

# Contentious Debate on Capitol Hill over Immigration Reform Mirrors Partisan Divides among the Public

## *Public Impressions of Illegal Immigration Flows Exaggerated*

May 6, 2013 CHICAGO – While visiting Mexico last week, President Obama struck an optimistic chord on passing new immigration reform. But at home, the fractious immigration debate on Capitol Hill continues and resembles partisan divides among the public.

According to [public opinion survey findings](#) released today by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, in conjunction with The Woodrow Wilson Center, self-described Democrats and Independents are more supportive than Republicans of immigration reform options involving a path to citizenship and express more favorable impressions of Mexicans living in the United States. [Download the survey brief \(PDF\)](#).

There have, however, been several shifts in nationwide public opinion that may signal public readiness for reform. There is an increased preference for the United States, rather than Mexico, to take the lead in dealing with undocumented Mexican immigrants entering the United States. At the same time, the numbers who say that immigration is a critical threat to the United States has dropped a staggering 32 percentage points since 1994.

Six in ten Americans across partisan divides (57% overall) now say that the United States should be more responsible for dealing with illegal Mexican immigrants entering the country, compared to 45 percent in 2004 who thought the United States should be more responsible. In 2004, slightly more thought that Mexico should be more responsible than the United States in dealing with unauthorized immigration (50%, compared to 40% now).

Republican opposition to immigration reform may rest upon their constituents' negative views of Mexican immigrants. Self-described Republicans are more negative than Democrats and Independents toward Mexicans living in the United States than other groups of immigrants (e.g., Brazilian or Chinese immigrants) or towards Mexicans who live in Mexico.

The Chicago Council's survey also shows that half of Americans overstate unauthorized immigration levels into the United States, which is related to a bias against Mexican immigrants and opposition to reform. But those who perceive that illegal immigration flows have either declined or stabilized over the past year have a much more positive image of Mexican immigrants living in the United States as well as immigration reform—underscoring the potential power of accurate information.

Just under six in ten Americans have a favorable view of Mexican immigrants in the United States, considerably fewer than those with a favorable view of Brazilian (72%) and Chinese (67%) immigrants; nine in ten have a positive view of Mexicans living in Mexico. Those who have more accurate information about declining undocumented immigration rates express more positive views of Mexican immigrants and immigration reform.

Mexicans in the United States are viewed as working hard, regardless of the perceptions of unauthorized immigration. Overall, almost nine in ten Americans say that most Mexican immigrants to the United States work hard (87%, up from 82% in 2004), and more say that most Mexican immigrants respect the law than not (53% versus 43%). But Americans are evenly divided on whether most Mexican immigrants integrate into American life (48% yes, 48% no), and a majority continues to say that most Mexican immigrants do not learn English (57%, versus 39% yes).

This report is based on the results of a Chicago Council survey of public opinion conducted from April 12 to 15, 2013. GfK Custom Research conducted the survey for The Chicago Council using a randomly selected sample of 1,017 adults age 18 and older from their large-scale, nationwide online research panel, recruited using address-based sampling. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points. The margin of error is higher when analyses are conducted among subgroups.

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