

May 6, 2013

In Mexico, President Obama Expresses Optimism for Immigration Reform, But Many Americans Express Bias against Mexican Immigrants

Public Impressions of Illegal Immigration Flows Exaggerated

Immigration reform gained momentum in the United States after the 2012 presidential election, when the Hispanic vote helped to swing the election conclusively toward President Obama, a fact he alluded to recently while in Mexico. This just-completed, nationwide Chicago Council survey reveals support for some variation of immigration reform, similar to other recent polls. But there is still a lot of grass-roots work to be done to break down stereotypes. Half of Americans overstate unauthorized immigration levels into the United States, which seems to intensify bias against Mexican immigrants and opposition to reform.

Key Findings

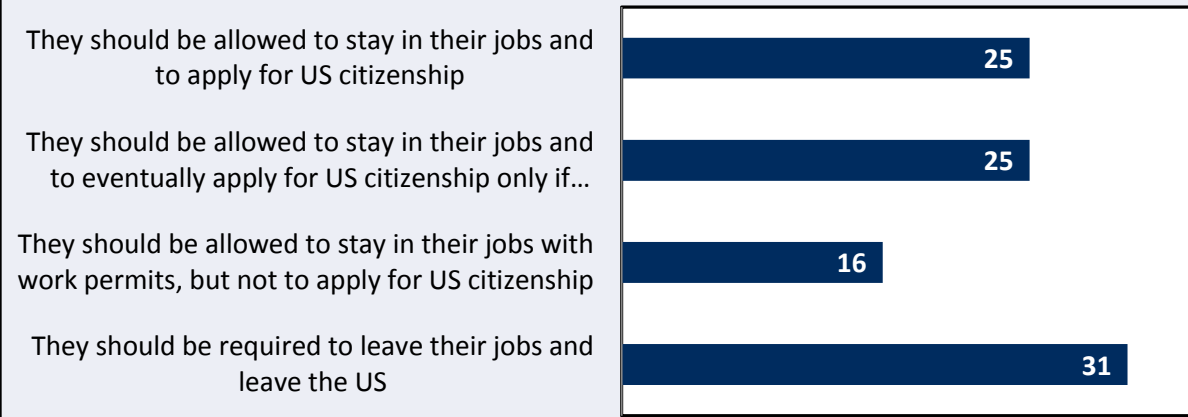
- The contentious immigration debate on Capitol Hill resembles partisan divides among the public. Democrats and Independents are more supportive of immigration reform options involving a path to citizenship and express more favorable impressions of Mexicans living in the United States than Republicans.
- At the same time, there have been several shifts in public opinion since 2004 that signal public readiness for reform. This includes an increased preference for the United States, rather than Mexico, to take the lead in dealing with undocumented Mexican immigrants entering the United States. There has also been a sharp decline between 1994 and 2012 in the number who say that immigration is a critical threat to the United States.
- 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 and Chinese immigrants; nine in ten have a positive view of Mexicans living in Mexico.
- 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.

Majority Does Not Favor Deportation, But Views Differ on Citizenship for Workers

When asked which of four options comes closest to their views about illegal immigrants who are currently working in the United States, only three in ten (31%) believe they should be required to leave their jobs and leave the United States.

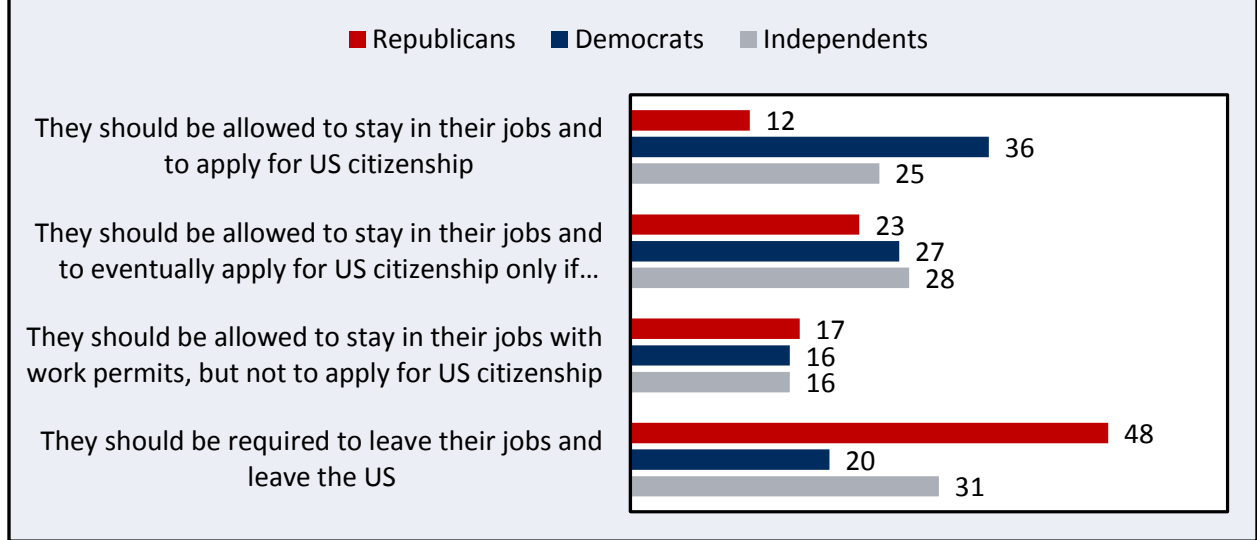
Of the rest, one in four (25%) says they should be allowed to stay in their jobs and apply for US citizenship. An equal proportion (25%) says they should be allowed to stay in their jobs and eventually apply for US citizenship only if they pay a penalty and wait a number of years—similar to the legislation currently under debate, which requires a long probationary period, a fine, and repayment of back taxes. Another 16 percent say illegal immigrants should be allowed to stay in their jobs with work permits, but not be allowed to apply for US citizenship (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are currently working in the United States? (%)



Immigration is one of the few key foreign policy issues on which there are stark partisan differences. Republicans are more likely than Democrats or Independents to say that all illegal immigrants should be required to leave their jobs and the United States (48% Republicans, 20% Democrats, 31% Independents). They are less likely than other partisans to support allowing undocumented workers to stay in their jobs and to apply for US citizenship without conditions (12% Republicans, 36% Democrats, 25% Independents) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are currently working in the United States? (%)

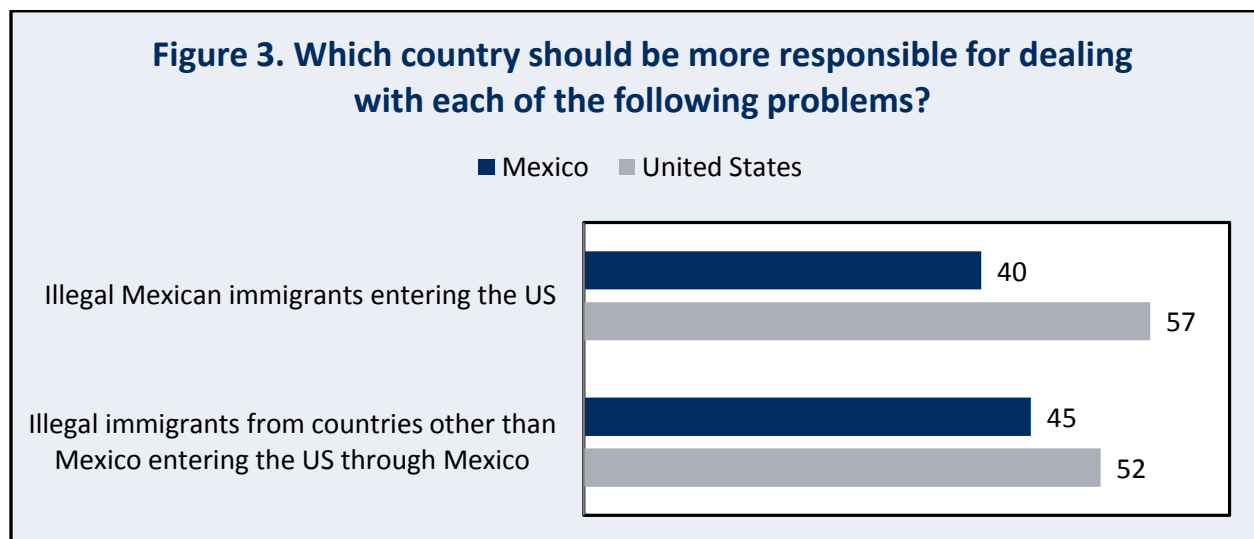


Question wording makes a big difference in whether Americans support or oppose immigration reform proposals. The 2012 Chicago Council Survey found that large majorities in both 2010 (83%)

and 2012 (78%) favored a widely discussed version of immigration reform that would entail securing the border, penalizing employers who hire illegal immigrants, and requiring illegal immigrants to either leave the country or enter a program toward citizenship that involves paying back taxes and learning English.¹ In fact, favorability for this version of immigration reform was the highest among Republicans in 2012 (87%, vs. 75% among Democrats and 76% among Independents). However, as our more recent question illustrates, opinion is more divided when respondents are asked about policies such as allowing unauthorized immigrant workers to stay in the United States with varying degrees of temporary or permanent legal status.

More Americans Now Think the US, Not Mexico, Should Be Responsible for Illegal Flows

There have been some key shifts over time in American attitudes toward immigration reform, including a sharp decline in the percentage of Americans who view illegal immigration as a critical threat to the United States (from Chicago Council 2012 survey; see figure 8, page 8). In addition, more now than in 2004 want to place the onus on the United States to deal with undocumented immigration flows. 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) (Figure 3).

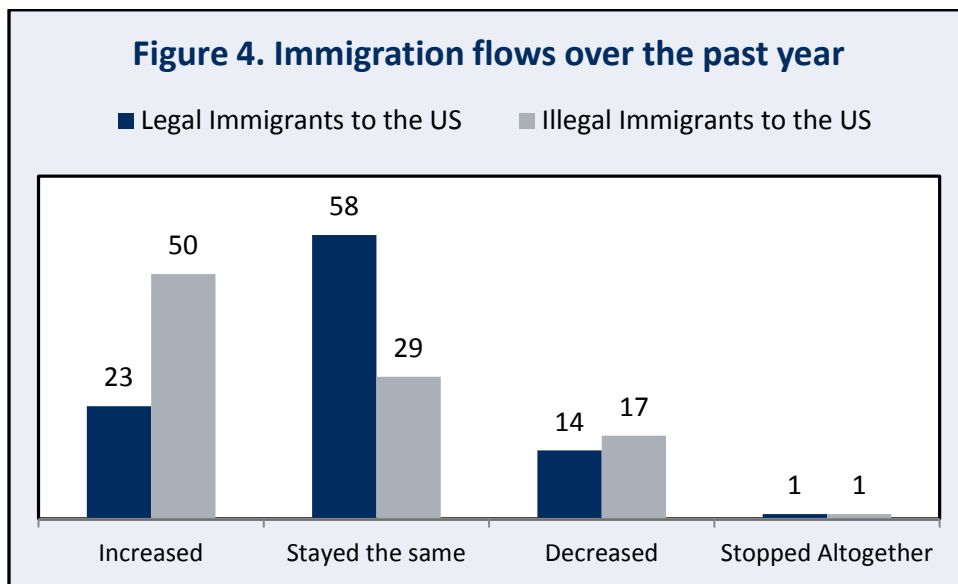


Opinion is less decisive on which country should bear responsibility for illegal immigration from countries other than Mexico entering the United States through Mexico (the question did not specify particular countries). A slight majority believes this burden should lie with the United States, though nearly as many think Mexico should be accountable (52% US, 45% Mexico). When asked the same question in 2004, opinion was more evenly divided (48% Mexico, 46% US).

American Impressions of Undocumented Immigrant Flows Are Exaggerated

¹ The full wording of the question: “One version of immigration reform that people have discussed would do the following: Greater efforts would be made to secure the border, to identify illegal immigrants, and to penalize employers who hire them. Illegal immigrants would be required either to leave the country or to enter a program toward citizenship that would require them to pay back taxes and to learn English. Do you favor or oppose this version of immigration reform?”

When asked their impressions over the past year, a majority of Americans believe that the flow of legal immigration has remained stable (58%). By contrast, half (50%) of the public says that illegal immigration has increased over the past year, including 64 percent of Republicans and half of other partisan groups (Figure 4). These results resemble findings from a 2012 Chicago Council Midwest survey on immigration, in which over half thought illegal immigration had increased, and a plurality thought legal immigration had stayed the same.² These impressions overstate actual inflows of undocumented immigration. Recent reports have highlighted that inflows of unauthorized immigration nationwide has flattened to net-zero in the past few years, meaning that more Mexican immigrants are leaving the United States for Mexico than the other way around.³



Majority Is Favorable toward Mexican Immigrants, But Sense Unwillingness to Integrate

The view that undocumented immigration is rising is linked to more negative attitudes of Mexicans living in the United States today, suggesting that some of those with negative views have undocumented immigrants in mind. Overall, a majority has a favorable view of Mexicans living in the United States (55% favorable), but Americans are more positive about Brazilian (72%) and Chinese (67%) immigrants. By contrast, a large majority has a positive view of Mexican residents in Mexico (81%).⁴

Those who think illegal immigration has increased are less likely to express favorable views of Mexicans living in the United States (43% favorable, 57% unfavorable) than those who think illegal immigration has stayed the same (67% favorable, 33% unfavorable) or decreased (73% favorable, 27% unfavorable).

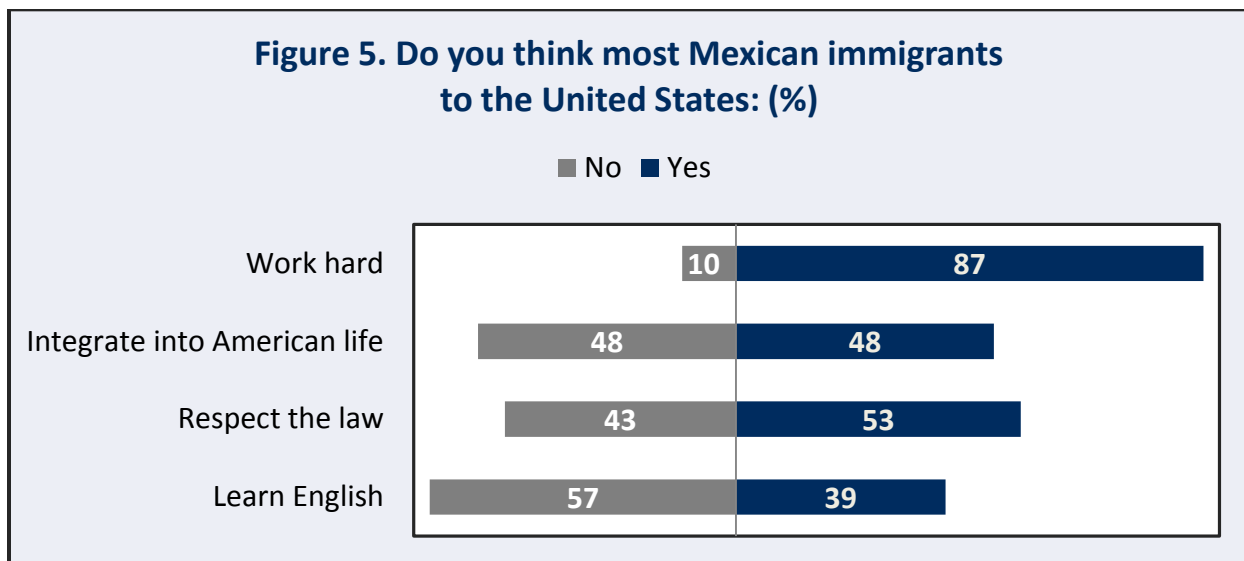
² http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/Task%20Force%20Reports/2012_CCS_Midwest_ImmigrationBrief.pdf

³ See <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/23/net-migration-from-mexico-falls-to-zero-and-perhaps-less/>.

⁴ As might be expected, Hispanics and African Americans are more positive than others on these and other questions, but the sample sizes for these subgroups are small and are merely suggestive of views among these groups. Moreover, the survey sample did not include Spanish-only speaking households.

Perceptions of whether unauthorized immigration is increasing, decreasing, or staying the same also influence other views about Mexicans living in the United States. Those who think illegal immigration has increased over the past year are less likely to say that Mexican immigrants to the United States learn English, respect the law, and integrate into American life. Mexicans in the United States are, however, 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) (Figure 5).



Learning English is a significant issue for many Americans. Results from the 2012 Chicago Council Midwestern immigration survey found that when Midwesterners were presented with a series of criteria and asked which were most important in selecting immigrants to the United States, speaking English was considered most important (55% “very important”), more so than not using social benefits (42% “very important”), having skills needed in our country (41% “very important”), filling jobs for which there are not enough able and willing Americans (24% “very important”), and having a higher education (23% “very important”). At the same time, coming from a cultural background “similar to ours” is the least important (only 10% “very important”). This may suggest that Midwesterners are less threatened by immigrants’ impact on American culture and are more concerned about immigrants integrating into their new home.

Partisan Differences in Public Attitudes toward Mexicans in the United States Are Stark

These results also suggest that Republican opposition to immigration reform may rest upon their constituents’ negative views of Mexican immigrants. Self-described Republicans are more negative 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 (Figure 6). In addition, they are much less positive in rating Mexican immigrants on various attributes such as learning English, respecting the law, and integrating into American life (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Views of people (% favorable)

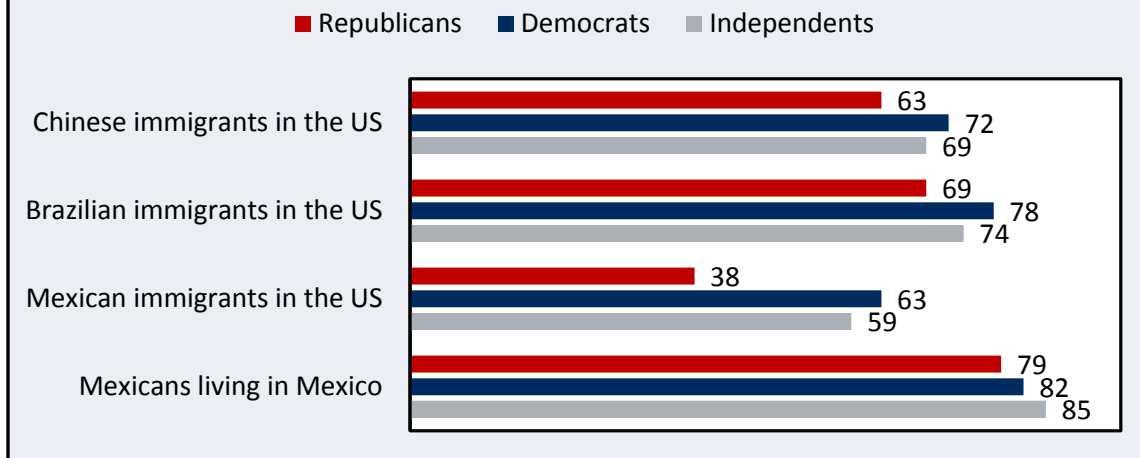
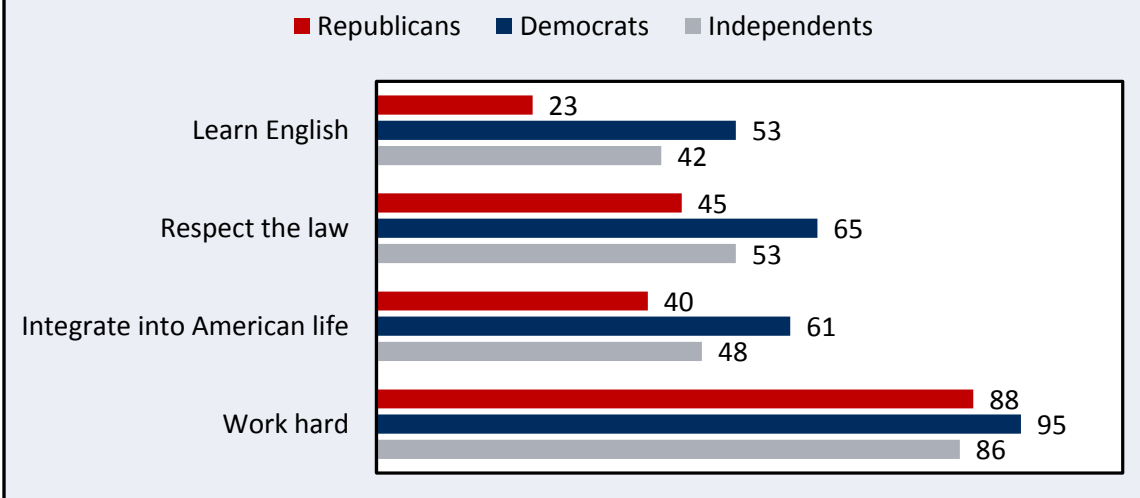


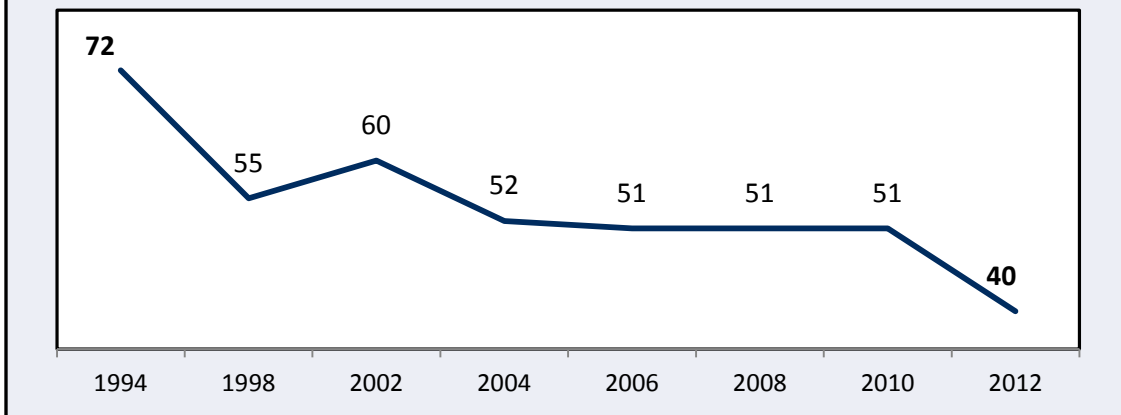
Figure 7. Do you think most Mexican immigrants to the United States... (% yes)



At the Same Time, Perceived Threat from Illegal Immigration at a Record Low

While Americans overestimate the number of undocumented immigrants living in the United States, they are actually less threatened by illegal immigration now than at any point since 1994. The 2012 biennial Chicago Council Survey conducted nationwide showed that for the first time in *Chicago Council Survey* history, only a minority (40%) of Americans considered immigration a critical threat to the United States. Public perceptions of immigration as a critical threat declined a staggering 32 points over the course of eighteen years (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the country (% critical threat)



Conclusion

These survey results show that Americans may be more open to immigration reform now than in the past 18 years in the sense that anxiety over undocumented immigrants in the United States has fallen sharply over that period and more now than nearly 10 years ago believe the United States, rather than Mexico, should take the lead in dealing with illegal immigration.

Despite the finding that half the public thinks undocumented immigration flows have increased in the past year, a majority favor a reform option that would allow undocumented workers to stay in the United States either temporarily (with a work permit) or permanently (with a pathway to citizenship under certain conditions). An analysis of the poll numbers shows that public education efforts to inform Americans about the real trend in net-zero illegal inflows into the United States could help raise public support for immigration reform.

For more analysis of public opinion on international affairs and foreign policy, follow the Running Numbers blog (www.runningnumbers.org) featuring Chicago Council and other surveys.

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Methodology

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 ± 3.1 percentage points. The margin of error is higher when analyses are conducted among subgroups.