

# Holding Steady: Public Opinion on Immigration

Attention on the child migrant surge has not changed long-term trends in improving public opinion on immigration

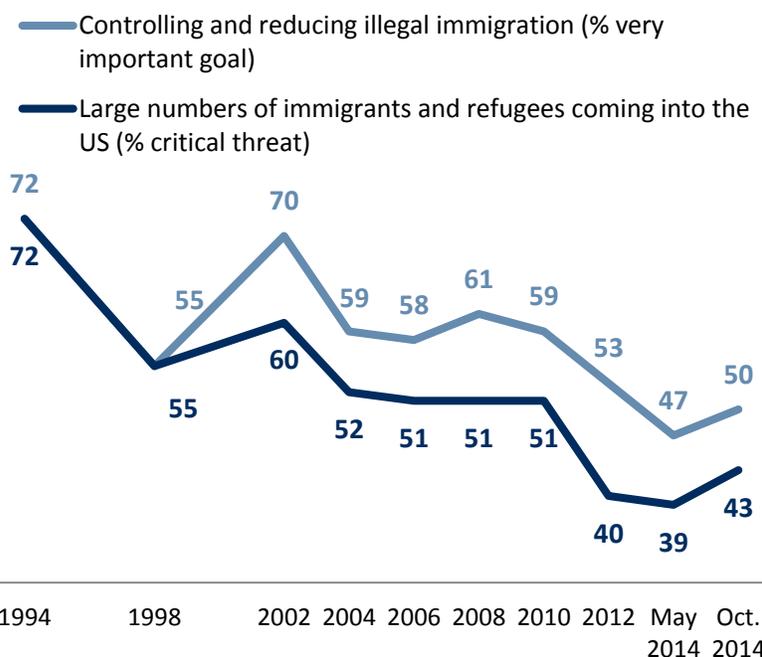
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October 2014

The arrival of a “surge” of Central American minors on the US-Mexico border generated intense media coverage as authorities apprehended more than 68,000 children between October 2013 and September 2014, double the number from the previous year.<sup>1</sup> Public opinion polls conducted in July, at the height of the influx, showed that much of the public was following the issue<sup>2</sup> and opinion was split on whether these unaccompanied minors should be treated as refugees or undocumented immigrants<sup>3</sup> But Chicago Council Surveys conducted both before (May) and after (October) the surge show little effect on a twenty-year-long trend of decreasing public concern over immigration.

- Current public perception of large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States as a “critical threat” is not significantly<sup>4</sup> different from the all-time-low level recorded in May 2014 (see figure 1).
- Similarly, a long-term trend of declining importance placed on “controlling and reducing illegal immigration” held steady, with no significant<sup>5</sup> difference between current levels and those recorded in May 2014.
- The public is slightly more likely now than in 2010 to see economic benefits from immigration (see figure 5).

**Figure 1: Declining public concern over immigration**



## **Polling reflects an ongoing, long-term decline in threat perception and importance placed on controlling and reducing illegal immigration.**

The 2014 Chicago Council Survey, conducted May 6-29, recorded some of the most favorable public opinion on immigration since the Council began polling on immigration in 1994. In May 2014, only 39 percent of Americans labeled large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the US as a critical threat, the lowest recorded percentage since the Chicago Council began asking this question in 1994. Similarly, the survey demonstrated a continued, steady decline in the priority the public placed on controlling and reducing illegal immigration: less than half (47%) labeled it a “very important” goal for the US (see figure 1).

These results marked the continuation of a long trend in public opinion documented by Chicago Council Surveys. Over the past twenty years, the proportion of Americans who see large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the US as a critical threat has fallen dramatically. In 1994, seven in ten Americans (72%) saw this as a critical threat to US vital interests. In 2014, perception of that threat has declined to around four in ten Americans: 39 percent in May 2014 and 43 percent in October 2014, results which are not statistically different.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the importance Americans place on the goal of controlling and reducing illegal immigration has also fallen dramatically over the last two decades. In 1994, 72 percent of the American public said that controlling and reducing illegal immigration was a very important goal for US foreign policy. Since then, the issue has steadily declined in priority. Now, half of Americans say the same: 47 percent in May and 50 percent in October, results which are again not statistically different.<sup>7</sup>

## **Partisan and demographic divisions are driving long-term trends.**

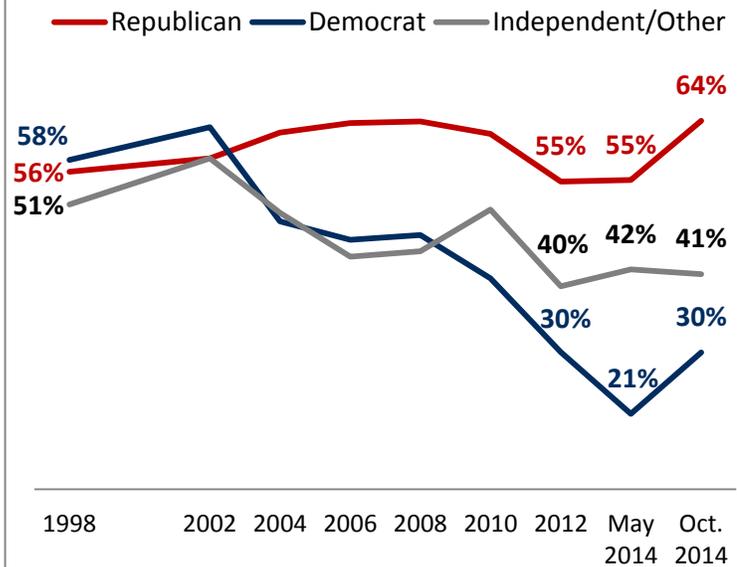
Long-term trends of decreasing public concern about immigration suggest a positive political environment for reform. However, Chicago Council Survey data suggests an increasing partisan divide is driving the trend, the same phenomenon that continues to stall progress on immigration reform. Since the 1990s, Republican concern over illegal immigration has remained at a relatively consistent level, while Democrats have placed markedly less emphasis on this issue in recent years. In 1998, polling revealed little distance between partisan groups on questions of immigration as a “critical threat” and the importance of “controlling and reducing illegal immigration”—statistically insignificant differences of two and four percent, respectively.

However, the gap between the parties has widened substantially on both issues over the past two decades. As of October 2014, the two parties differ on both the threat of large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the U.S. and the goal of controlling and reducing illegal immigration by a respective 34 and 39 percent (see figures 2 and 3).

Of note is a significant increase in both Republicans' and Democrats' views of immigration as a critical threat in October 2014; both groups rose nine percentage points between May and October. Among Republicans, the increase marks a return to levels of concern expressed in 2010, when six in ten (62%) said the same. For Democrats, it marks a return to levels of concern expressed in 2012, when an identical proportion (30%) labeled the issue as a critical threat. Independents, by contrast, showed no such shift, with four in ten in both May (42%) and October (41%) labeling immigration as a critical threat (see figure 2). This stability among Independents accounts for the statistical equality between the May and October results, despite significant shifts among both Republicans and Democrats.

**Figure 2: Growing partisan divides on immigration as a critical threat**

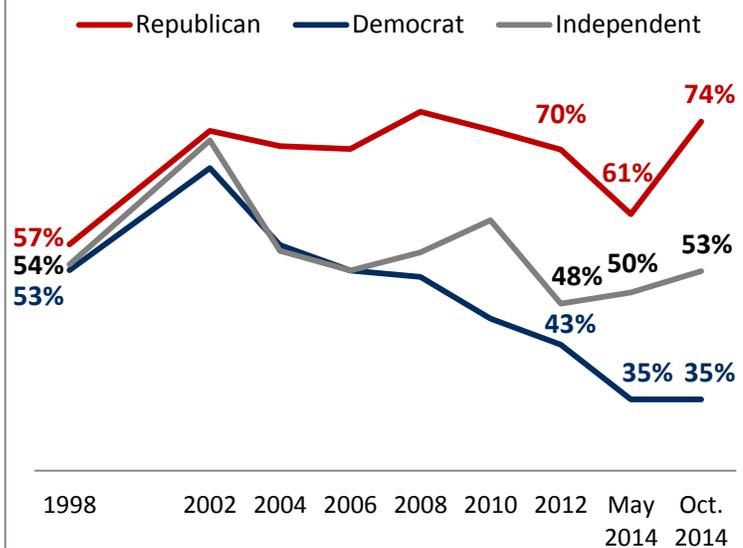
Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the US (% critical threat)



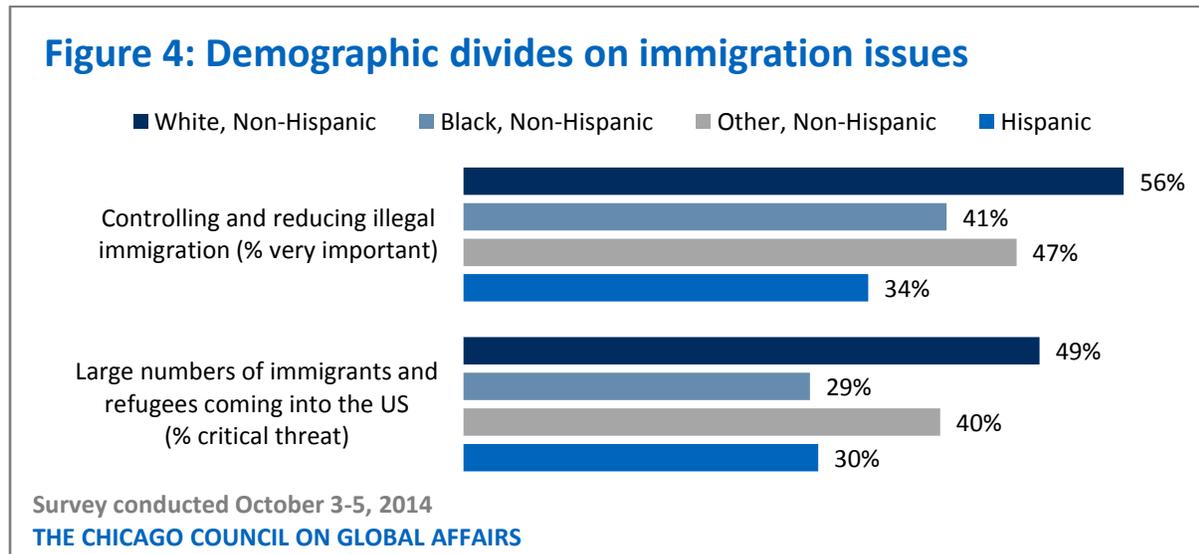
Despite this increased perception of threat among Republicans and Democrats, the two partisan groups diverged in the priority they placed on controlling and reducing illegal immigration. For Democrats, the summer's developments did not change the level of importance assigned to reducing illegal immigration, with 35 percent of Democrats in both May and October saying it was very important. Republicans, by contrast, were far more likely to say the goal of controlling and reducing illegal immigration was very important in October (75%) than in May (61%). For Republicans, this increase marks a return to 2010 levels of emphasis on the issue. Independents, meanwhile, remained stable, showing no significant difference between May and October on this question (see figure 3).

**Figure 3: Growing partisan divides on importance of controlling and reducing illegal immigration**

Controlling and reducing illegal immigration (% very important goal)



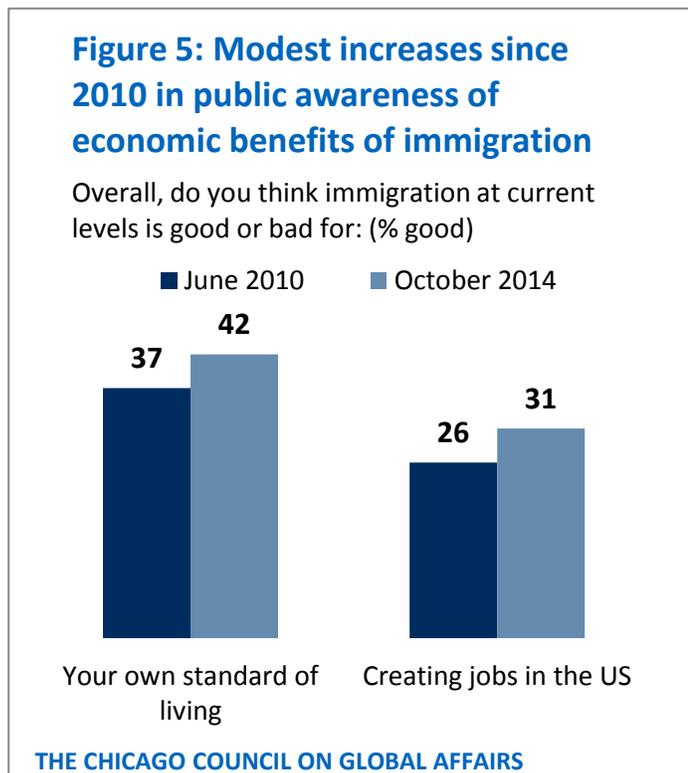
As US Hispanic population growth outpaces other groups, their views on immigration may increasingly drive overall trends. Compared to other groups, Hispanics are generally less threatened by immigration and place a lower priority on controlling and reducing illegal immigration. Just 30 percent saw immigration as a critical threat (vs. 49% of white non-Hispanics) and only 34 percent prioritized controlling and reducing illegal immigration (vs. 56% of white non-Hispanics) (see figure 4).



**The public is slightly more likely now than in 2010 to see economic benefits of immigration.**

For the most part, while they may feel less threatened by it, Americans do not see obvious benefits to immigration. However, Chicago Council Survey polling suggests that more Americans now than in 2010<sup>8</sup> see immigration as good for the economy—though percentages are modest.

Approximately four in ten say that immigration at current levels is good for American companies (45%), their communities (40%), the country (37%), and the U.S. economy (35%). Overall, Americans’ views on whether immigration at current levels is good or bad are not statistically different than results from the 2010 Chicago Council Survey, the last time the question was asked. But those recognizing the benefits of immigration for their own standard of living (42%) and for creating jobs in the US (31%) both jumped a significant five



percentage points over 2010 levels (see figure 5). Though these remain minority positions, views are trending in positive directions. For self-identified Hispanics, positive perceptions of immigration are higher than for the overall sample: More than half said that that immigration at current levels is good for American companies (52%), their communities (51%), the country (53%), the U.S. economy (50%), and their standard of living (52%).

### **Public opinion polls do not provide reason to delay addressing immigration reform.**

President Barack Obama cited the public's attention to the plight of migrant children as his reason to postpone long-awaited executive action on immigration in early September, promising to revisit the issue after midterm elections. The Chicago Council Survey results suggest that current public opinion on immigration is effectively the same as it was five months ago, at a time when the President was ready to take action on the issue.

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### **About the Chicago Council Survey**

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2014 Chicago Council Survey and previous Chicago Council Surveys of the American public on foreign policy. The 2014 Survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide research panel between May 6 to May 29, 2014 among a national sample of 2,108 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error ranges from  $\pm 2.1$  to  $\pm 4.1$  percentage points depending on the specific question. For more results from the 2014 Chicago Council Survey, please see *Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment*, which can be found at [www.thechicagocouncil.org](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org).

The October 2014 survey was also conducted by GfK Custom Research, and was fielded October 3-5, 2014, among a national sample of 1,009 adults. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points, with higher margins of error for partisan and age subgroups.

The 2014 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Korea Foundation, the United States-Japan Foundation, and the personal support of Lester Crown.

### **About the Authors**

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> US Customs and Border Protection. "Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children."

<http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center for People and the Press. "Surge of Central American Children Roils U.S. Immigration Debate." July 16, 2014. <http://www.people-press.org/2014/07/16/surge-of-central-american-children-roils-u-s-immigration-debate/>

<sup>3</sup> Survey by Fox News, conducted by Anderson Robbins Research/Shaw & Co. Research July 20-22, 2014 and based on telephone interviews with a national registered voters sample of 1,057.

<sup>4</sup> The margin of error for the May 2014 survey is  $\pm 2.1$  to  $\pm 4.1$ ; for October 2014 it is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points. See "About the Chicago Council Survey" for details.

<sup>5</sup> See endnote 3.

<sup>6</sup> See endnote 3.

<sup>7</sup> See endnote 3.

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<sup>8</sup> This question was not included in the 2014 Chicago Council Survey fielded in May. It was last included in the 2010 Chicago Council Survey, fielded in June 2010. The question was fielded in the October 2014 poll to analyze any long-term change in public opinion around immigration in general.