



The New Middle of Immigration Reform: The View from Texas

Overview

Over the past year, the Bipartisan Policy Center and BPC Action have engaged in a major effort to find out what Americans think about the U.S. immigration system and what they want to see done to fix it. We conducted focus groups and a nationwide survey to gauge public attitudes on immigration and support for reform options. Partnering with the Mission Foods Texas-Mexico Center at Southern Methodist University, we looked specifically at Texans' views on the issues, conducting an oversample of Texan respondents with additional Texas-specific topics like support for state immigration legislation.

These efforts showed that Texans share many priorities with national voters for reforming the nation's immigration system. While Texans and other Americans overwhelmingly believe immigration helps the United States, they do not believe that there is control over who enters the country legally and illegally. Like national respondents, Texans also want a controlled system that allows immigrants based on how they will integrate into the American culture and contribute. However, Texans broke with national respondents over support for President Donald Trump's proposed border wall, whether immigration levels are too high, and whether states should play a greater role in these reform efforts.

What Do Texans Want in an Immigration System?

Although Texans shared common immigration reform priorities with other Americans, each group had a different view about President Trump's proposed border wall, proper immigration levels, and the role of states in immigration reform efforts.

Texans view themselves as proudly independent but nonetheless had similar priorities for the nation's immigration system as the national respondents in the survey.



The survey found that 62 percent of Texan respondents said being a Texan is extremely or very important to their overall identity.



Texan and national respondents both prioritized national security and enforcement, and both groups expressed similar levels of support for these options.



For instance, 21 percent of national respondents and 19 percent of Texan respondents prioritized national security in a list of several goals.

Nationally, **Republicans** in the survey also prioritized the same goals: **29 percent supported national security.**

Nationally, **Democrats prioritized an opportunity to earn legal status for the undocumented population**, while **swing voters viewed national security, interior enforcement, and legalization as almost equally important.**

While border security is important to all Americans, Texans had more complicated views about building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Americans want the immigration system to **stop illegal border crossings, reduce drug flows across the border, and detain more illegal border crossers.**

However, Texans expressed **greater support for these priorities** than their national counterparts in some cases: 29 percent of Texans prioritized stopping drug flows across the border compared with 25 percent of national respondents.

Texans' views on a border wall were mixed.



51 percent of Texan respondents expressed support for the border wall, while 48 percent of all respondents in the national survey held similar views.



Nationally, the highest support for the wall came from **GOP respondents**: 84 percent completely or somewhat approved of Trump's proposed border wall.



49 percent of Texan respondents disapproved of the federal government forcing land owners to sell their property to build the wall.

Texan respondents said that **expanding legal visas, building a border wall, and prosecuting individuals who violate immigration laws** can best help to secure the border.



However, Texans were more likely to support a combination of surveillance technology and physical barriers to improve border security.

Nationally, **Republicans expressed higher support for a border wall** but also supported other border investments. **Swing voters prioritized an entry-exit tracking system**, while **Democrats supported increasing legal visas.**

Nearly equal numbers of Texan and national respondents agreed that people living without authorization in the United States **should have a path to legal status**, but it shouldn't be "for free."



47 percent of Texan respondents and 44 percent of national respondents supported a path to citizenship, if individuals **pass a background check, pay "their fair share of taxes," and pay a monetary penalty.** Less than a third of respondents in both groups wanted to see them deported.

20 percent of Texan respondents and 23 percent of national respondents supported a path to permanent legal status but not citizenship.

Texans said their future immigration system should be **strongly enforced, fair, and consistent**.

Like their national counterparts, Texan respondents selected these three words as their top descriptors for a future system. “**Consistent**” was the descriptor with the most consensus among Texans, as well as Republicans, Democrats, and swing voters in the national survey. In concrete terms, this means:



These voters want **strong enforcement** that includes border and interior enforcement to show the public that the government is actively managing immigration and enforcing the law.

They also want a **fair and consistent system that everyone can understand** and works the same for all immigrants and Americans.



71 percent of Texans and 73 percent of national respondents had **little familiarity with the immigration system** but wanted a simpler one, showing real demand for a fairer and more straightforward approach to managing immigration.

Respondents said an **immigrant's values matter more than their skills or family relationships** when evaluating which individuals can move to the United States.



Texan and national respondents identified “**law abiding,**” “**actively integrating into American society and learning English,**” “**hard working,**” and “**self-reliant**” as descriptors for individuals who should immigrate to the United States.

However, Texans placed greater emphasis on “**actively integrating into American society and learning English**” as a key trait, with 28 percent of Texan respondents prioritizing this quality, compared with 25 percent of national respondents.



While learning English is important to Texan and national respondents, both groups said immigrants simply need to know conversational English to immigrate to the United States.

41 percent of Texans found it very or extremely important that **immigrants be able to hold a basic conversation in English**, but only 14 percent said immigrants should be fluent.



However, more Texan respondents wanted strict immigration enforcement to include **rigorous English-learning criteria**: 26 percent of Texans supported this option, compared with 22 percent of national respondents.

Texans said that the **number of Mexican immigrants with a higher-education degree in Texas has increased or stayed the same**.



35 percent of Texan respondents said that this number increased, while 48 percent said it stayed the same.

Texans said that **immigration levels to the United States are too high**, but they would support admitting screened immigrants if the United States had a better vetting system.



50 percent of Texan respondents said that **immigration levels are too high**, compared with 42 percent of national respondents.



Nevertheless, 31 percent of Texan and national respondents said that the **United States should admit every vetted immigrant who applies for entry and meets requirements for citizenship**.

While both groups wanted the federal government to lead immigration reform efforts, Texans also saw a greater role for state and local governments in these efforts.



67 percent of Texan survey respondents and 74 percent of national respondents said the **federal government should spearhead any reform efforts.**

However, 33 percent of Texans supported state and local solutions to immigration issues, in contrast with 26 percent of national respondents.

What Does This Say About Texas's Influence in the National Immigration Debate?

While Texans are proud of their heritage, their preferences for a future immigration system were not that different from the rest of America. However, they held more nuanced views about effective border security, as well as English-speaking criteria. They supported enforcement of immigration laws and state actions, but they still wanted to see the federal government take the lead on reform efforts.

With the largest delegations in Congress, the border states of Texas and California wield significant influence on immigration issues in Washington. As a result, understanding how Texans want to see the immigration debate resolved can help define the parameters of any future immigration reform. **Based on this survey, Texans and Americans must recognize there is a definable middle-ground on immigration, that includes:**



Robust enforcement of border and immigration laws, but also compassion and an opportunity to earn legal status for those who are currently undocumented.



An immigration system that is simpler, easy to understand, and fair to immigrants and Americans alike.



A system that is based on the immigrant's traits that will allow them to integrate and succeed in American society, and a screening and vetting process that ensures immigrants are law-abiding individuals.



Border security that doesn't just rely on a wall but also respects the rights of landowners along border.



A reform process led by the federal government but with input from the states.

National lawmakers who can support this sort of legislation, one that would reset the current immigration system, **would find broad support not only in Texas but across the country.**

Texans also had strong support for **state Senate Bill 4**, which outlaws "sanctuary cities" in the state.



59 percent of Texan respondents supported this bill and 55 percent said it was important to pass the law.

Methodology

The findings in this document stem from four initiatives.

1. In April 2018, BPC Action conducted a nationwide survey with 1,004 voters: 39 percent Democrat, 37 percent Republican, and 24 percent independent.
2. Between March and April 2018, BPC conducted a Texas oversample of 624 voters: 43 percent Republican, 33 percent Democrat, and 24 percent independent. In addition to the questions that appeared in the national survey, the Texas survey had state-specific prompts.
3. BPC Action also organized two focus groups—in Pittsburgh and Detroit—with 28 Democrats, 27 Republicans, and five swing voters.
4. Finally, BPC hosted three roundtable meetings with state legislators and county elected and appointed officials from various regions across the country.



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