans who rarely or never listened to talk radio favored a path to citizenship by a ratio of nearly 2-to-1, a slightly larger proportion than in the country as a whole. Despite the relatively small number of respondents in these subgroups, the differences between the two groups of conservative Republicans were statistically significant.

*But it is quite clear that the talk radio hosts mobilized a significant minority constituency against immigration reform.*

Interestingly, the only other statistically significant finding related to liberals who listened to talk radio is that they were far more favorable to a path to citizenship than the rest of the sample. Not surprisingly, the survey found that conservatives made up nearly half of the talk radio audience, liberals less than a fifth. Overall, 40 percent of those surveyed said they regularly or sometimes learned something about the campaign from talk radio; for conservatives, the share was 48 percent.

These findings suggest that talk radio listeners may now be a distinctive constituency within the Republican and conservative coalitions. Whether the attitudes of this constituency were shaped by the talk radio hosts or whether the hosts were reflecting widespread sentiment among their listeners is a question deserving of further study. But it is quite clear that the talk radio hosts mobilized a significant minority constituency against immigration reform. It's also clear that

conservative worries about immigration have grown over time. The combination proved lethal to immigration reform efforts in 2007.

As the accompanying study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism shows, conservative talk radio gave far more attention to the congressional immigration reform debate than did any other medium. The study found that conservative radio hosts devoted 31 percent of their airtime to coverage of immigration from May 17 to June 28, 2007, compared with just 3.6 percent on liberal radio shows. In the same period, newspapers devoted just 8 percent of their front-page coverage to the immigration debate. On cable television, the study found that conservative hosts on Fox and CNN's Lou Dobbs, television's leading opponent of illegal immigration, gave far more coverage to the issue than did other hosts and anchors. On the right, there is a clear push-pull effect between the advocacy of talk show hosts and the views of their wing of the conservative Republican coalition. The immigration issue energized a significant part of the right while calling forth little militancy or concern on the left.

But conservative talk radio was not alone in fighting for a restrictionist position on immigration. Another critical important media player was Dobbs, whose evening broadcast on CNN became television's headquarters for the battle against illegal immigration. Dobbs was unabashed in running story after story about the problems created by "illegal aliens," including an ongoing series on the nation's "broken borders." Dobbs cast himself as a populist avatar for a struggling middle class in speaking out against illegal immigration, the costs of free trade and pressures on the middle class. His opposition to illegal immigration was linked to a message on trade and stagnating wages that was congenial to the labor movement, which built Dobbs a significant following among Democrats.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Pew survey found that Dobbs' audience was smaller than the combined audience for talk radio shows. Overall, 22 percent of respondents said they "learn[ed] something about the presidential campaign or the candidates" from the Dobbs show either "regularly" or "sometimes," about half the rate who said the same of talk radio. More importantly, the Dobbs audience was significantly less Republican than the talk radio audience. While 41 percent of Republicans said talk radio was a significant source of political news, only 15 percent said the same of Lou Dobbs. Looked at another way, Democrats formed a much larger share of the Dobbs audience than of the talk radio audience.

And as Table Four shows, Dobbs' impact on the immigration attitudes of respondents was much larger on Democrats than Republicans, and it was especially pronounced on moderate-to-conservative Democrats. (Note that Dobbs viewers were asked both forms of the immigration question. Their responses have been combined to create a large enough sample for analysis.) For the sample as a whole, there was little difference between Dobbs viewers and non-viewers: 55 percent of non-viewers favored a comprehensive solution that included a path to citizenship or amnesty, as did 53 percent of Dobbs viewers. But Democrats who said they regularly went to Dobbs' program for political information were significantly less likely to favor a path to citizenship than other Democrats. And Dobbs' impact was especially powerful on moderate and conservative Democrats. Of all the groups studied, Dobbs viewers in this group were the most firmly opposed to a comprehensive solution (43 percent favor, 52 percent against). At the same time, moderate and conservative Democrats who did not watch Dobbs regularly strongly favored a comprehensive solution (59 percent in favor, 34 percent opposed).

These findings, taken together with the Project for Excellence in Journalism's analysis of the media, point to how the media's impact on the congressional debate fell decisively on the restrictionist side and almost certainly played a major role in dooming immigration reform in 2007. Conservative talk radio and Lou Dobbs paid far more attention to the immigration debate than did other media sources, and they pushed hard for defeat of the bill. By contrast, neutral and liberal media gave the debate limited coverage. Moreover, an implicit (and almost certainly unconscious) division of labor developed between talk radio and the Dobbs program. Each had its greatest influence on critical swing groups in Congress. Talk radio moved (and also firmed up) conservative opposition to comprehensive immigration reform, providing a strong counterweight to President Bush's support for a broad measure. Dobbs' greatest impact was on moderate-to-conservative Democrats—and in Congress, moderate-to-conservative Democrats (or Democrats who represented moderate and conservative swing constituencies) were those most likely to join the ranks of the opponents of comprehensive reform.<sup>2</sup> It's possible, of course, to exaggerate the power of the restrictionist media in the immigration debate. But it would be a larger mistake to ignore or discount the media's role in making what was already a difficult situation impossible for advocates of comprehensive reform.

This report will explore a variety of factors shaping views on immigration. It will underscore the extent to which concern about immigration is sporadic and suggest that the public's view of the issue is replete with ambiguity and paradox. Americans are philosophically pro-immigration but operationally in favor of a variety of restrictions, particularly when it comes to the receipt of taxpayer benefits. In principle, a majority favors a solution to the problem that includes a path to citizenship,

**TABLE FOUR**    **IMPACT OF LOU DOBBS ON AMERICANS' ATTITUDE TOWARD IMMIGRATION**

**WORDING OF QUESTIONS:** “Now I’d like to ask you about some specific ways in which you might be getting news about the presidential campaign. For each item that I read, please tell me how often, if ever, you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates from this source. How often, if ever, do you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates from ... “Lou Dobbs Tonight” on CNN—regularly, sometimes, hardly ever or never?”

“Thinking about immigrants who are currently living in the U.S. illegally. ... Do you favor or oppose providing a way for illegal immigrants currently in the country to gain legal citizenship if they pass background checks, pay fines and have jobs?” OR “Thinking about immigrants who are currently living in the U.S. illegally ... Do you favor or oppose providing amnesty to illegal immigrants currently in the country if they pass background checks, pay fines and have jobs?”

	GET INFORMATION ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FROM LOU DOBBS REGULARLY/SOMETIMES			GET INFORMATION ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FROM LOU DOBBS HARDLY EVER/NEVER		
	PATH TO CITIZENSHIP OR AMNESTY					
	FAVOR	OPPOSE		FAVOR	OPPOSE	
Total	53	42	(303)	55	38	(944)
Republicans	51	46	(60)	47	47	(319)
Democrats	50	43	(119)	65	28	(329)
Independents	56	39	(106)	53	39	(388)
Rep/Rep Lean	55	43	(99)	48	48	(461)
Dem/Dem Lean	56	36	(171)	63	30	(523)
Conservatives	48	47	(96)	45	48	(440)
Moderates	53	44	(125)	57	36	(418)
Liberals	66	26	(68)	75	20	(219)
Conserv Reps	48	47	(37)	44	50	(216)
Mod/Lib Reps	54	47	(22)	56	40	(98)
Cons/Mod Dems	<b>43</b>	<b>52</b>	(68)	<b>59</b>	<b>34</b>	(202)
Liberal Dems	65	28	(46)	78	19	(119)

Source: Pew Research Center, December 2007.

Notes: The differences between Dobbs-viewing and non-Dobbs-viewing Democrats and moderate/conservative Democrats are significant. The non-watching group also includes the categories “Don’t Listen” and “Don’t Know.” Source: Pew Research Center, December 2007.

but many within that majority are also inclined to deal harshly with immigrants who are in the country illegally. The most important finding is the energy created on the restrictionist side by the interaction between core supporters of the conservative Republican coalition and their radio hosts.

## **SPLIT-LEVEL POLITICS: CONGRESS, THE PRESIDENCY AND IMMIGRATION**

This paper deals with national findings and national trends, although it incorporates some of the conclusions of the valuable 2006 study of selected regions and cities by the Pew Research Center and the Pew Hispanic Center. But the national perspective is less important in the congressional battle over immigration, which is fought district-by-district in the House and state-by-state in the Senate. It's therefore worth pausing to note that while Latinos played an important part in pushing for immigration reform, their impact on the debate may be limited by their relative absence in swing congressional districts. While the spread of Latinos across the country will enhance their voice in the long run, they are likely to have a limited impact in the short run in pushing marginal members of Congress in their direction. The national-district split also helps explain why the immigration issue could play very different roles in the presidential election and in congressional contests, and why restrictionist media could have a much larger role in the congressional debate than on a president's views. A Latino backlash against Republicans could hurt their nominee for president. John McCain's past efforts on immigration reform could offset this effect, though a Pew Hispanic Center survey released in mid-July 2008 suggested that McCain, despite his history, was having difficulty blunting the Latino reaction against his party. A backlash against illegal immigration could

conceivably help at least some Republicans running for Congress, though the issue has had only a limited effect in recent congressional contests as the GOP's candidates battled a broad anti-Republican tide.

In the presidential election, Latino votes could well tip Western states that voted for President Bush in 2004 to the Democrats, who enjoyed a Latino surge in 2006. A study released in December 2007 by the Pew Hispanic Center found that 57 percent of registered voters who are Hispanic identified themselves as Democrats, compared with 23 percent who identified as Republicans—a 34-point advantage. In July 2006, the Democratic Latino advantage was just 21 points. Immigration has a lot to do with the widening of this gap. That same Pew study found that Hispanics gave Democrats a 41 percent to 14 percent edge on dealing with illegal immigration.

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This shift will matter in several swing states, notably in New Mexico, where people of Hispanic origin account for 42.6 percent of the state's population; Arizona (25.3 percent Hispanic); Nevada (19.7 percent Hispanic); and Colorado (17.1 percent Hispanic). It should be noted that Arizona, because it is McCain's home state, is less likely to be a swing state in this election.

Yet the Hispanic population is quite small in the limited number of highly competitive districts that will determine control of the House. Based on the results of the 2006 election, some 34 Democratic

districts are potentially vulnerable to Republican challenge (even if the actual number, given strong Democratic trends, may prove to be significantly smaller).<sup>3</sup> In only four of those districts is the Hispanic population more than 18 percent. In 19 of them, it is under 3 percent. These are the races in which Republicans may be tempted to use the issue of illegal immigration. In the 15 districts where the Democratic incumbent received 51 percent or less in 2006, 11 have Hispanic populations below 10 percent. (All Hispanic population figures are from the just-published Almanac of American Politics 2008.)

Typical of Democrats trying to hold on to seats won in 2006 is Representative Heath Shuler, who defeated GOP incumbent Charles Taylor in a western North Carolina district where Hispanics account for just 2.6 percent of the population. It is no accident that Shuler has featured his sponsorship of the Secure America through Verification and Enforcement Act on his congressional website. The proposal, Shuler says, would “drastically reduce illegal immigration” through “a strict emphasis on border security, employer verification, and interior enforcement.”<sup>4</sup> No one will accuse Shuler of being “soft” on immigration. And his stance has made Shuler a regular on Dobbs’ program.

The evidence from both the 2008 Republican primaries and public opinion polls points to a decline in the saliency of the immigration issue and a slight decline of restrictionist sentiment. Nonetheless, the figures on swing districts in the House suggest the limits of extrapolating national trends to the behavior of individual members of Congress. To offer a more modest version of Tip O’Neill’s famous axiom: Politics, including immigration politics, is often local. And because most representatives of swing districts cannot count on a large Latino vote, they are more likely to be influenced by voters who are themselves

influenced by restrictionist media—particularly, in the case of Democrats, by Lou Dobbs. As a practical matter, this also suggests the limits of a strategy for immigration reform that counts on a large Latino electoral mobilization. While such a mobilization is desirable in and of itself as a democratizing step and could have an important effect on the presidential election, it would likely have a limited impact on congressional outcomes and congressional votes.

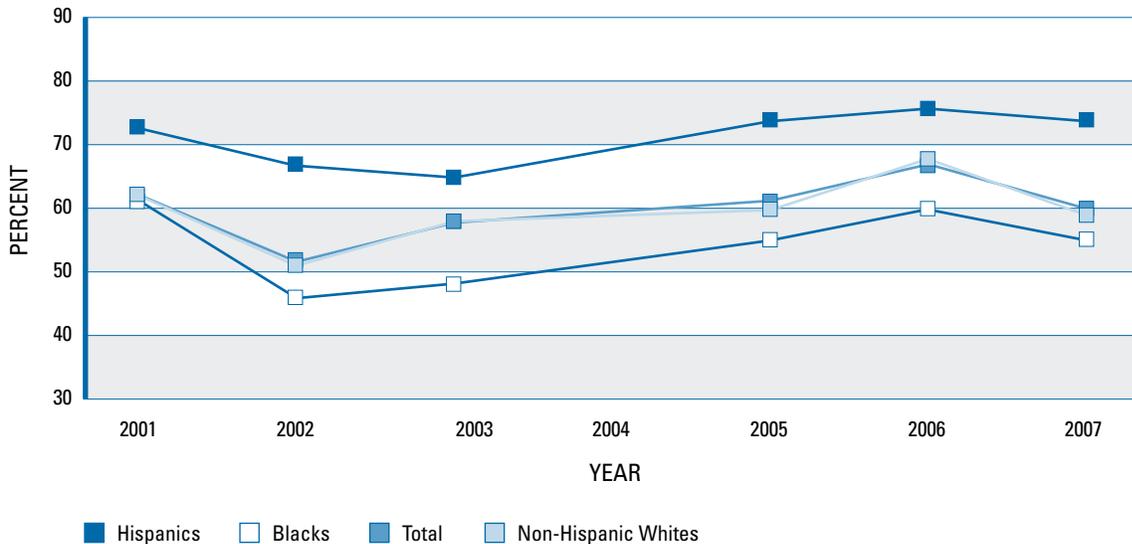
## **IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES: AN OVERVIEW**

President Bush has declared that the United States is a “nation that values immigration.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, immigration is embedded in our country’s history. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the vast majority of the public has a positive view of immigration’s historical role. For example, a 2002 Gallup poll found that 75 percent of Americans said that immigration has been “a good thing” for the country in the past.

Americans also view immigration as “a good thing” for the country today. From 2001 to 2007, a majority of the public has shared this viewpoint. But there was a modest decline between 2006 to 2007, reflecting the broader trends mentioned earlier. In 2007, the year of the immigration debate in Congress, 60 percent reported immigration is “a good thing,” including 59 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 55 percent of blacks, and 74 percent of Hispanics. Immigration opponents clearly had an impact on public opinion in the critical year.

As Gallup noted, while most Americans tend to assess the concept of immigration positively, the majority of the public does not want to increase immigration.<sup>6</sup> A June 2007 Gallup poll found that 45 percent of the public favors decreasing

**CHART THREE AMERICANS WHO SAY IMMIGRATION HAS BEEN GOOD FOR THE COUNTRY (PERCENT BY RACE AND ETHNICITY)**



Source: The Gallup Organization, Inc. The surveys were conducted in June 4–24, 2007; June 8–25, 2006; June 12–18, 2003; June 3–9, 2002; and June 11–17, 2001.

immigration<sup>6</sup> levels, while 35 percent said it should remain at its current level. Only 16 percent wanted immigration levels increased. The percentage of Americans supporting a decrease in immigration varied sharply by subgroup. While close to half (48 percent) of non-Hispanic whites and 46 percent of blacks said that immigration levels should be decreased, only 30 percent of Hispanics shared that view. It is striking that over the last several years and across many measures, African-Americans and non-Hispanic whites have held similar views on immigration. African-Americans are often regarded as natural allies of liberal causes, but there was considerable opposition on black talk radio to a path to citizenship. African-American commentators pointed to high rates of black unemployment in expressing distress and anger over the phrase, commonly used by immigration reformers, that immigrants took jobs that “Americans won’t do.”<sup>7</sup>

The share of Americans favoring a decrease in the immigration level is currently lower than it was in the mid-1990s when 65 percent favored decreasing immigration levels. Economic distress in the early 1990s certainly played a role in the shift toward a restrictionist view.

When asked in a 2007 Gallup poll if immigrants make the “economy in general” worse, close to half of Americans (46 percent) said they did. A slight majority of blacks (52 percent) and close to half of whites (49 percent) saw immigrants as making the economy “worse.” For Hispanics, the figure was 25 percent.

Indeed, there was a striking correlation between the monthly seasonally adjusted unemployment rate—as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics from the Current Population Survey—and attitudes toward immigration, as reported on Chart Five.

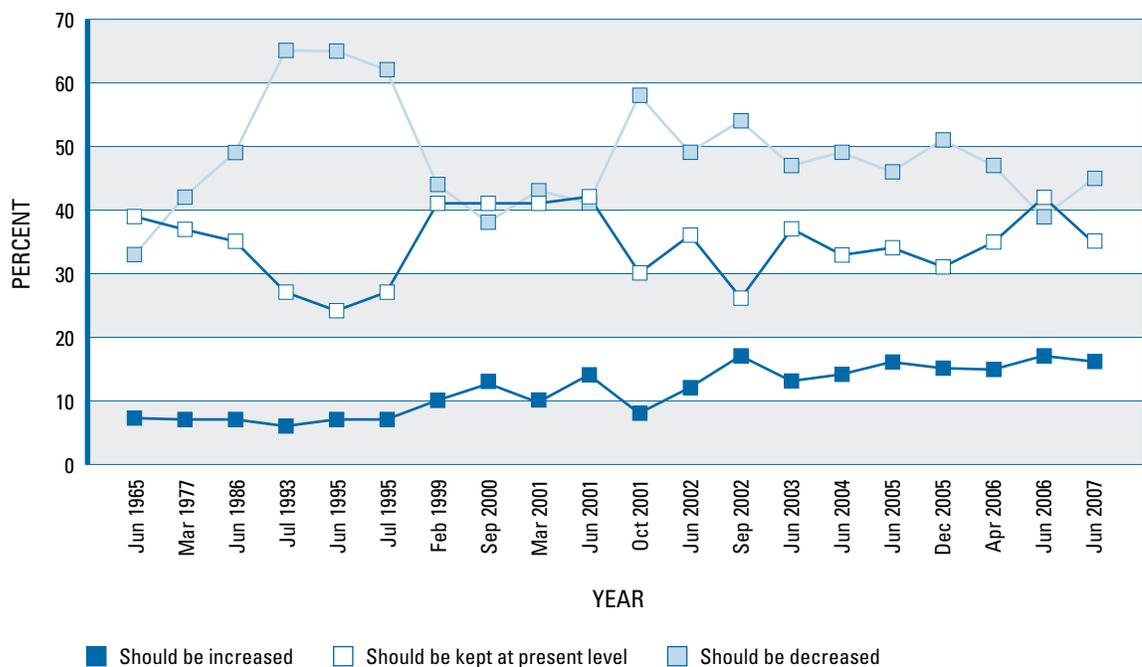
As the unemployment rate rises, so does support for decreasing immigration. A June 2007 Gallup poll reported that about one-third of Americans (34 percent) said immigrants to the U.S. were making job opportunities “worse” for the respondent’s family. On the other hand a 2006 Gallup poll found that nearly three-quarters of Americans said illegal immigrants took low-paying jobs that Americans did not want. Only 17 percent of Americans said illegal immigrants took jobs that Americans wanted, though that figure was 24 percent among African-Americans.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, clearly had a separate impact<sup>8</sup>. According to a Gallup poll, 41 percent of Americans preferred a decrease in immigration in June 2001. That figure jumped to 58 percent in October 2001 following the attacks.

Although views on immigration today remain rather negative, as 45 percent of Americans want to decrease immigration levels, Americans appear to have a more positive attitude toward immigration now than they did in the mid-1990s and in the period immediately after 9/11.

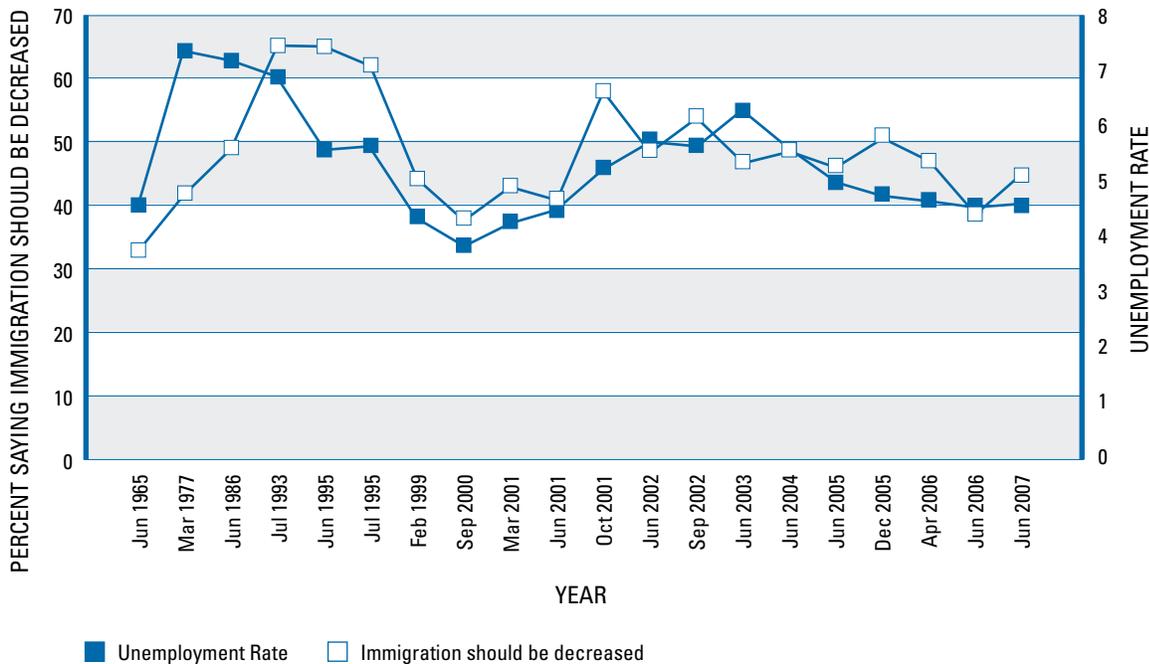
A 2006 Gallup poll reported that one in five Americans (20 percent) said “too many” immigrants from European countries were entering the U.S., and a comparable share said that too many were entering from African countries. More (31 percent) said that too many immigrants were coming to the U.S. from Asian countries. Thirty-nine percent said that too many immigrants were entering the U.S. from Arab countries. By far the strongest opposition was to immigration from Latin American countries: 48 percent of Americans said that too many

**CHART FOUR** AMERICANS' VIEWS ON IMMIGRATION LEVELS



Source: The Gallup Organization, Inc. The surveys were conducted in March 6–9, 2008; March 11–14, 2007; March 13–16, 2006; March 7–10, 2005; March 8–11, 2004; March 24–25, 2003; March 4–7, 2002; March 5–7, 2001.

CHART FIVE IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES AND UNEMPLOYMENT



Source: The Gallup Organization, Inc. The surveys were conducted in June 4–24, 2007; June 8–25, 2006; June 12–18, 2003; June 3–9, 2002; and June 11–17, 2001.

immigrants were arriving from those nations. Clearly, reaction to immigration is not simply a generalized phenomenon. There is greater opposition to Latin and Arab immigration than to immigration by other groups. Opposition to Arab immigration is no doubt a product of the post-9/11 reaction that produced a spike in negative feelings toward immigration generally. The reaction to Latinos suggests a cultural and perhaps also a racial response, but it may primarily be a response to the fact that Latinos make up such a significant and visible proportion of recent immigrants.

According to a 2007 Gallup poll, the majority of Americans (58 percent), including a majority of blacks (52 percent) and whites (63 percent), said immigrants to the United States were making the crime situation in the country “worse.” Strikingly,

41 percent of Hispanics also said immigrants were worsening the crime situation.

Additionally, majorities said that immigrants were negatively affecting taxes. In response to a 2007 Gallup question about whether immigrants were making taxes in the country “better or worse, or not having much effect,” more than half of Americans (55 percent) said immigrants were making taxes “worse.” Only 11 percent said they were making taxes “better.” Views regarding the effect of immigrants on taxes varied by race. Close to 60 percent of whites and 54 percent of blacks said immigrants were making taxes worse; only 34 percent of Hispanics felt that way.

Gallup regularly asks an open-ended question about “the most important problem facing this country

today.” As Chart Six shows, immigration has only rarely emerged out of the single digits. In May 2008, only 4 percent labeled immigration as the most important problem confronting the U.S., but there have been spikes in concern. From March to April 2006, the proportion of Americans identifying immigration as the nation’s most important problem

of Americans identifying immigration as the nation’s most important problem dropped to 13 percent; in June, it grew to 18 percent. Concern fell back to a range of 5 to 10 percent until April 2007, when it began rising again, hitting 15 percent in June. That spike coincided with the Senate’s consideration of the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007.

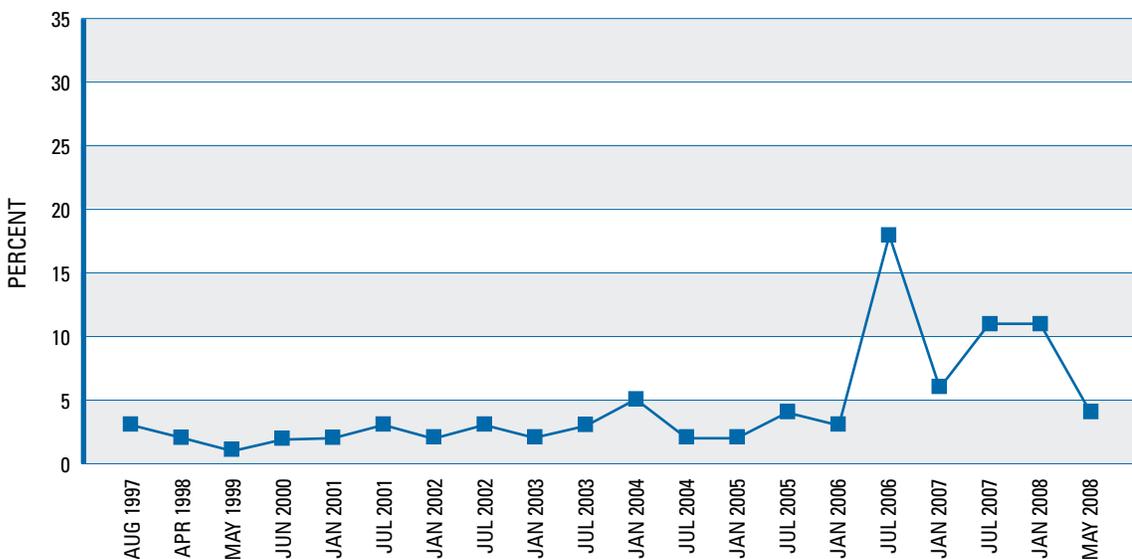
*As we saw earlier, Americans are philosophically pro-immigration but operationally in favor of a variety of restrictions.*

jumped from 6 to 19 percent. The increase appears to be a response to legislation, known as the Sensenbrenner bill, named for its primary sponsor, Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., a Wisconsin Republican, that would make undocumented presence in the U.S. a felony. The bill was passed in the House in December 2005, and sparked protests in cities across the country. In May 2006, the share

### AMERICA’S TORN MIND ON IMMIGRATION

The way the immigration issue is framed, both by the media and by activists in the battle for new legislation, is especially important because Americans are deeply torn in their attitudes about immigrants and immigration. As we saw earlier, Americans are philosophically pro-immigration but operationally in favor of a variety of restrictions. Majorities are pragmatic about the need to find solutions to the immigration problem that do not involve wholesale deportations. Yet they see illegal immigration as an injustice. They do not want

**CHART SIX** MEASURING IMMIGRATION’S IMPORTANCE, 1993–2008



Source: The Gallup Organization, Inc. The surveys were conducted in June 4–24, 2007; June 8–25, 2006; June 12–18, 2003; June 3–9, 2002; and June 11–17, 2001.

immigrants to lack basic social services (notably education and health care), yet they are unhappy offering too many public services to immigrants and worry about the impact of doing so on taxes. At bottom, Americans are deeply practical in their view of immigration. They understand how difficult the problem is to solve. They see mass deportations as posing economic and logistical difficulties, and moral difficulties, too. That is why many polls have found majorities in favor of a path to citizenship. Yet majorities are also bothered that so many immigrants are here illegally. In areas of rapid recent immigration, taxpayers worry about the impact of immigrants on services, and some citizens worry about sudden changes in the character of their communities. That is why surveys can sometimes also find majorities in favor of requiring all illegal immigrants to leave. And the attitudes of respondents toward individual immigrants are often more positive than their view of immigrants as a group. Indeed, the citizens of areas with high levels of immigration often have a more positive view of individual immigrants than do residents of areas where few immigrants have come, simply because residents in high-concentration localities have had positive contacts with hardworking new arrivals to the country.

The upshot is that three broad camps of opinion emerge on the immigration question. Roughly speaking, a third of the country is broadly pro-immigration; a third is strongly inclined to favor restrictionist measures; and the middle third is ambivalent. Members of this middle third admire our long immigration tradition and believe that the newest arrivals make a significant contribution to the country, but they worry about the economic and social impact of illegal immigration and the government's apparent inability to "control the borders." This middle group is especially influenced by how the immigration issue is framed.

In recent years, two major studies were especially successful in capturing the complexity of American opinion on immigration. In March 2006, the Pew Research Center and the Pew Hispanic Center released their seminal report, "America's Immigration Quandary." And in December 2007, Democracy Corps released "Winning the Immigration Issue," a paper addressed to Democratic candidates and officeholders based on a highly detailed study of many dimensions of the immigration question.

Some of the Democracy Corps' key findings are summarized in Tables Five and Six, and they offer a portrait of ambivalence and uncertainty. The survey of likely voters found a narrow majority (52 percent) responding favorably to the idea of deporting all illegal immigrants even as strong majorities also supported implementing a guest worker program (76 percent) and allowing illegal immigrants who pay a fine and learn English to be eligible to apply for citizenship (64 percent). Those surveyed overwhelmingly favored allowing illegal immigrants to use hospitals and emergency rooms (64 percent) but overwhelmingly opposed giving them coverage under Medicaid (only 25 percent favored this). There was great sympathy (74 percent) for allowing the children of illegal immigrants to attend public schools in grades kindergarten through 12, but there was strong opposition to granting the children of illegal immigrants in-state tuition rates at public colleges (only 35 percent in favor).

The 2006 Pew study found similar ambivalences. A strong majority (67 percent) opposed making illegal immigrants eligible for social services at the state and local level. But close to three-quarters (71 percent) said that the children of illegal immigrants should be allowed to attend public schools. Like other surveys, it pointed to a country divided roughly into thirds on the immigration question.

**TABLE FIVE** AMERICANS' AMBIVALENCE TOWARD IMMIGRATION

**WORDING OF QUESTION:** "Now let me read you some immigration policies. For each one, please tell me whether you favor or oppose that measure."

	APPROVE	DISAPPROVE
Deport all illegal immigrants	52	45
Implement a guest worker program to allow immigrants to work in the U.S. for a set period of time	76	21
Allow illegal immigrants who pay a fine and learn English to be eligible to apply for citizenship	64	34
Cut off non-essential public services, such as welfare programs, to illegal immigrants	65	33
Double the number of border patrol agents	77	21
Tougher enforcement so businesses don't hire illegal workers	80	18
Build a fence along the U.S.-Mexico border	51	46

Source: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps. Nov. 29 – Dec. 3, 2007 survey of likely voters.

**TABLE SIX** AMERICANS' ATTITUDE TOWARD PUBLIC SERVICES FOR ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

**WORDING OF QUESTION:** "I am going to read you a list of public services. After I read each one, I would like you to tell me whether you approve or disapprove of illegal immigrants receiving that service."

	APPROVE	DISAPPROVE
Public schools from kindergarten through high school for the children of illegal immigrants who are American Citizens	74	24
Public schools from kindergarten through high school for children who are here illegally	50	49
Entrance to state colleges at in-state tuition rates for children of illegal immigrants	35	62
Use of hospitals and emergency rooms	64	33
Medicaid	25	73
Driver's licenses	31	68

Source: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps. Nov. 29 – Dec. 3, 2007 survey of likely voters.

When offered a choice between requiring illegal immigrants to go home or granting them permanent legal status, 53 percent of Americans in the Pew study favored deportation and 40 percent opted for allowing them to stay. But when an additional option was introduced—allowing immigrant workers to stay temporarily—opinion splintered further. Pew found that 32 percent of Americans favored allowing immigrants to gain permanent legal status, 32 percent favored the temporary worker option and 27 percent favored deportation. A significant plurality (46 percent) of conservative Republicans favored a temporary worker program, while a large plurality of liberal Democrats (49 percent) favored a path to permanent legal status.

The Pew study is so rich in detail that it cannot be fully summarized here. However, it is worth focusing briefly on the survey's important findings that underscore how differently the immigration issue was viewed in different parts of the country, and also in different localities.

Among Americans living in areas with a high percentage of foreign born, 33 percent considered immigration as a very big problem in the community, while only 10 percent of those living in areas with low concentrations of immigrants shared that view. This finding is not surprising. Yet respondents living in areas with high concentrations of immigrants also tended to assess immigrants more positively than did people living in areas with a smaller foreign-born population. While 60 percent of Americans living in areas with low proportions of immigrants saw newcomers as threatening to traditional American customs and values, only 47 percent of those in areas with high concentrations of immigrants held that view. And while 65 percent of residents in areas of low concentration saw immigrants as a burden because of a perception that they took away jobs, housing and health care

of the native born, only 47 percent of those in areas of high immigrant concentration felt that way. One of the many paradoxes of the immigration debate unearthed by the Pew study is that Americans who live in areas of low concentrations of immigrants were more likely to favor a reduction in immigration—52 percent said this—than those who live in areas of high concentrations, where only 37 percent took this view. This seeming contradiction is explained in part by the fact that those who live in high immigrant areas were more likely to see immigrants as contributors to their local economy.

The Pew study also showed how attitudes toward immigration differed even among cities and regions that have high levels of immigration. Residents of cities on the Eastern Seaboard and in the Midwest with long-established immigrant populations tended to be less concerned about immigration than residents of cities in the Southwest and, to a certain extent, the South. In Phoenix—often seen as the gateway for the new wave of Hispanic immigration—78 percent of those surveyed identified immigration as a “moderately big” to “very big” problem. In Las Vegas, a similarly high-density, new immigrant city, 64 percent identified immigration that way. By contrast, in areas with long-established immigrant populations, the comparable figure for Chicago was 35 percent; for Washington, D.C., it was 44 percent; and for Raleigh, N.C., it was 56 percent.

Cities that experienced high levels of immigration in the past appear not to view immigration with as much hostility as do the cities in the Southwest that are undergoing a more recent immigration boom. Residents of the southwestern cities were also somewhat more likely than residents of the other cities to see immigration as a “burden” in connection with social problems such as crime and welfare dependency. Nearly half of the respondents in Phoenix (46 percent) and Las Vegas (45 percent)

said that Hispanic immigrants significantly increased crime. In Chicago, Raleigh and Washington, the comparable figures, respectively, were 30 percent, 37 percent and 31 percent. Residents of Phoenix and Las Vegas were more likely than residents of the other cities to say that Hispanic immigrants often ended up on welfare.

The Pew authors nicely summarized the complexity of public opinion:

*Most Americans express some concern about the growing immigrant population in one way or another, but the nature of those concerns vary and are expressed with varying intensity by different segments of the population. Competition for jobs, the erosion of traditional American values, the costs to local government and the threats of terrorism and crime are all sources of immigration-related concern to some Americans, but none of these is a dominant or primary cause of worry. And on virtually every one of these points, a substantial share of the population takes a positive view of immigrants or finds no cause for concern.*

Two years later, that is a fair reading of a country that is ambivalent, divided and, in some ways, indifferent to the issues surrounding immigration.

## **CONCLUSION: THE MEDIA'S POWER IN AN AMBIVALENT ENVIRONMENT**

The profound ambivalence of Americans about so many aspects of the immigration question suggests that the politics of this issue will remain complicated for a long time to come. There are different majorities on different aspects of the issue, but no single majority overall. These multiple majorities make compromise especially difficult. Concessions designed to win over one key constituency can easily turn off another. For example, temporary worker programs can attract conservative Republicans

who might otherwise support more restrictionist measures. But such programs are especially unpopular among liberal Democrats who form one of the core support groups for a comprehensive solution that would allow illegal immigrants to stay. There are many other examples of how compromise proposals can easily misfire politically.

Because immigration is usually of concern to only a small minority of Americans, mobilized groups on either side of the issue can disproportionately influence the outcome of any given skirmish. And because middle ground opinion is so torn between its search for practical solutions and its sense of aggrievement over the presence of illegal immigrants, its views can easily be shaped by how the issue is framed and which aspects of the problem are accentuated.

If anything, in recent years the politics of the issue have become more, rather than less, complicated. In the past, the immigration issue had little partisan or ideological salience. Conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats were about equally divided. That made for complicated alliances, but it also facilitated cross-party compromises such as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act of 1986. Today, as the issue is drawn more into ideological politics and particularly as conservative Republicans move toward more restrictionist positions, the older style of compromise politics may become obsolete. And outside the Latino community, there is considerable evidence that the most intense feeling about immigration is held, for the moment at least, on the conservative side.

In this environment, the media have a larger impact than usual. As Roberto Suro's paper shows, the immigration reform bill of 2007 foundered for a broad range of reasons. The media effect was just one factor. But the current media environment

may have been especially hostile to reform efforts. Talk radio accelerated the movement of Republicans away from compromise. Lou Dobbs' efforts raised the price of compromise for Democrats. And taken together, talk radio and Dobbs were by far the most energetic and opinionated voices in the immigration debate. The traditional media lacked the interest in the issue shown by passionate media opponents of immigration reform, and the more liberal media were far less engaged in the issue than their conservative counterparts. There is some evidence that African-American talk radio was ambivalent about reform, and some

important black hosts voiced skepticism about proposals for legalization. The Latino media were certainly forceful, engaged and effective with their own constituency.<sup>9</sup> But ambivalence about compromise proposals blunted their impact. And, in any event, the ability of Latino media to influence the swing votes in Congress among Anglos—conservative Republicans and moderate Democrats—was limited. With the country divided and ambivalent about immigration reform, the current balance of forces in the media is more likely to contribute to the Triumph of No than to blaze a path to Yes.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Weisberg, Jacob, "The Lou Dobbs Democrats: Say Hello to the New Economic Nationalists." *Slate*, November 8, 2006, from: <http://www.slate.com/id/2153271/>.

<sup>2</sup> Swarns, Rachel, "Bipartisan Effort to Draft Immigration Bill." *The New York Times*, December 26, 2006. [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/26/washington/26immig.html?\\_r=3&pagewanted=1&ref=politics&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/26/washington/26immig.html?_r=3&pagewanted=1&ref=politics&oref=slogin).

<sup>3</sup> This section draws on an analysis from my *Washington Post* column. See E.J. Dionne Jr., "The Split-Level Politics of Immigration," December 11, 2007. Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/10/AR2007121001562.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See Jessica Richardson, "Rep. Shuler attempts to combat illegal immigration with the SAVE Act," November 15, 2007, available at [http://www.maconnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1694&Itemid=34](http://www.maconnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1694&Itemid=34). Rep. Heath Shuler's congressional website: <http://shuler.house.gov/content/issues/immigration.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> See the president's statement on immigration: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040107-3.html>.

<sup>6</sup> This section relies in large part on the analysis and data in "Gallup's Pulse of Democracy: Immigration," available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1660/Immigration.aspx>. As we note elsewhere, we are very grateful for Gallup's help in analyzing its data.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, Alberta, "For Blacks, Debate Means a Fight Over Value, Values." *Austin American-Statesman*, May 25, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> See George Gallup, Jr. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 2002* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> De Lafuente, Della, "Look Who's Talking: Putting a Face on Hispanic Radio." *Brandweek*, September 17, 2007.