

Cross Currents on Illegal Immigration

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Note: Earlier analysis was unweighted. After feedback and analysis, we weighted the data to age as determined by the US Census to better represent the sampled population.

Despite finding that more San Diego County residents believe illegal immigrants help the local economy rather than hurt it, the latest installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows dissatisfaction with illegal immigration running high. Over 80% feel it is a serious problem and 47% label it “very serious.” Solutions? On Operation Gatekeeper’s ten year anniversary, the poll shows that residents do not think that the border patrol operation has had much success. Sixty percent believe the program has been ineffective. On the other hand, 57% of San Diegans support recent raids and sweeps by the Border Patrol to apprehend undocumented immigrants. The survey also finds that President Bush’s proposed temporary worker program generates a startling lack of consensus.

A Very Serious Problem

With almost half of all San Diegans perceiving a very serious problem, it is obvious that illegal immigration is striking a very raw nerve.

Ideology plays a huge role in public opinion about illegal immigration. Seventy-two percent of self-identified very conservative residents and 56% of somewhat conservative people feel this is a very serious problem. Conversely, only 28% of very liberal residents and 30% of moderate liberals deem illegal immigration to be very serious. In conservative San Diego County (where nearly half label themselves as “conservative”) this heightens the perception that the area is rife with problems surrounding illegal immigration. This also suggests that conservative politicians can rally their base of support by focusing on illegal immigration.

A somewhat surprising finding is that those County residents who do not reside in the City of San Diego are much more likely to perceive illegal immigration as a very serious problem. Fifty-seven percent of non-City of San Diego residents believe this problem to be very serious as compared to 35% of City residents. It should be noted that 89% of City residents still regard illegal immigration to be a problem--they are just much less likely to regard it as a very serious one. This interesting difference relates in part to the liberal tendencies found in the City, but may also be attributable to urban residents having less contact with people they know to be here illegally. Further, the urban environment tends to be ethnically diverse. Urban residents may therefore be less likely to notice – or care about – the illegal immigrants in their midst.

Hispanic residents – especially those who principally speak Spanish – are much less likely than non-Hispanics to consider illegal immigration a very serious problem. On the other hand, those who label themselves “white” and those of mixed race, especially, tend to view the situation more seriously.

Spanish-speakers, in particular, may be reacting to their experience in their own communities or may be making a statement about overall immigration issues, but, whatever the case, they are less concerned than English-speaking Hispanics and much less concerned than the general population. So language, in addition to ethnicity, is key, suggesting that the ability to speak English is a marker for assimilation into the dominant American culture.

The Contribution of Illegal Immigrants to the San Diego Economy

While more San Diegans think that illegal immigrants help the local economy than hurt it, the results here are not compelling. In fact, more residents believe undocumented immigrants hurt the economy *a lot* (24%) than help the economy *a lot* (20%).

Again, ideology plays a very significant role. More than three-quarters of very liberal San Diegans believe that unlawful immigrants help the local economy while a quarter of very conservative residents feel undocumented immigrants benefit the economy. On the flip side, over 60% of very conservative folks feel illegal immigrants hurt the local economy versus 24% for very liberal San Diegans. Apparently liberals tend to focus on the narrow question of low consumer prices while conservatives figure additional taxes and social costs into their economic calculation.

The results related to language are again interesting. English-speaking Hispanics are more likely than non-Hispanics to believe that illegal immigrants help the economy. This suggests that Hispanic residents are doing more day-to-day business with this immigrant population and therefore see the immediate economic benefits. For their part, Spanish-speaking Hispanics are even more likely to view illegal immigrants as an asset, as nearly all say they help the economy. This again shows that language, possibly more than heritage, is very important to understanding views on illegal immigration and the contributions of undocumented workers in particular.

President Bush's Proposed Temporary Worker Program

Support for the President's proposed program is fairly evenly split with a little over one-third supporting it, a little less than one-third opposing it, and about one-third undecided. The results are notable for their lack of firmness on either side. Clearly, this issue has not generated intense media coverage or scrutiny and is "flying below the radar" during this presidential campaign.

The most fascinating finding here is what is *not* happening. Unlike the debate over whether illegal immigration is a problem or whether those immigrants contribute economically, ideology is AWOL when it comes to Bush's plan. Conservatives and liberals are evidently *both* torn over a conservative President's support for what is perceived as a liberal cause. More work will have to be done by proponents of the proposal before it will gain significant traction with the public.

The survey does show however that, despite their liberal leanings, Democrats tend to oppose Bush's temporary worker program. So, in this hyper-political season, partisan politics trumps ideology on this issue. It would be interesting to see how responses would vary along partisan lines if a Democratic candidate were to propose such a plan.

Spanish-speaking Hispanics are the only residents who, as a group, strongly support Bush's proposed policy. Some commentators have suggested that the object of Bush's foray into immigration politics is to bring more Latino voters into the Republican fold. If so, since Spanish speakers make up a tiny fraction of the electorate, this is not the way to "reach out" to Latinos.

Proximity to the border also makes some difference in support for the temporary worker program. The survey finds folks south of Interstate 8 showing more support than opposition for the program. The inference is that South County residents see themselves as more likely to avail themselves of the workforce served by the program.

Border Patrol Raids

Not surprisingly, those who feel that the illegal immigration problem is severe are the most supportive of border patrol raids and sweeps. Nearly 80% of those who feel the problem is very serious support the raids (including 66% who favor them strongly.) Conversely, three-quarters of those who see no problem with illegal immigration oppose border patrol sweeps. Clearly, the more acute the problem is perceived to be, the more support there is for aggressive law enforcement action. As long as illegal immigration is viewed as a serious problem, support for raids should remain high.

Ideology and party also play big roles. Almost 80% of very conservative residents favor the raids (63% strongly) as compared to only 38% of very liberal residents. On the other hand, 58% of very liberal folks oppose sweeps versus only 13% of those on the far right of the ideological spectrum. Moderate conservatives also back Border Patrol

raids as do those in the middle of the spectrum. It is the moderate liberals who are somewhat split on the issue with half opposed but 40% favoring the raids.

More Republicans support the Border Patrol's actions than do Democrats, though even half of the Democrats support the Border Patrol response. The relationship to party and ideology show that strong political currents underlie this issue. Republican politicians could rightly view this as an issue where Democrat elected officials who oppose raids and sweeps tend to be out of step with their constituents.

Support for the raids dips when English-speaking Hispanics are considered; while 49% support the actions, 41% oppose them. But it is a radically different story for Spanish-speakers who, the data strongly suggests, view the raids and sweeps as targeting their ethnic group and thus are suspicious. Over 60% *strongly oppose* the Border Patrol's techniques.

Operation Gatekeeper Effectiveness

San Diegans may support Border Patrol tactics such as raids and sweeps but they do not feel Operation Gatekeeper has been effective. Sixty percent rate the border operation as ineffective (34% very ineffective) as compared to just 27% who feel it has been effective (only 8% very effective).

Both those who feel illegal immigration is a very serious problem and those who feel it is not a problem at all say Gatekeeper is not accomplishing its mission. It is likely that the former are unhappy with it because it, in their minds, has allowed the problem to accelerate, while those who minimize the problem see the program as a waste of time and resources. It is difficult to maintain public support for Operation Gatekeeper when it comes under attack from both sides.

Liberals judge Operation Gatekeeper more harshly than do conservatives. While just over half of very conservative San Diegans think the operation has been ineffective, 63% of very liberal residents and 74% of somewhat liberal residents feel it has not worked. It seems that liberals are unwilling to give the federal government the benefit of the doubt when it comes to Gatekeeper.

Residents over the age of 34 are also more likely to say that Gatekeeper is ineffective, as are folks in households who make over \$80,000. That older residents and upper income San Diegans are more likely to seriously question Operation Gatekeeper's effectiveness may be a problem for the Border Patrol and federal elected officials. These groups are not afraid to make their displeasure known at the ballot box or in the public square.

Conclusions

San Diego County residents are generally unhappy with the current state of affairs regarding illegal immigration, but the results point to no easy solutions. A vast majority feel it is a problem that needs addressing but, on Operation Gatekeeper's tenth birthday, residents generally agree that the current remedy is not curing the illness. They like the specific tactics of raids and sweeps, and almost certainly feel more are warranted, but at the end of the day, residents do not feel that enough progress is being made to roll back the perceived tide of undocumented aliens entering the County. Though many residents feel there is an economic benefit, social, cultural and legal costs seem to outweigh the material contributions of illegal immigrants.

What is the answer? Not President Bush's temporary worker program at this point. It gets little traction anywhere on the political spectrum. Since Operation Gatekeeper gets similarly hammered by both those who think illegal immigration is a big problem and those who think it is not, it has lost support. Because the raids and sweeps are viewed as a positive step, it is clear that the emphasis is on stronger law enforcement tactics.

However, it remains to be seen whether the political will exists to promote a policy of raids, which, in fact, were quickly abandoned when they became public knowledge.