



America's Views of Immigration: The Evidence from Public Opinion Surveys

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The Migration Policy Institute is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide.

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I. Executive Summary

Over the past decade the United States has once again truly become a nation of immigrants. The share of the foreign-born population is approaching the historical high, and if both immigrants and their US-born children are taken into account, the foreign-stock population now constitutes a bigger slice of the US population than at any time since the early years of the 20th century.¹

For most Americans, however, immigration sits at the edge of their peripheral vision, far from their most pressing concerns. When attention does focus on the issue, Americans are divided over both immigration's impact and the best ways to manage it. On the most difficult issues — those involving unauthorized migrants — public opinion surveys reveal both anxiety and ambivalence. Most Americans express distress about the phenomenon of illegal immigration but not about the people. While not happy the migrants are here, most Americans are willing to let them stay.

Examining shifts over time suggests that attitudes towards immigration are susceptible to influence by both public policy debates and major news events like the 9/11 attacks or an economic downturn. As with all shifts in public opinion, it can be difficult to tease out the influencing factors. In the past, anxiety over immigration has tended to increase during periods of rising unemployment, but during the current recession immigration has actually dropped as a policy priority. Meanwhile, the issue has been largely absent from public debate since efforts to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation reached a stalemate in June 2007.

The subject of immigration has been explored extensively in recent years in a variety of national public opinion surveys which have produced very consistent results. We have a very clear portrait of America's perplexity over immigration, and on close examination that portrait resolves into some clear features that are readily explained. Drawing on several sources of survey data, this report will examine the major contours of American public opinion towards immigration and immigration policy. Major findings include:

Immigration ebbs and flows in importance

- Immigration consistently ranks as a second- or even third-tier policy priority when weighed against other issues.
- Although immigration has been a steady phenomenon in recent years, its ranking as a priority has risen and fallen sharply depending on its prominence in the policy arena.
- As preoccupation with the economy has increased over the past year, concern over immigration has decreased.
- Americans are divided over immigration's impact on the country although a majority takes a positive view.

Americans generally do not support stricter immigration policies

- Most Americans favor robust immigration flows of the sort the country has experienced in recent years.

¹ According to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, there were 38,059,694 foreign born in the United States in 2007, representing 12.6 percent of the total US population. The historical peak was reached in 1890, when 14.8 percent of the US population was foreign born.

- During the 2008 campaign, get-tough positions on immigration enforcement did not succeed in mobilizing voters.
- A clear majority of the American public favors legalization as the best approach to the current population of unauthorized migrants. Support for legalization is lower among older Americans and those without a college education.
- A majority of Americans favors worksite enforcement rather than border controls as the best means to control illegal immigration.

Public opinion is segmented by age, race, gender, political ideology, and education

- Older Americans take more negative views of immigration overall than do young adults.
- Anxiety over illegal immigration has increased over the past decade across the entire population, but some segments of the population are more worried than others. The highest levels of worry are associated with the following characteristics: 65+ years old, male, white, conservative, Republican, and lacking a college degree.

II. Immigration: A Second-Tier Policy Priority

America's foreign-born population has been growing at a rate of about 1 million people a year for about two decades. Despite its demographic import, however, immigration has consistently ranked as a second- or third-tier issue in the eyes of the public when compared to other policy priorities.

A CBS/*New York Times* survey in October 2008 listed six issues and asked respondents which would be most important in deciding their vote for president.² Illegal immigration scored lowest, with only 4 percent of registered voters citing it as a top priority (see Table 1). That finding is echoed in numerous other polls taken at the end of the campaign.

With some differences in wording, a Pew Research Center survey in October 2006 posed the same six issues to prospective voters.³ Compared to 2008, when the economy was an overwhelming concern, priorities were more evenly distributed in 2006. With greater attention focused on immigration, the issue was cited as a top priority by 11 percent of likely voters (versus 4 percent in 2008; see Table 1). But even in this context it was still not a top concern.

It is impossible to draw clear lines of causality, but the level of interest in immigration in these two polls coincides with different levels of political debate on the issue. In 2008, immigration was hardly mentioned in the presidential campaign, and public interest was low. A greater number of voters saw it as a decisive issue in 2006. That election took place in the wake of the massive immigration marches through American cities and a congressional debate that had ended inconclusively. Also, numerous congressional candidates featured immigration prominently in their campaigns.

² CBS/*New York Times* Poll, "US Public Opinion on Election 2008," conducted October 25-29, 2008. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. [USCBSNYT.103008.R15].

³ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "October 2006 Survey on Electoral Competition," conducted Oct. 17-22, 2006, <http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/293.pdf>.

Table 1. Registered Voters Rank Top Issues, 2006 and 2008

“Of the following six issues, which ONE would you say is MOST important to your vote for Congress this year? . . .”	
2006	
Issue	Percent
Situation in Iraq	27
Economy	20
Health care	18
Terrorism	14
Immigration	11
Energy policy	4
Other (vol.)	2

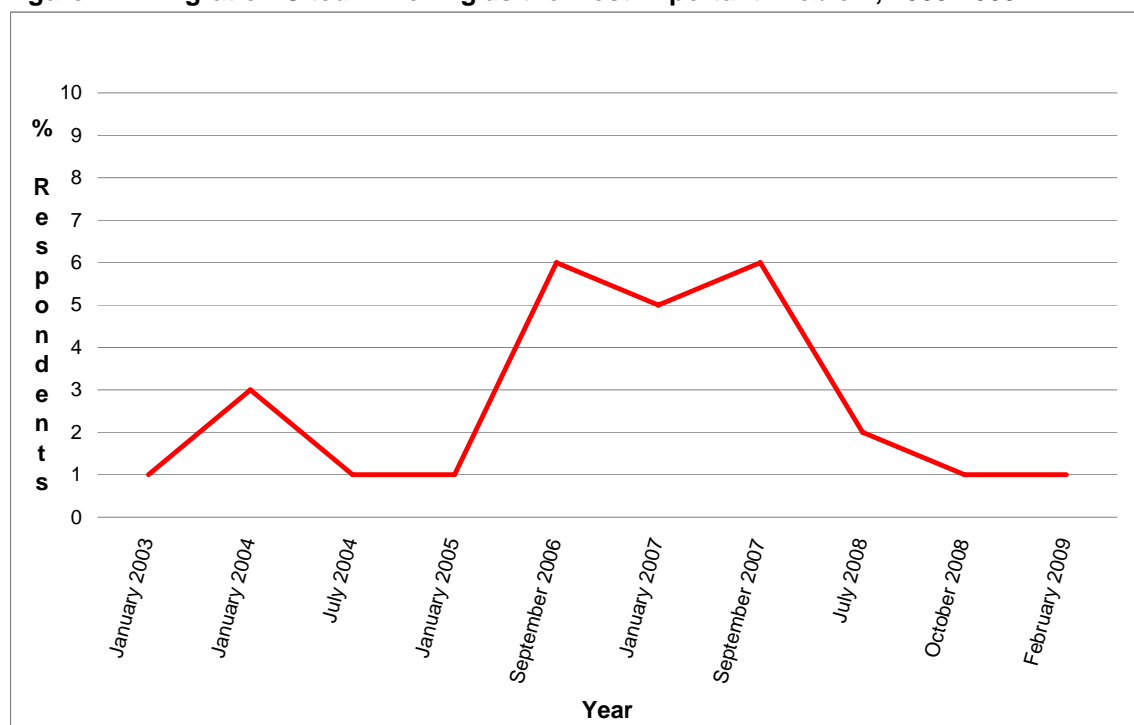
“In deciding who you would like to see elected president this year, which one of the following issues will be most important to you? . . .”	
2008	
Issue	Percent
Economy	55
Terrorism	13
Health care	9
Energy policy	7
War in Iraq	6
Illegal immigration	4
Something else	6

Sources: 2006 data, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Poll, October 17-22, 2006; 2008 data, CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, October 25-29, 2008.

Although it never rises to the top of the policy agenda, the level of interest in immigration seems highly responsive to its prominence in the political arena. The underlying event — the influx of the foreign born — has been fairly steady, but public interest in the issue is marked by sharp ups and downs coinciding with policy debates and the resultant media attention.

This pattern is apparent in a series of polls by the Pew Research Center dating back to 2003 that have asked respondents to name “the most important problem facing the country today.” The war and the economy have consistently held the top two spots with terrorism not far behind — at least until the economy became an overwhelming concern in 2008. Health care and moral values fluctuated in importance but stayed within a range that showed they are matters of consistent concern. Immigration was cited as a top concern by no more than 3 percent of the public until after President Bush proposed a temporary worker program in January 2004 (see Figure 1). While Congress debated the issue in 2006 and 2007 the level of interest was up at 5 to 6 percent. Interest then fell back to 2 percent or less almost immediately after the debate ended in stalemate in June 2007, and has remained low every since. In February 2009 only 1 percent of the population rated immigration as a top priority.

Figure 1. Immigration Cited in Polling as the Most Important Problem, 2003-2009



Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Political and Economic Surveys 2003-2009, <http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/492.pdf>.

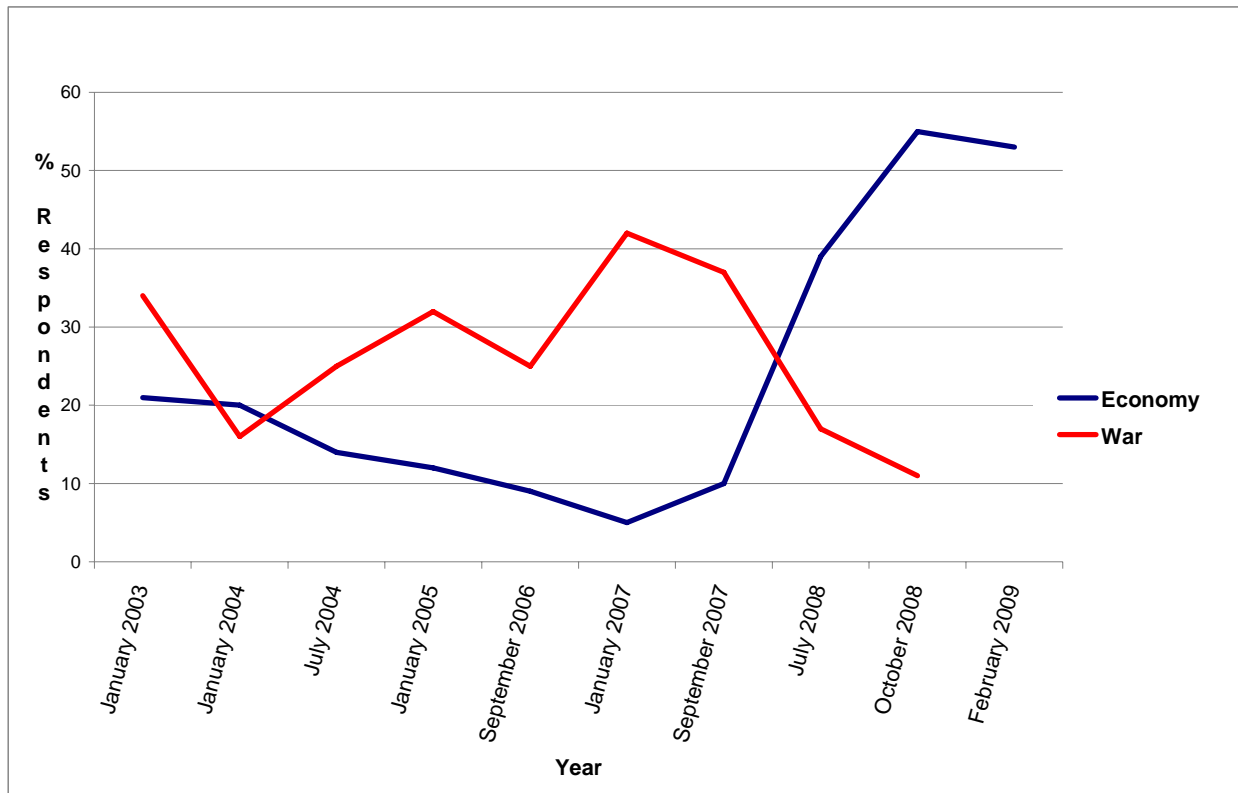
The same decline in interest is evident in another series of Pew surveys conducted every January, which includes questions about which issues should be a top focus for the White House. Immigration was listed as a top priority by 55 percent of respondents in January 2007 when a debate on major reform legislation was pending in Washington. It slipped to 51 percent in January 2008, and then plunged to 41 percent by the beginning of 2009 as the economy and jobs became an overwhelming concern.⁴

Though waxing and waning as a political issue, immigration was a fairly stable factor in American life over the course of this entire period viewed through the prism of its effects on communities, the labor market, and broader society. Its long-term impact hardly changed between 2003 and 2009. What we see, however, is that the priority placed on immigration moved up when the subject was debated in Washington and then receded again after the debate ended. In contrast, concern over issues like the economy and the war arguably seem more responsive to events on the ground than to the volume of political discourse alone. As the economy soured, interest soared (see Figure 2). As American casualties alternately increased and declined, so did concern about the war. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) was unable to change this dynamic despite much effort in the 2008 campaign.

The extent to which preoccupation with immigration relative to other issues rises and falls with its prominence in the public arena, regardless of the facts on the ground, suggests that concern over this issue is highly susceptible to messaging and leadership.

⁴ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, surveys conducted various dates, <http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/485.pdf>.

Figure 2. Economy and War Cited as the Most Important Problem, 2003-2009

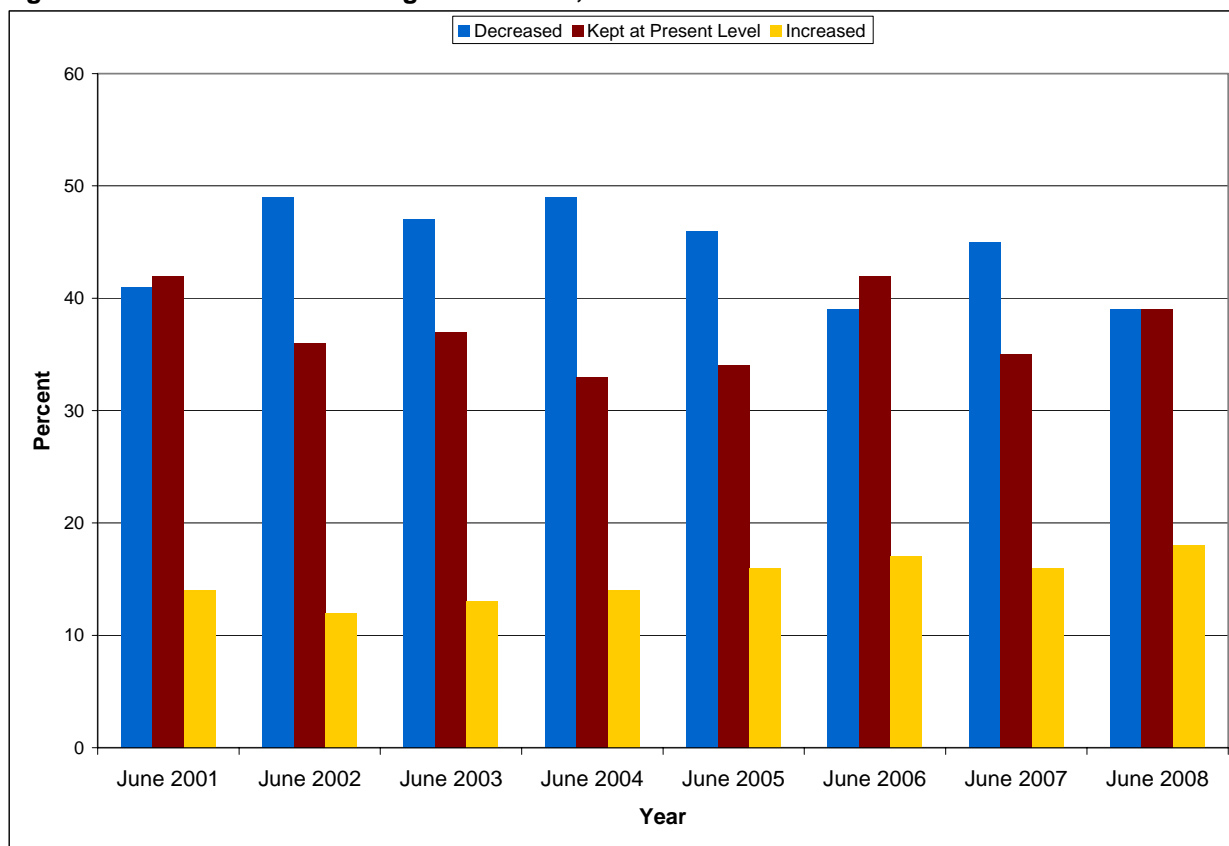


Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Political and Economic Surveys 2003-2009.

III. Overall Opinions on Immigration: Favorable, though Divided

When Americans are asked about the flow of immigrants generically — without specifying whether they are legal or not — a small share say that the numbers should be increased and the rest are about evenly divided between those who would like to see a decrease and those who are happy with the flow at present levels (see Figure 3). In a series of Gallup polls on this issue taken in 2001-2008, the distribution of those views has remained fairly stable in recent years.

Figure 3. Preferred Size of Immigration Flows, 2001-2008

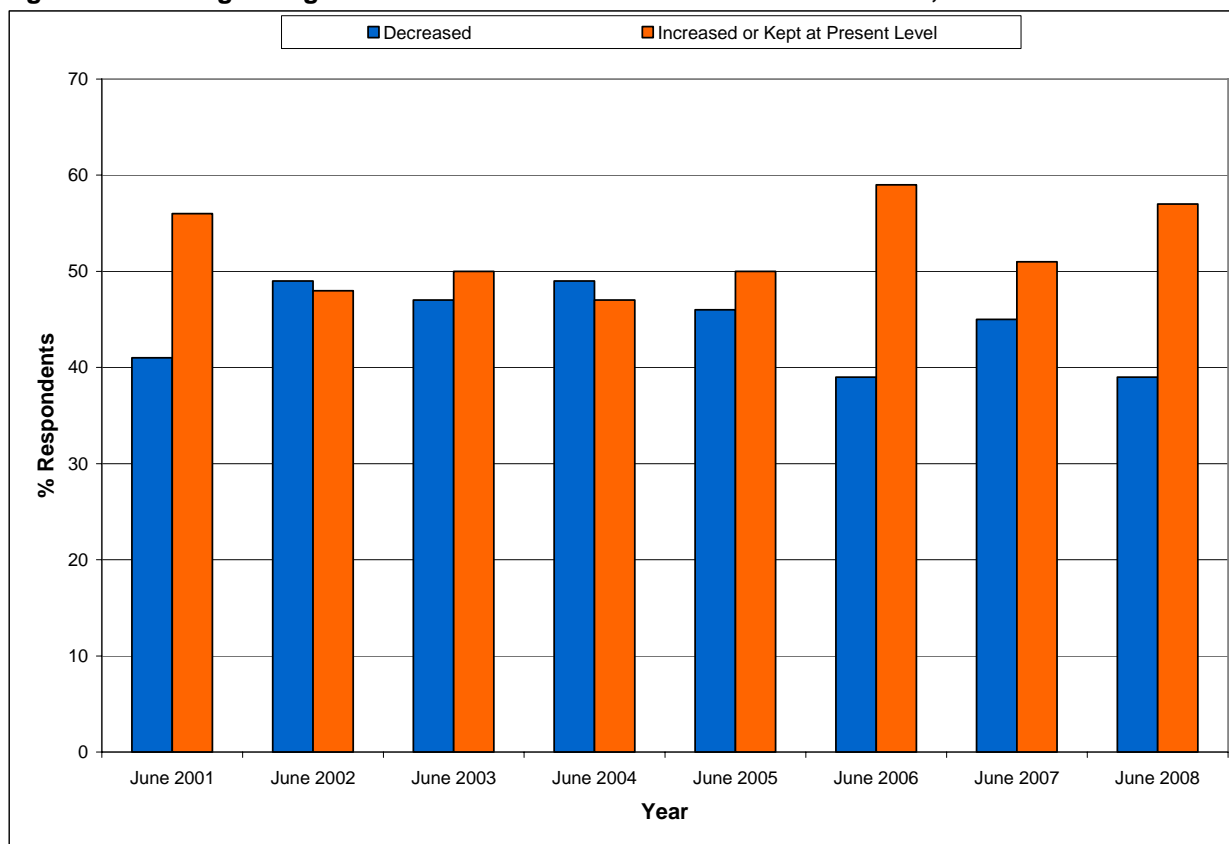


Source: Gallup Polls, "Pulse of Democracy," 2001 through 2008, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1660/Immigration.aspx>.

Considering that immigration flows have been at very high levels throughout this period, the survey results could be read as an endorsement of a robust influx of the foreign born. Adding those who favor increases to those who are happy with the status quo produces a majority of respondents in six of the last eight years (see Figure 4). On the other hand, a substantial minority has sought decreases in the number of immigrants coming into the country. Overall, the data show a country that is divided on this key point but that leans towards positive attitudes on robust immigration flows.

That same constellation of attitudes is evident when Americans are asked to draw a simple judgment on whether immigration is a good thing or a bad thing. Again, a series of Gallup surveys shows fairly stable attitudes. As with the series on immigration flows, there are blips of negative views in the wake of 9/11 and again in June 2007 in the midst of the Senate debate on immigration reform. But, even at these moments majorities voiced positive judgments.

Figure 4. Favoring Immigration Increases or Satisfied with Current Levels, 2001-2008



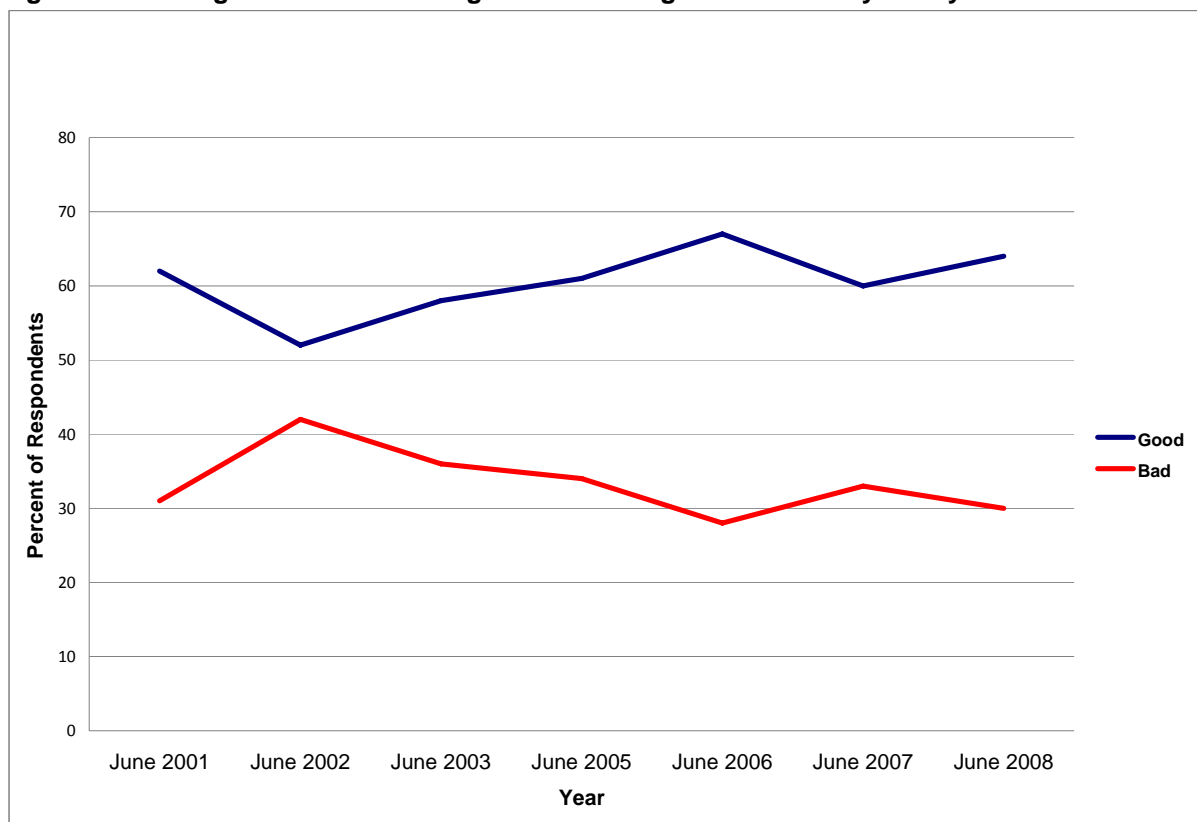
Source: Gallup Polls, “Pulse of Democracy,” 2001 through 2008.

Averaging the results of the seven annual polls taken every June since 2001 (except 2004) finds that six in ten Americans believe that immigration is a good thing for the country (see Figure 5). The lowest mark was registered in June 2002, and even then half (52 percent) saw immigration in a favorable light.

Moreover, Americans readily distinguish between legal and illegal immigration. In a September 2007 ABC News Poll, for example, 59 percent of respondents said that *legal* immigrants do more to help the country while 26 percent said they do more to hurt the country.⁵ When the same choice was posed regarding *illegal* immigrants, the results were reversed, with 54 percent saying they do more to hurt the country compared to 34 percent who said they do more to help.

⁵ ABC News Poll, “Aqui Se Habla Español — and Two Thirds Don’t Mind,” conducted Sept. 27-30, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/images/US/1048a1Hispanics.pdf>.

Figure 5. Is Immigration a Good Thing or a Bad Thing for the Country Today? 2001-2008



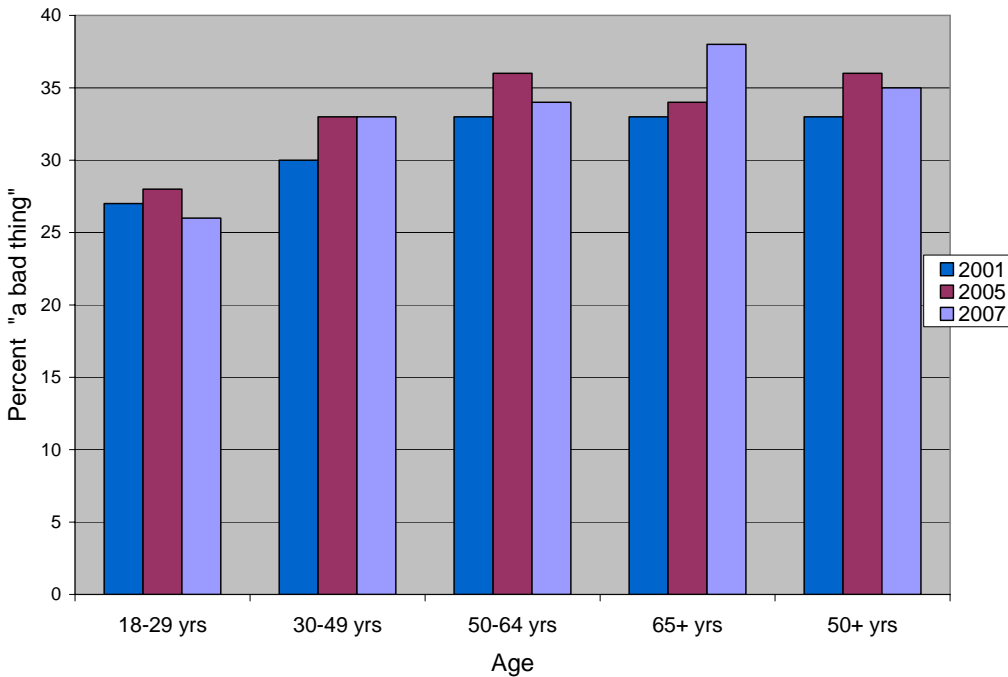
Source: Gallup Poll, "Pulse of Democracy," 2001 through 2008.

On both the size of immigration flows and the basic judgment on immigration's impact, non-Hispanic whites and blacks express similar views. Meanwhile, Latinos take a somewhat more favorable view of immigration on both questions.

Analyzing these data by the age of respondents reveals that negative views are somewhat more pervasive among the old than the young (see Figures 6 and 7). In 2007, for example, among respondents 65 and older, 49 percent favored decreased immigration flows compared to 38 percent among those 18 to 29 years old. Similarly, in the 65-plus category, 38 percent saw immigration as a bad thing versus 26 percent in the 18-to-29 age range. It is worth noting, however, that the major shift in attitudes takes place between the young and the middle aged and that there are only minor differences between the middle aged and those over 65. These differences are barely large enough to meet a test of statistical significance, but the same pattern by age appears consistently in the Gallup data over the course of many years, suggesting that young adults hold distinctive views.

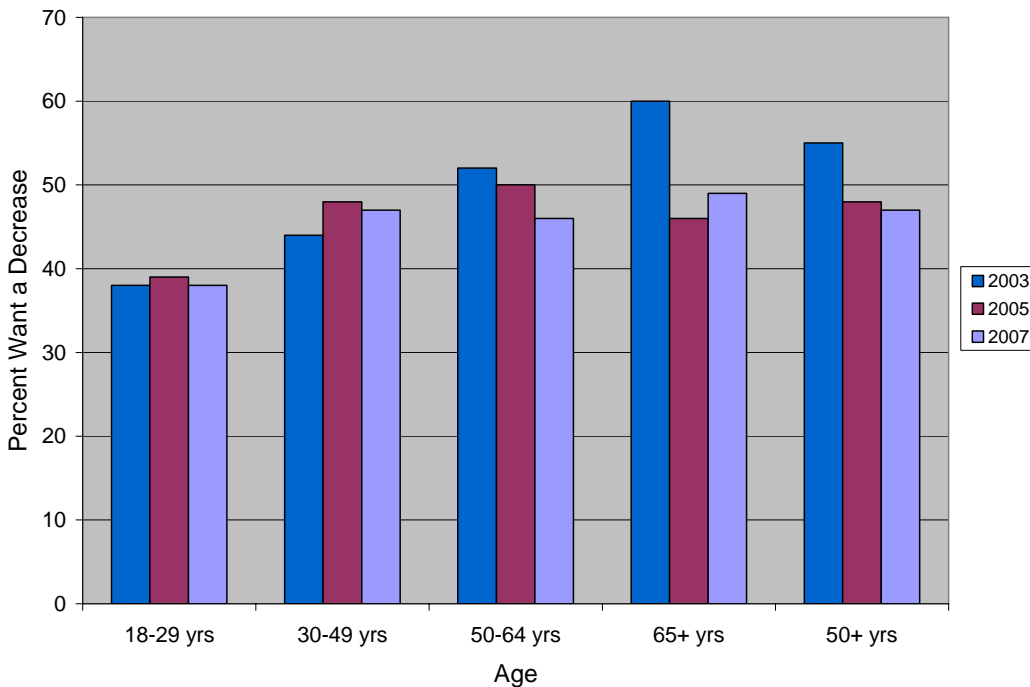
It is worth underscoring that even in the age cohort with the most negative views (65 years plus), negative views are held by a minority of the cohort.

Figure 6. Percentage of Respondents by Age Who Consider Immigration a Bad Thing for the Country Today, 2001, 2005, 2007



Source: Gallup Poll, "Social Service Series," tabulations provided to the author by The Gallup Organization.

Figure 7. Percentage of Respondents by Age Who Want to Decrease Immigration Levels, 2003, 2005, 2007



Source: Gallup Poll, "Social Service Series," tabulations provided to the author by The Gallup Organization.

IV. Growing Anxiety over Illegal Immigration: Who Is Most Concerned?

In recent years, Americans have viewed illegal immigration as a greater source of anxiety than it was in the early years of this decade. While this trend is evident across all segments of the population, older Americans have registered some of the highest levels of worry.

An annual series of surveys by the Gallup Poll has tracked the extent to which Americans express worries about a dozen different topics that are presented as problems facing the country (see Table 2). The surveys, conducted every March, have shown that illegal immigration ranks below several other subjects as a source of anxiety. This is consistent with the finding cited above on the ranking of immigration as a policy priority. Similarly, the salience of the issue increased markedly in 2006 and 2007 when it was a subject of congressional debates, and then receded in 2008 when the economy became a dominant preoccupation and immigration faded from the public arena.

Table 2. Recent Trend in Worry about Major National Issues, 2007-2008

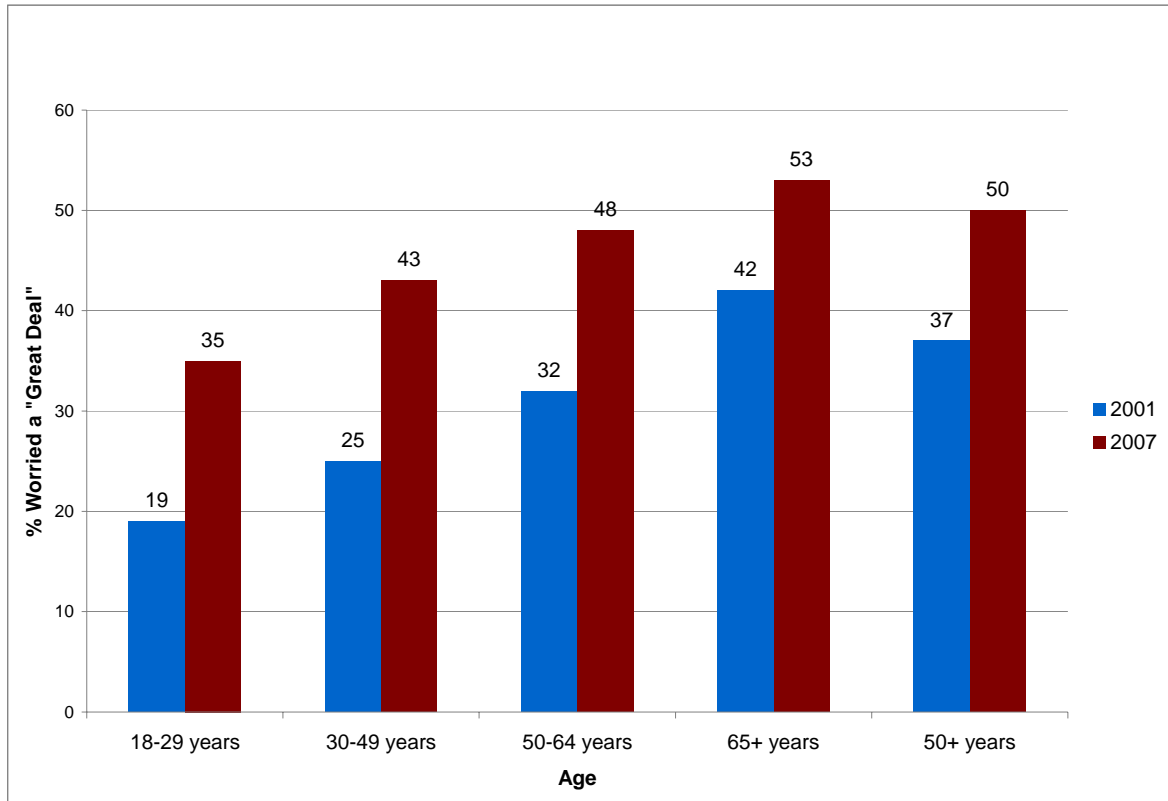
Percent Who Worry a "Great Deal"			
Issue	March 2007	March 2008	Change pct.pts.
	%	%	
Economy	39	60	21
Unemployment	25	36	11
Energy	43	47	4
Crime and violence	48	49	1
Possible terrorism against the US	41	40	-1
Race relations	19	18	-1
Drug use	45	43	-2
Social Security	49	46	-3
Environment	43	40	-3
Health care	63	58	-5
Illegal immigration	45	40	-5
Hunger/Homelessness	43	38	-5

Source: Gallup Poll, March 6-9, 2008, [USGALLUP.08MRCH06.R09G], and March 11-14, 2007, [USGALLUP.07MARH11.R09G]. Data provided to the author by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

To understand how the upward trend in anxiety over illegal immigration played out among different segments of the population, it is instructive to compare the segments that felt “a great deal” of worry at the both the low point (2001) and the high point (2007) of the time series.

Older Americans, particularly those at least 65 years old, expressed higher levels of anxiety from the start, and by 2007 ended up as one of the most worried segments in the entire population, with 53 percent saying they viewed the problem as the source of a great deal of worry (see Figure 8).

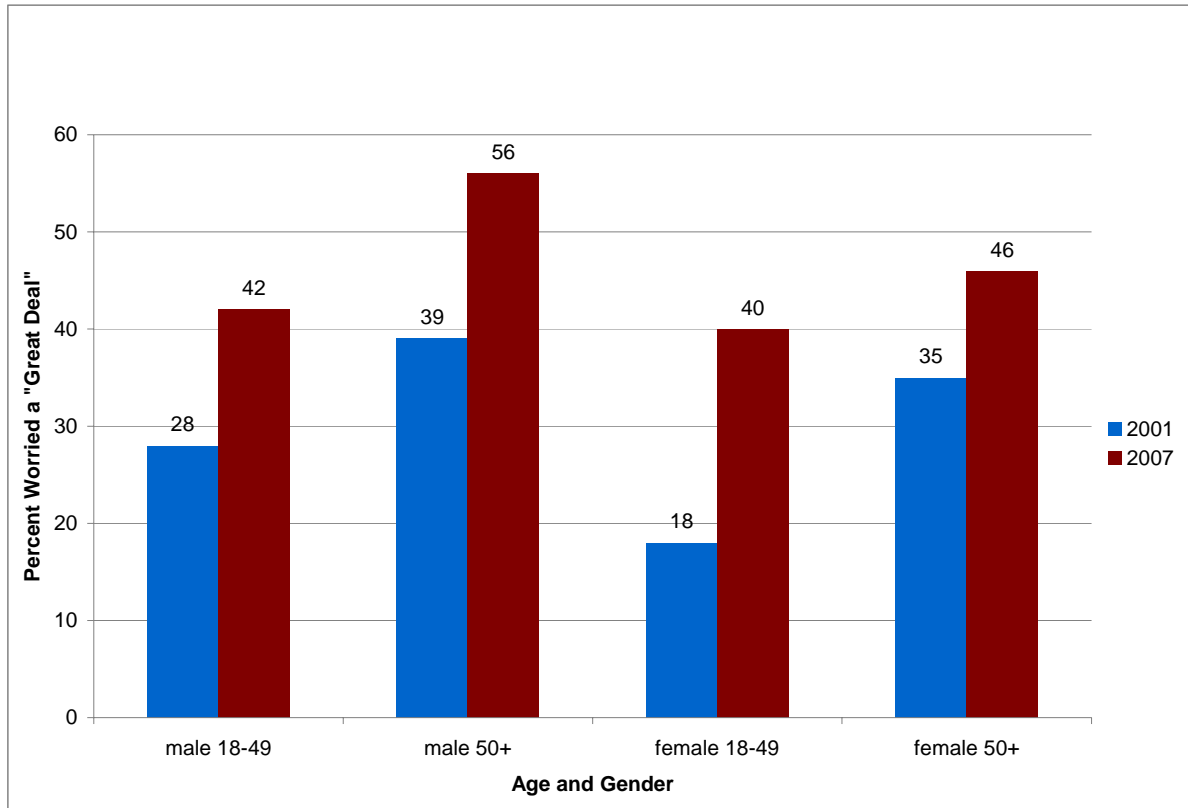
Figure 8. Degree to Which Respondents by Age Cite Illegal Immigration as Causing a Great Deal of Worry, 2001 and 2007



Source: Gallup Poll, "Social Service Series," tabulations provided to the author by The Gallup Organization.

Males of all ages have consistently expressed greater anxiety about immigration than females, with older males exhibiting the highest levels of worry (see Figure 9).

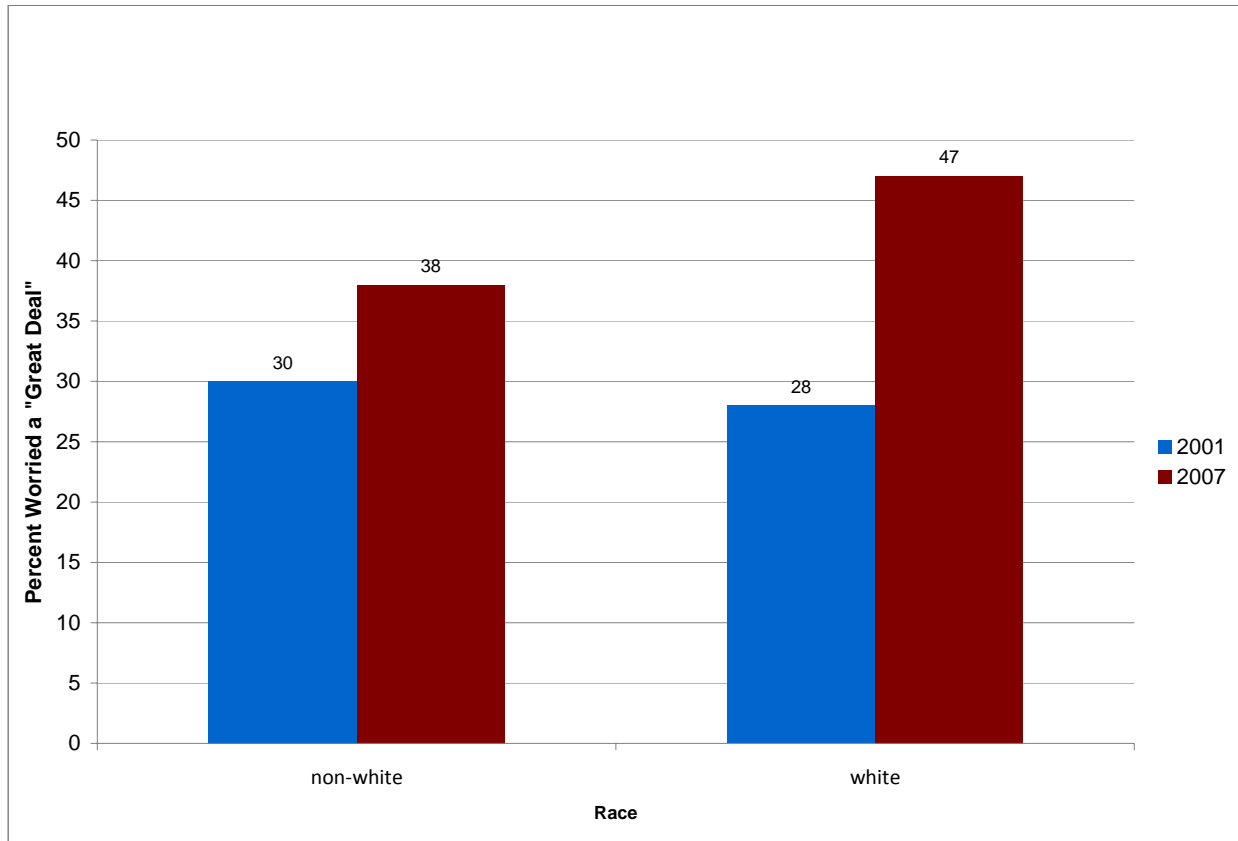
Figure 9. Degree to Which Respondents by Age and Gender Cite Illegal Immigration as Causing a Great Deal of Worry, 2001-2007



Source: Gallup Poll, "Social Service Series," tabulations provided to the author by The Gallup Organization.

Attitudes towards illegal immigration were essentially the same for whites and non-whites in the 2001 survey, with both groups exhibiting increases in anxiety. But, the upswing was far more substantial among whites (see Figure 10).

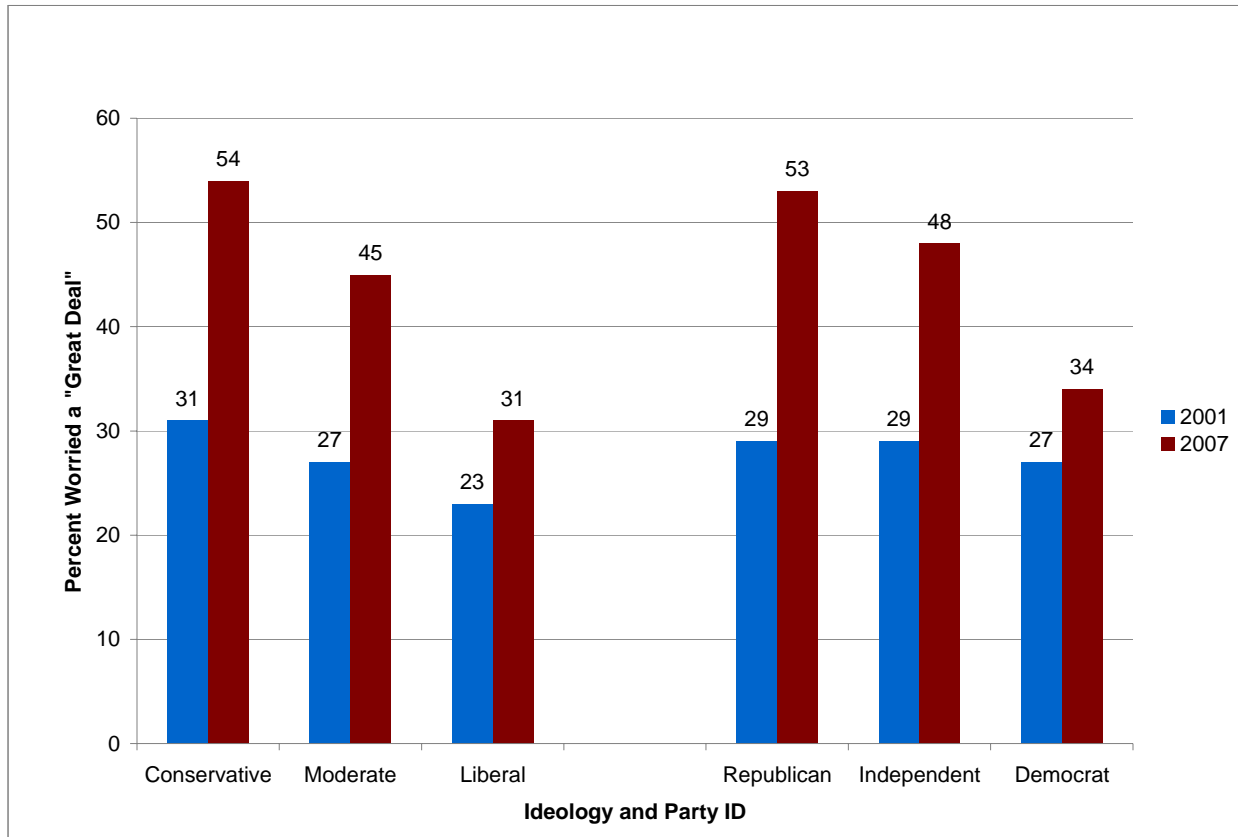
Figure 10. Degree to Which Respondents by Race Cite Illegal Immigration as Causing a Great Deal of Worry, 2001 and 2007



Source: Gallup Poll, "Social Service Series," tabulations provided to the author by The Gallup Organization.

Similar trends are also evident in examining the changes in attitudes according to political ideology and party identification. The levels of worry were roughly similar across the spectrum in 2001, although liberals expressed somewhat less anxiety than conservatives. But by 2007, respondents who identified themselves as either conservatives or Republicans stated much higher levels of worry (see Figure 11). Moderates and independents also experienced substantial increases in anxiety while attitudes changed less among liberals and Democrats.

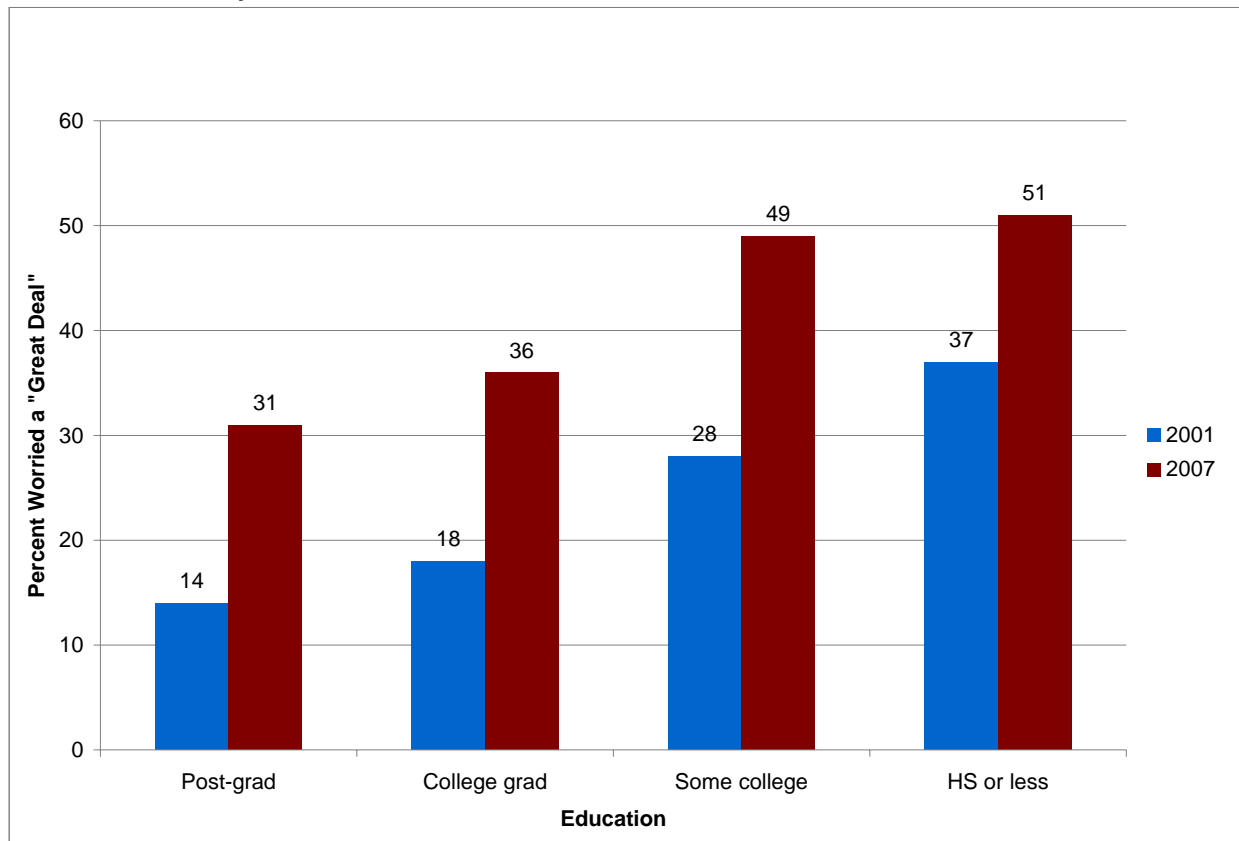
Figure 11. Degree to Which Respondents by Ideology and Party Identification Cite Illegal Immigration as Causing a Great Deal of Worry, 2001 and 2007



Source: Gallup Poll, "Social Service Series," tabulations provided to the author by The Gallup Organization.

Concern over illegal immigration also correlates strongly with education: anxiety is consistently higher among those who lack a college degree (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Degree to Which Respondents by Education Level Cite Illegal Immigration as Causing a Great Deal of Worry, 2001 and 2007



Source: Gallup Poll, “Social Service Series,” tabulations provided to the author by The Gallup Organization.

In sum, analysis of the Gallup surveys shows that worry about illegal immigration increased in virtually every segment of the population in recent years, but the anxiety was notably more heightened in some segments than others. The highest levels of worry are associated with the following characteristics: 65+ years old, male, white, conservative, Republican, and lacking a college degree.

A 2006 Pew survey offers further insight into how views of immigration divide the public in several different ways. Notably, this poll found that both Republicans and Democrats are deeply split internally along socioeconomic and ideological lines. In addition, Hispanics Democrats take more positive views than whites or African-Americans Democrats.

The survey posed a variety of questions intended to measure attitudes towards immigrants. Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents in various subcategories of the two political parties who said that: 1) immigrants are a burden on the country, 2) immigrants threaten traditional American values, and 3) they would like to see a decrease in legal immigration. The results are consistent across all three questions. Within both party coalitions those who are financially struggling and who are less educated take more negative views than those who describe themselves as financially secure and who have graduated from college. Ideological divides are evident in both parties although the split is greater among the Democrats.

Table 3. Views on Immigration by Party Affiliation, Financial Well-being, and Education Levels, 2006

Immigration Divides Both Political Parties			
	<i>Immigrants...</i>		
	are a burden on the country	threaten traditional values	Legal immigration should be decreased
Republicans	56	53	43
Conservative	58	59	43
Moderate/Liberal	52	43	42
Financially secure	48	49	36
Financially struggling	68	59	54
College graduate	43	42	34
Not college grad	62	58	47
Democrats	51	47	38
White	53	47	41
Black	56	51	37
Hispanic	36	38	27
Conservative /Moderate	57	53	43
Liberal	36	29	26
Financially secure	41	36	32
Financially struggling	58	55	43
College graduate	32	31	21
Not college grad	59	53	46

Source: Pew Research Center/Pew Hispanic Center, "America's Immigration Quandary," survey of 2,000 respondents, March 2006.

V. The 2008 Election: The Dog that Did Not Bark

At the onset of the 2008 campaign, immigration seemed likely to become a mobilizing issue among Republicans and for the growing number of voters facing economic difficulties. However, the evidence from both exit polls and election results shows not only that immigration never developed as a deciding issue for voters, but also, and more importantly, that candidates taking tough stands in favor of restrictive polities fared poorly at the polls.

In the Republican presidential nomination race, candidates Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee portrayed themselves as eager to crack down on illegal immigration, with Romney investing major sums in advertisements on this theme in the early primary states. Both candidates harshly attacked the eventual nominee, John McCain, as being soft on the issue because of his prominent role in the initial efforts to enact comprehensive reform legislation. Despite their efforts, immigration did not

develop as a decisive issue in the Republican primaries (see Table 4). While prominent in the Iowa caucuses, it soon faded as McCain emerged as the front runner.

Table 4. Immigration as an Issue in Republican Primary Exit Polls, 2008

Which ONE of these four issues is the most important facing the country?										
	Iowa	New Hampshire	Michigan	Nevada	S. Carolina	Florida	Missouri	Illinois	Virginia	Ohio
	January 3	January 8	January 15	January 19	January 19	January 29	February 5	February 5	February 12	March 4
Illegal immigration	33	23	13	35	26	16	18	19	19	17
War in Iraq	17	24	17	10	16	14	20	20	24	22
Economy	26	31	55	37	40	45	44	43	32	42
Terrorism	21	-	11	13	15	21	13	16	21	17
<i>Winner</i>	<i>Huckabee</i> 34%	<i>McCain</i> 37%	<i>Romney</i> 39%	<i>Romney</i> 51%	<i>McCain</i> 33%	<i>McCain</i> 36%	<i>McCain</i> 33%	<i>McCain</i> 47%	<i>McCain</i> 50%	<i>McCain</i> 60%

Source: 2008 exit polls conducted by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International on behalf of the National Election Pool. Data downloaded from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21660890/>.

As noted above, immigration did not play a significant role in the November 2008 presidential voting. However, a number of hard-fought congressional races did involve sharply divergent views on immigration or candidates who campaigned on promises to take tough action against unauthorized immigrants. In more than a dozen contested House races and several close Senate races, the pro-restriction candidates were defeated. For example, five prominent members of the House anti-illegal immigration caucus were defeated as was first-time congressional candidate Lou Barletta, the mayor of Hazelton, Pennsylvania, who gained momentary fame for engineering one of the toughest local ordinances on immigration. In Arizona’s Maricopa County, a hotspot for immigration controversies, a Democrat who favors comprehensive reform won the 5th Congressional District for the second time, again defeating a pro-deportation Republican. In Colorado, New Mexico, and Virginia, open Senate seats were won by Democrats who had to fight off accusations of being soft on illegal immigration, and in North Carolina, a Republican incumbent was defeated despite running attack ads on immigration against her opponent.

All of the losing candidates in these races were Republicans and, as with the 2006 election, which produced similar results for candidates taking negative views on immigration, the effects of this issue are difficult to distinguish from the general downdraft experienced by the Republican Party.

Moreover, several moderate Democrats won swing districts by taking cautious positions on immigration.

The 2008 primary and general elections took place amid heightened anxiety about financial security and an overwhelming concern with the economy as a political issue. Under such circumstances advocating restriction on immigration should logically have produced positive results at the polls. Nonetheless, the election results clearly show that promoting get-tough policies on immigration was not a formula for success. The converse was not necessarily true, however: espousing moderate or generous views did not rally voters. The election did not produce a mandate in favor of one policy approach over another. Instead, the clearest message was a rejection of punitive measures, harsh rhetoric, and policies that rely only on enforcement to control illegal immigration.

VI. Policy Options: Support for Legalization and Enforcement

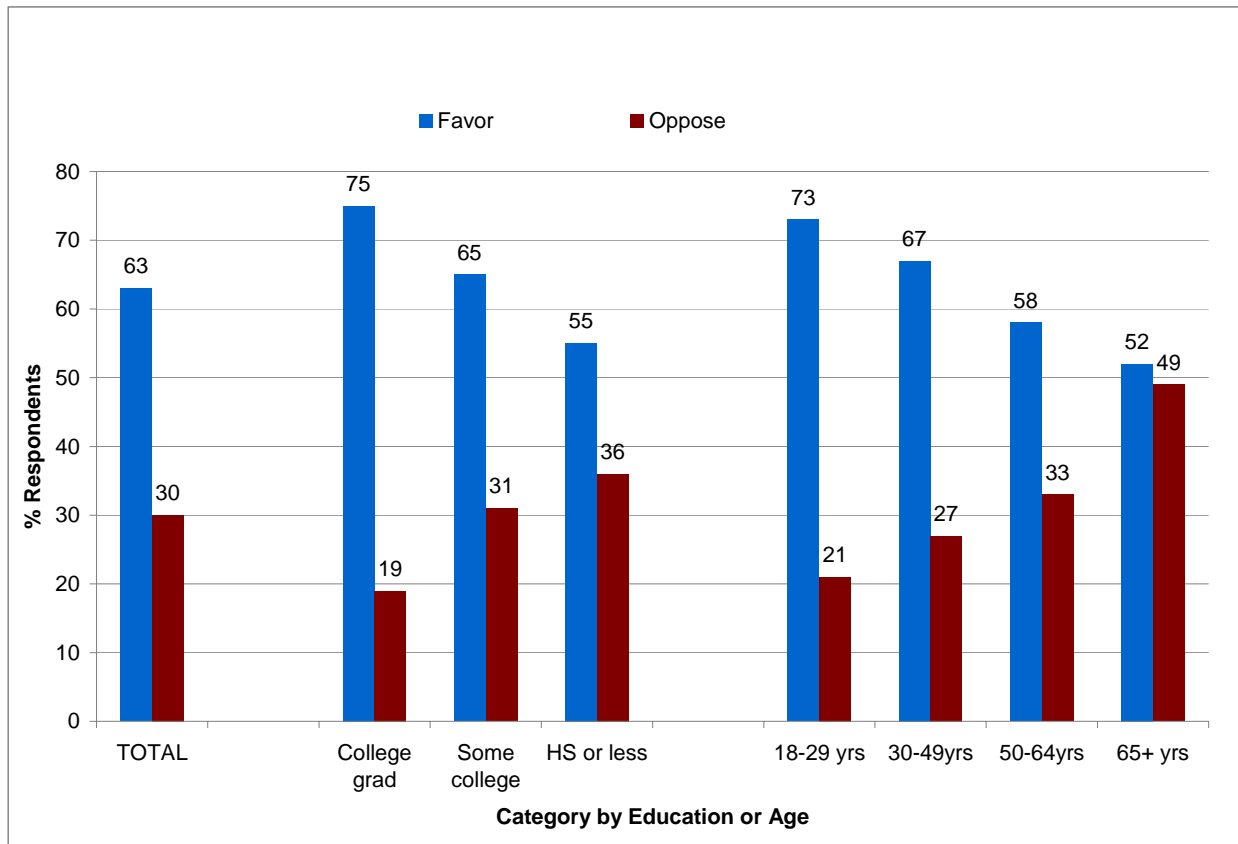
The 2006 and 2008 election results are consistent with public opinion data showing that most Americans reject an enforcement-only approach. Instead, clear majorities in numerous polls favor a combination of measures similar to the comprehensive reforms debated in Congress in 2006 and 2007. Most Americans want to see effective measures to halt illegal immigration, but they also support measures that would eventually grant legal status to unauthorized migrants already residing in the country.

The single most controversial policy proposal considered in recent years would have created a path to legal status and eventual citizenship for unauthorized migrants currently living in the United States, so long as they met certain requirements. During the 2007 Senate debate, conservative and pro-restriction commentators termed it an “amnesty” and rallied public opinion among those most anxious about illegal immigration. The mobilization lasted only a few weeks, but it was sufficient to sway enough Republican lawmakers to block enactment of comprehensive reform in June 2007.

The virulence of the opinions expressed during that period and the failure of the legislative effort have produced a misimpression, apparently widely shared, that some large measure of the American public opposed the legalization proposal. The evidence from public opinion surveys clearly contradicts this assessment. A clear majority of the public supported the idea of legalization. The survey data is presented here in somewhat repetitive detail because the misimpression of opposition has proved so resilient.

Attitudes towards legalization vary according to some of the same variables evident in levels of anxiety over illegal immigration, most notably education and age. A Pew survey conducted during the height of the 2007 Senate debate found that 63 percent of Americans favored legalization. However, as with anxiety over illegal immigration, attitudes varied widely by a number of characteristics, most notably education and age (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Support for Earned Legalization by Age and Educational Attainment, 2007



Source: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Mixed Views on Immigration Bill," June 7, 2007, <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/335.pdf>.

Table 5. Polls Reflect Consistent Majorities Favor Legalization, 2006-2007⁶

CBS News/<i>New York Times</i> Poll			
"If you had to choose, what do you think should happen to most illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the United States for at least two years? They should be given a chance to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status. OR They should be deported back to their native country."			
	Keep jobs	Deport	Unsure
May 18-23, 2007	62	33	5
March 7-11, 2007	60	36	4
May 4-8, 2006	61	35	4
"Would you favor or oppose allowing illegal immigrants who came into the country before January to apply for a four-year visa that could be renewed, as long as they pay a \$5,000 fine, a fee, show a clean work record and pass a criminal background check?"			
	Favor	Oppose	Unsure
May 18-23, 2007	67	28	5

<i>Los Angeles Times</i>/Bloomberg Poll			
"One proposal that has been discussed in Congress would allow illegal immigrants who have been living and working in the United States for a number of years, and who do not have a criminal record, to start on a path to citizenship by registering that they are in the country, paying a fine, getting fingerprinted, and learning English, among other requirements. Do you support or oppose this, or haven't you heard enough about it to say?"			
	Support	Oppose	Unsure
Nov. 30-Dec. 3, 2007	60	15	25
June 6-10, 2007	63	23	12
June 24-27, 2006	67	18	12

⁶ Sources: CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, "Immigration Reform," conducted May 18-23, 2007, http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/052407_immigration.pdf; CBS/*New York Times* Poll, "The Republicans: No Satisfaction," conducted March 7-11, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/MAR07A-REPS.pdf>; CBS/*New York Times* Poll conducted May 4-8, 2006, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/12/politics/main3362530.shtml>; CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, "Immigration Reform," conducted May 18-23, 2007; CNN/Opinion Research Corp. Poll conducted May 4-6, 2007, <http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/2007/images/05/09/rel6e.pdf>; CNN/Opinion Research Corp. Poll conducted April 4-12, 2007, <http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/2007/images/05/09/rel6e.pdf>; CNN/Opinion Research Corp. Poll conducted May 16-17, 2006, <http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/2007/images/05/09/rel6e.pdf>; Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg National Survey, "The 2008 Election, the Economy, Immigration, and Military Families," conducted Nov. 30-Dec. 3, 2007, <http://www.latimes.com/media/acrobat/2007-12/34119655.pdf>; Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg National Survey conducted June 6-10, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/13/nation/na-poll13>; Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Poll conducted June 24-27, 2006, <http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm>; Gallup Poll, "Public Still Supports Path to Citizenship for Illegal Immigrants," conducted March 2-4, 2007 and containing May 2006 and June 2006 survey question results, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/26875/public-still-supports-path-citizenship-illegal-immigrants.aspx>.

CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll			
"Would you favor or oppose creating a program that would allow illegal immigrants already living in the United States for a number of years to stay in this country and apply for U.S. citizenship if they had a job and paid back taxes"			
	Favor	Oppose	Unsure
May 4-6, 2007	80	19	1
April 10-12, 2007	77	21	2
May 16-17, 2006	79	18	3

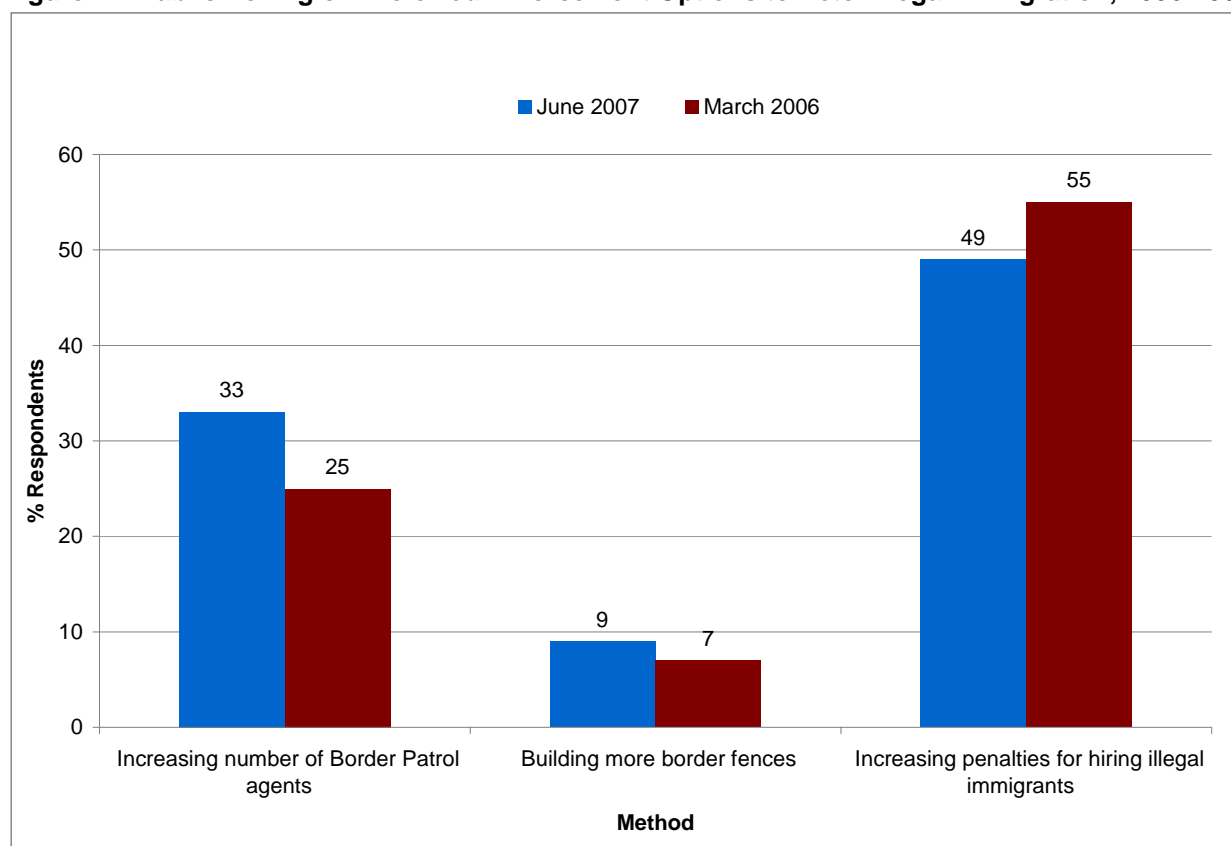
Gallup Poll			
Which comes closest to your view about what government policy should be toward illegal immigrants currently residing in the United States? Should the government -- [ROTATED: deport all illegal immigrants back to their home country, allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States in order to work, but only for a limited amount of time, or allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens, but only if they meet certain requirements over a period of time]?			
	Deport all	Remain to work	Remain as citizen
March 2-4, 2007	24	15	59
June 8-25, 2006	16	17	66
May 5-7, 2006	21	15	61

The political dilemma for policymakers arises from the fact that the public is even less supportive of alternative measures to deal with the current population of unauthorized migrants. When asked in a June 2007 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll whether deporting all "illegal immigrants" is "a realistic and achievable goal," 85 percent said it is not.⁷ Asked in the same survey whether it was realistic to have all illegal immigrants return to their native countries before applying for legal entry, the response was equally negative, with 76 percent saying that goal was not achievable.

Public opinion is quite settled when it comes to the kinds of enforcement measures that are needed to halt future flows of illegal immigration. Most Americans favor action aimed at work sites rather than at the borders (see Figure 14). The results from a 2007 Pew survey are typical of other polls. These views are consistent across all population segments.

⁷ NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll conducted June 8-11, 2007, http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/0607-wsj-nbc-poll.doc_6pm.rtf.pdf.

Figure 14. Public Polling on Preferred Enforcement Options to Deter Illegal Immigration, 2006-2007



Source: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Mixed Views on Immigration Bill,” June 7, 2007, <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/335.pdf>.

In order to implement effective worksite enforcement, most Americans are willing to contemplate the use of a verification system including an identity document based on the Social Security card. In a May 2007 Gallup survey, 86 percent of respondents said they favored the issuance of a tamper-proof Social Security card that would demonstrate the holder was eligible to work, and they agreed that people should be required to show this card in order to gain employment.

VII. Conclusion

More than three decades into an era of large-scale immigration that is transforming the country, most Americans share a positive overall assessment of the influx and its impact. But that does not mean that the nation’s response to immigration is simply calm and accepting. A significant minority holds negative views and would like to see flows reduced. Moreover, illegal immigration has been a source of growing anxiety for most Americans, coming at a time when the population of unauthorized immigrants rose from an estimated 8.5 million in 2000 to close to 12 million in 2008.⁸

⁸ Michael Hofer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2008*, (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics, 2009), http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2008.pdf.

This worry is most prominent in specific sectors of the population: those who are over the age of 65, white, lack a college education, or describe themselves as politically conservative. Young adults and those with college degrees are much less concerned.

As a practical matter, this anxiety does not translate into widespread support for either get-tough policies or the politicians who espouse them. Instead, a clear majority of the public favors a mix of policy approaches that combines enhanced worksite enforcement and measures that would allow the current population of unauthorized migrants to remain in the country with legal status. There is dissent, however. Between a quarter and a third of the public opposes legalization, and they mobilized loudly during the Senate debates of 2006 and 2007. Those voices proved strong enough to help produce a stalemate, but they were not strong enough to get their own agenda enacted or even seriously considered. Most Americans simply want to see the illegal immigration problem fixed, and they have a good idea about how to do it. And, opinion surveys suggest they will not be unhappy if the end result is ongoing immigration flows at the high levels of recent years — just as long as it comes through legal channels.

VIII. About the Author

Roberto Suro is a Professor at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and a Nonresident Scholar at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). He has nearly 35 years experience in the immigration field as a journalist, author, and researcher. Prior to joining the University of Southern California faculty in August 2007, Mr. Suro was Director of the Pew Hispanic Center, a research organization that he founded in 2001 with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. At the Center, he supervised the production of more than 100 publications that offered nonpartisan statistical analysis and public opinion surveys chronicling the rapid growth of the Latino population and its implications for the nation. Prior to that, Mr. Suro spent more than two decades in journalism, including at the *Chicago Sun Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *TIME* Magazine. In 1985, he joined *The New York Times*, serving as bureau chief in Rome and Houston. Mr. Suro later joined *The Washington Post* as a National staff writer and later served as Deputy National Editor. He is author of *Strangers Among Us: Latino Lives in a Changing America*, (Vintage, 1999), *Watching America's Door: The Immigration Backlash and the New Policy Debate*, (Twentieth Century Fund, 1996), *Remembering the American Dream: Hispanic Immigration and National Policy*, (Twentieth Century Fund, 1994) as well as more than two dozen book chapters, reports, and other publications related to Latinos and immigration.

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