

Immigration: Tough, Fair, and Practical

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Takeaways

Suggested message: Our country needs immigration reform that is tough, fair, and practical. Tough means tough on border enforcement. Fair means fair to U.S. tax-payers. Practical means restoring the rule of law and solving the problem for good.

Immigration reform opponents support the same failed ideas that created this expensive mess.

With the focus back on immigration now that states are passing questionable laws and policymakers across the political spectrum are agreeing that the system is broken, we are recommending a three-pronged message for reform supporters: tough, fair, and practical.

Tough means tough on border enforcement.

Fair means fair to U.S. taxpayers.

Practical means restoring the rule of law and solving the problem for good.

Why It Works

- **It's what Americans want.** In our polling, 92% said that “fairness to taxpayers” should be the goal of immigration policy—more than any other alternative.¹ Americans also ranked “don't pay their fair share in taxes” as their second highest complaint about illegal immigration (behind only national security concerns and far above concerns about breaking the law or taking jobs away). Americans are generally compassionate toward illegal immigrants (57% describe them positively), but their compassion ends where their taxpayer interest begins. Immigration reform proponents must be seen as putting middle-class taxpayer interests ahead of those of interest groups.
- **It turns back assumptions that progressives are soft.** Americans believe progressives are compassionate to a fault when it comes to illegal immigration. They assume that progressive proponents of reform will put illegal immigrant interests ahead of taxpayers, and be soft on enforcing the rule of law. On the flip side, conservatives are often thought too harsh, too inflexible, and too willing to demonize illegal immigrants as criminals. To succeed, progressive supporters of reform must place a hard shell of toughness, fairness to taxpayers, and the rule of law around policy ideas like an earned path to citizenship.
- **It addresses the complexity that Americans see in this issue.** When we described the prevailing bill to allow an earned path to citizenship, 83% of Americans voiced support. But in the same poll, 60% agreed with the statement that it would be a good goal to deport all illegal immigrants. There are two lessons from these seemingly contradictory numbers:

- 1) support doesn't necessarily mean popularity, and 2) people are internally torn about what the right thing to do is on this subject. Most Americans see the immigration system as broken and are frustrated at the inability of government to solve the problem. They are much more likely to support a proposal that grants citizenship to illegal immigrants if it is in accord with their own values.
- **It adheres to the widely shared American value that we should not punish children for the mistakes of their parents.** By a margin of 55-39%, Americans support the Obama Administration's executive order offering children brought here through no fault of their own a temporary work permit for two years. And 74% of Americans support federal legislation in the form of the DREAM Act to allow kids who came to the United States as minors a path to citizenship.²

Policy Recommendations

In keeping with the message of tough, fair, and practical, progressive reform advocates should support policies that offer young people a path to citizenship as outlined in the DREAM Act and policies for adult immigrants residing here illegally that require them to:

- Pay a fine (that would fully cover the cost of the legalization process);
- Pay back-taxes and pay taxes going forward;
- Learn English;
- Remain employed so as not to be a burden on taxpayers;
- Pass a criminal background check;
- Go to the "back of the line" behind those with paperwork pending to legally immigrate;
- Obtain a Biometric I.D.; and,

- Be committed to becoming an American with all of the responsibilities that come from being a model citizen.

In our polling, 64% of Americans felt that this kind of legalization is different from “amnesty.”

Critique and Response

Critique

They can sugarcoat it any way they want, but supporters of immigration reform are for amnesty.

Response

America needs tough, fair, and practical immigration reform that restores the rule of law, puts taxpayer interests first, and solves the problem for good. Folks on both sides of the aisle, like former President George W. Bush and current President Barack Obama, like former Vice President Dick Cheney and current Vice President Joe Biden, agree that a plan should include an earned path to citizenship for those who take a series of important and difficult steps. Reform opponents want to stick with the exact same policies that gave us this mess.

END NOTES

- 1.** Third Way’s polling was conducted by Benenson Strategy Group and included 1,200 likely voters from swing states in 2006.
- 2.** Poll, Quinnipiac University, July 1-8, 2012. Accessed October 1, 2012. Available at: <http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm>; See also “New Poll: DREAM Act Will Not Solve Illegal Immigration,” Press Release, Mass Media Distribution LLC, October 1, 2012. Accessed October 3, 2012. Available at: <http://www.mmdnewswire.com/poll-dream-act-illegal-immigration-119320.html>.