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Public Opinion on Immigration Reform:

Research Reveals that Voters Support Both the Arizona Immigration Law *and* Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Recent polling and public opinion research shows that Americans hold complex – even seemingly contradictory – views when it comes to immigration issues.

Case in point: most Americans support both Arizona’s controversial anti-immigration law at the same time they also support proposed federal comprehensive immigration reform legislation with a path to eventual citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

Overall then, opinion research shows that rather than a newfound wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, most Americans support Arizona’s law as well as support for national comprehensive immigration reform is driven by a desire for action by Washington on a problem that has been left unattended for too long.

Politically, this nuanced understanding of American public opinion offers lessons to both parties for how to best address both the policy and politics of immigration reform.

Voters Want Action and Solutions on Immigration

In a bipartisan survey sponsored by America’s Voice Education Fund and conducted by Lake Research Partners and Public Opinion Strategies, we sought to understand the motivations and sentiments underlying support for Arizona’s tough immigration law.¹ We found:

- Arizona Law Supported By Most – Opposed by Latinos: Sixty percent of voters nationwide support the Arizona law (45% strongly) with 23% opposed. Latinos opposed the Arizona law by a 55% to 35% margin.

- Voters Supporting Arizona ALSO Support Comprehensive Immigration Reform: More than 4 out of 5 voters who support the Arizona law support comprehensive reform with a path to citizenship. And 67% of them strongly support comprehensive immigration reform. By comparison, only one out of five support deportation as the preferred policy option when given a range of policy options for what to do with the 11 million undocumented in our country.
- Strong Majorities Support Comprehensive Immigration Reform and Believe that Illegal Immigration is a National Problem: Fully 78% of all voters support comprehensive immigration reform. Additionally, when voters were asked to choose between three policy options: the deportation of immigrants in the U.S. illegally; having them stay only as temporary workers; or require them to undergo registration with the government, background checks, payment of taxes, learning English, and going to the back of the citizenship line, 22% chose deportation and 8% chose the temporary worker solution. The third option, the path to legal status, is by far the most popular at 64%.
- Voters Prefer Federal Action to Arizona Laws – and Want Federal Action Now: By a margin of 53% to 18% voters prefer a comprehensive national solution to a version of Arizona’s law in their own state. This is consistent with the finding that voters believe immigration is a national problem appropriately dealt with at a federal level (56%) rather than handled by individual states (22%). The passage of the Arizona law has not lessened voters’ appetite for immediate federal action. Three quarters of voters (76%) want action taken now, as opposed to waiting for action, and two thirds (67%) strongly desire action now.

Our Analysis: Underpinning the seemingly irreconcilable support for Arizona law while simultaneously supporting comprehensive reform is voters’ frustration with lack of action at the federal level. When asked voters why they supported Arizona’s law, the number one answer by far – 52% – was that voters believed the federal government had failed to solve the problem. What does this mean? It means they much prefer “doing something” to “doing nothing.” It means that voters are frustrated with federal government inaction and want the problem of illegal immigration addressed now. And it means that, provided a range of options, voters support practical and humane reform over border enforcement-only measures.

Support for Comprehensive Reform Stands Up Against Toughest Political Attacks

In a [poll](#) conducted by Hart Research Associates, we put support for comprehensive immigration reform up against the toughest political attacks possible and in tough locations – solely the moderate and conservative states of Arkansas, Colorado, Missouri, and Ohio.² Among the notable findings:

- Comprehensive Immigration Reform Stands Up to Toughest Attacks: We attached political labels to comprehensive immigration reform, including describing reform as the “Obama/Democratic plan,” and subjected the reform proposal to very strong Republican criticisms throughout the survey. After equal exposure to criticisms and Democratic responses, voters in these states support reform by a solid 14-point margin, with clear majority support in CO, MO, and OH, while AR voters are evenly divided. Specifically, the comprehensive approach was subjected to a variety of Republican attacks, including:
 - “Amnesty”: comprehensive reform wins over an “amnesty” attack 52%-39% overall, including by 54% to 37% in Colorado and 55% to 32% in Ohio.
 - “Border security first”: comprehensive reform wins over a “border security first” approach by a 51% to 40% margin overall and by a full 20-point margin in Ohio and 17 points in Missouri.
- Legal Status is the Plan’s Strongest Provision, Not a Vulnerability: The most convincing reason to support comprehensive immigration reform, according to 51% of the respondents, is that “immigrants will be required to get legal and pay their fair share of taxes,” vs. 21% who say it “cracks down on employers” who hire undocumented workers and only 15% who like the plan because it “improves border security.”
- Democratic Plan Improves Democratic Brand on Immigration Through the Debate: Democrats started with a 12-percentage point deficit on “which party do you trust on immigration?” After describing reform proposals and related party positions, Democrats end with a 4-percentage point advantage – a 16-percentage point swing through the course of the debate.

Our Analysis: This poll aimed to accurately portray the real time arguments of a political debate between a policymaker or candidate supporting comprehensive reform and one opposing reform. The enduring support for comprehensive reform, as well as the way the political brands on immigration evolved during the course of the debate, shows us that candidates supporting comprehensive reform should lean into the issue of immigration, recognizing that their position improves during a tough debate the more that they can show themselves as offering practical solutions and action on the issue of immigration.

Political Lessons for Both Parties Moving Forward

These recent studies of public opinion show that the conventional wisdom about immigration reform has been consistently and persistently wrong. Voters want their leaders to acknowledge their deep frustration with illegal immigration, to step up at the national level and to replace a broken and chaotic system with a legal and orderly one -- now.

Instead of ducking it, Democrats should lean into the immigration issue, knowing that the problem solving and pragmatism embedded in their support for comprehensive reform connects them with the broad majority of voters that want solutions on the issue. In doing so, candidates improve their positioning on the issue in the process. In Washington, Democrats should similarly recognize that pursuing comprehensive reform is not just good public policy, but good politics as well.

Republicans should recognize that in the short-term, the anti-immigration wedge strategy that failed spectacularly in 2006 and 2008 shows no signs of working any better this cycle. GOP candidates that pander to their base with enforcement-only policies and rhetoric in a primary campaign will have a very difficult time expanding their support beyond the base in a general election, especially if their opponent presents a practical alternative in the form of a comprehensive solution.

Long-term, the lessons of Proposition 187 in California in the mid-1990s offer a cautionary tale to Republicans in Arizona and beyond. Just as the Republican embrace of the anti-immigrant Prop. 187 mobilized California Latinos and caused them to flee to the Democrats – turning California enduringly blue in the process – so too, the Arizona law could have significant nationwide political consequences in the years to come.

¹ May 2010 America's Voice poll, conducted by Lake Research Partners and Public Opinion Strategies of 800 registered voters nationwide and an oversample of 300 Latino registered voters.
http://americasvoiceonline.org/index.php/polling/entry/bipartisan_poll_in_arizona_aftermath_public_demands_national_immigrati

² April 2010 America's Voice poll conducted by Hart Research Associates among 1,608 voters in four key states (405 AR, 401 CO, 401 MO, 401 OH).
http://americasvoiceonline.org/index.php/polling/entry/democrats_gain_by_addressing_immigration_head-on