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UNLIKELY SUPPORTERS FOR A PATHWAY TO CITIZENSHIP

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IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

It is approximated that there are 11-12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, and of those about half are Mexican. This makes not only Mexican immigrants more visible but the group as a whole as well. For example Arizona's SB 1070, is not solely anti-immigrant but anti-Latino as it has targeted this group, specifically through racial profiling. The failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform has devastated communities and families across the country. Just alone under Obama's administration about 1.2 million undocumented immigrants have been deported. This has not only affected immediate families but also local and regional economies. In Arizona, shortly after SB 1070 passed, many immigrants fled the state in fear of deportation, which created a labor crisis. Many industries, specifically in agriculture, tourism and construction lost billions of dollars. Thus, there is a political, economic, and social urgency to resolve the immigration crisis. My research examines white and Latino relations in Orange County California, through a 300 respondent survey and 40 in-depth interviews. My data maps white racial attitudes towards Latinos, and finds that the respondents overwhelmingly have negative and frequently prejudicial views towards Latinos.

This is key in immigration policy reform, because while not all immigrants are from Latin America, much of the debate is dominated by fears and discourse of a "browning" America. Yet, many of the white respondents in my sample agreed with some form of pathway to citizenship because they argued that upon becoming citizens they would "pull their own weight" by paying taxes. For respondents, paying taxes would mean a bigger tax base to pay for public services they felt Mexicans overuse. This is based on the incorrect assumption that the undocumented currently pay no taxes and thus do not pay for services they utilize. Rafael, one of my respondents, best explains how granting legal citizenship to undocumented immigrants would lead to immigrant paying taxes, and therefore less of a burden. In this sense, white respondents believed undocumented immigrants would be forced to contribute like everyone else.

Yes. If they choose to do that, because then if they become a citizen, then they're basically going to have the opportunities to basically to work here then also to pay taxes here. There are a lot of illegal immigrants here that are working here that aren't paying taxes here. So they're basically not contributing to the benefit of the country, but they're looking for benefits to take out of the country.



UNLIKELY SUPPORTERS FOR A PATHWAY TO CITIZENSHIP

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Policy Brief

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White respondents acknowledged that Latinos take up jobs, particularly in the fields that no one else would do, and that it would make sense if they were awarded amnesty in order to be taxed.

These exact sentiments were mirrored in a statewide survey in Arizona, conducted by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy. Even in Arizona, where Latinos have faced a considerable amount of racial turmoil, they found that 78% of Arizonans said they support legislation for those undocumented immigrants to become citizens. This included 69% of Republicans. (Fischer 2011).

There are added complexities in the contemporary immigration era. In recent times these issues have been compounded with issues of national security (Post-9/11) and an economic recession.

CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

Immigration and immigration policy have long been issues the US has had to grapple with. Historically, similar issues of nativism, the need for cheap labor, and political opportunism have led to either expansive or restrictive immigration policy. There are added complexities in the contemporary immigration era. In recent times these issues have been compounded with issues of national security (Post-9/11) and an economic recession. All of which has created a hostile anti-immigrant, specifically for Latin American immigrants, due to an increase in security at the US-Mexico

border, local law enforcement with more power, resulting in massive deportations.

CRITIQUE OF POLICY OPTIONS

In the past, the major policy options have been a guest worker program, increase in securing the border along with deportations, some form of amnesty, or a combination of these. What past immigration policy debates has failed to address head on is that, while not all undocumented immigrants are Mexicans/Latinos, media reports disproportionately show them to be Mexican, often using images of them crossing the border. This then creates rationales for people to feel unsympathetic toward this group and deny them equal rights. It is critical to address the fears people have of undocumented immigrants who are from Latin America, and who are often labeled criminal and inferior. It is critical to address these issues head on.



Policy Recommendations

Reframing a Pathway to Citizenship:

1. Emphasize how millions of undocumented immigrants becoming citizens will create a larger tax base that funds public services. This counters the argument that immigrants are a strain on the economy, that they do not contribute, and only abuse public services.

This also allays people's misconceived notion that only "their hard earned money," pays for the public services undocumented immigrants use.

2. Remind people that the labor and jobs that immigrants perform sustain food prices and take the jobs many American citizens chose not to take.

3. Citizenship not only comes with rights, but also with responsibilities. Granting citizenship would mean identification and holding them accountable for their actions. They would need to pay a naturalization application fee, in order to gain rights and services.

This presents the issue as a contract; so to speak, where immigrants get rights and access to services in exchange they would adhere to U.S. laws and would be more easily accountable.

4. Expand the notion of interdependence to include non-citizens. By recognizing all the contributions of undocumented immigrants both socially and economically, citizens will understand that it is in their best interest to usher immigrants out of the shadows and provide equal status in order to promote a country with principles of democracy and equality. Thus, incorporating undocumented immigrants is beneficial to the entire society.

5. Educate the public of the negative affects of keeping immigrants undocumented. Frame a pathway to citizenship as a way to alleviate "the costs," and the "burden" undocumented immigrants have on the US system.

References

Fischer, Howard. 2011. Poll: Views on Migrants Not Hard-Line.

