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Americans Support Immigration

Americans oppose restricting immigration, favor new immigrant workers

BY DAVID BIER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Proponents of restricting immigration often assert that Americans oppose immigration and want to see immigration reduced. But the reality is that a growing majority of Americans oppose reductions. Since the 1990s, Americans have favored more open immigration laws, especially for immigrants here for work. Here are the facts:

- Four different major surveys covering the period from 1965 to 2014 show that American support for restricting immigration has plummeted since the mid-1990s. Over the last 5 years, Americans have opposed restriction 58 to 39 percent.
- A comprehensive analysis of 46 national public opinion polls on lawful immigrant workers reveals growing support for increasing the number of work visas. In 1986, the public opposed new foreign workers, 58 percent to 36 percent. From 2001 to 2014, it supported them on average, 56 percent to 34 percent. Nor is there a partisan divide on immigrant workers. During this time, 60 percent of Republicans and 64 percent of Democrats favored more migrant workers.
- According to *New York Times*-CBS News polling, from 1994 to 2014, the percentage of the public who believed America should “welcome all immigrants” increased from 19 percent to 46 percent, while those saying America should “open its doors” to “no immigrants” fell from 34 percent to 19 percent.

Congress should ignore calls for further reductions in immigration. Immigration to America is already far from its historic high, and Americans oppose turning away more immigrants. Congress should reform the system to make legal immigration easier.

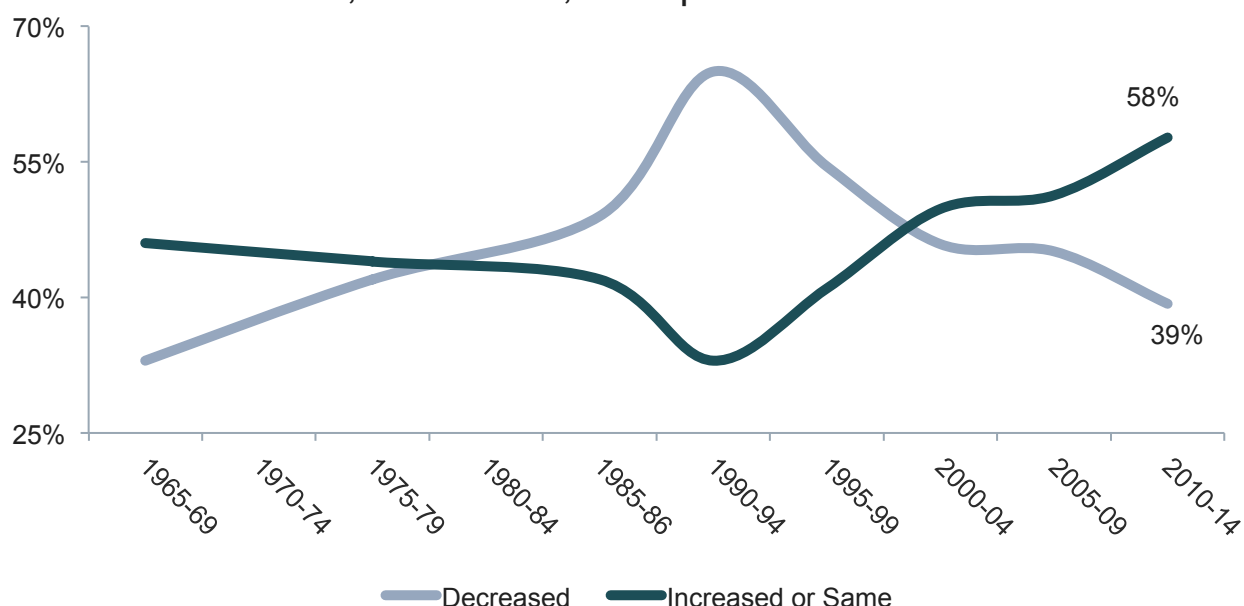
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AMERICANS' GROWING SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRATION

Opponents of immigration often claim that the public favors restricting legal immigration. In his “Immigration Handbook for the New Republican Majority,” Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) states, “We need make no apology in rejecting an extreme policy of sustained mass immigration, which the public repudiates.”¹ But he is wrong. The American public has never been more in favor of immigration than it is today.

Periodically since 1965, Gallup has polled the American public on their views on immigration. It is the longest running survey of the public’s views on immigration in the United States, and it is always asked in exactly the same manner: “Should immigration be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased?”

Chart 1: Gallup Polling: Should Immigration Be Increased, Decreased, or Kept the Same Level?



If Senator Sessions were correct that Americans reject the current policies and oppose immigration, opposition to immigration should have increased as immigration has increased since the 1960s. That was true from 1965 to 1995, but in the last 20 years, Americans have become increasingly opposed to restricting immigration. Chart 1 combines those respondents who support the current level with those who want it increased and compares it to those who want immigration decreased. For the last five years, a large majority has opposed restricting immigration, 58 to 39 percent.²

Gallup numbers correspond closely to responses from a question in the General Social Survey (GSS). Every four years from 1992 to 2004 and every other year until 2014, GSS has asked a sample of Americans, “Do you think the number of immigrants to America nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a little, remain the same as it is, reduced a lot, or reduced a little?” Respondents favoring reductions fell from 62 percent to 41

percent over the period, while respondents favoring the current or freer immigration laws rose from 33 percent to 53 percent.³

Chart 2: GSS: Should immigration be increased, decreased, or kept the same?

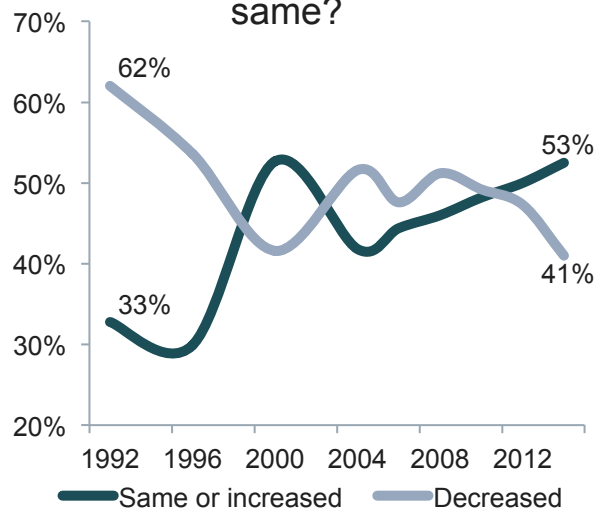
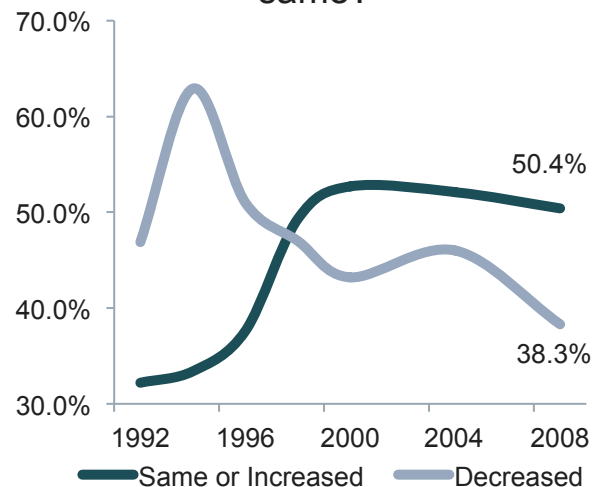


Chart 3: NES: Should immigration be increased, decreased, or kept the same?



Gallup and GSS numbers are further supported by the American National Elections Studies (NES) from 1992 to 2008, which asked a virtually identical question to the GSS. The NES numbers also reveal that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, American public opinion swung toward opposing immigration restrictions. From 1996 to 2000, respondents favoring the current or a higher level of immigration increased from 33 percent to 53 percent, while those favoring restriction fell from 63 percent to 43 percent.⁴

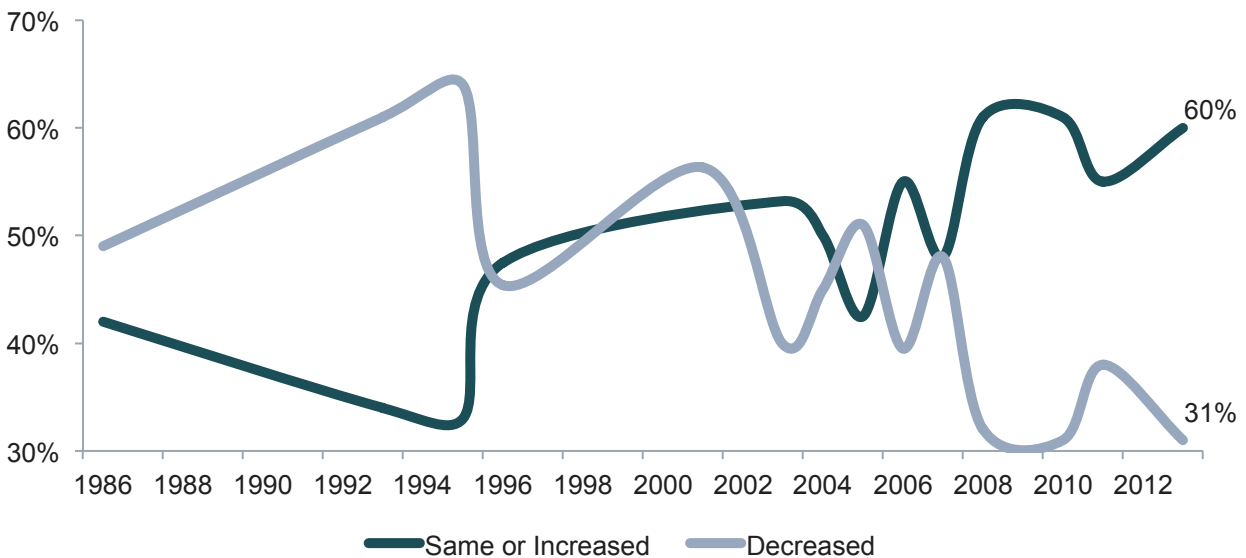
The increase in support for immigration is much more dramatic than this information alone would indicate. Because the level of immigration has also increased since 1965, those who support the “present level” in surveys are actually supporting a much higher level in 2014 than when the question was first asked in 1965. For a more accurate picture of the support for immigration, it is necessary to control for the actual level of immigration that respondents support. Controlling for the immigration rate, support for immigration has grown by over 200 percent since 1965.⁵

AMERICANS FAVOR LEGAL IMMIGRATION

One other problem with using the Gallup poll as the only measure of support for immigration is that it fails to control for those who wish to restrict only illegal immigration, not legal immigration. On this account, Americans have also turned against restriction. The *New York Times* and CBS News have performed the longest running poll of the American public's views on legal immigration, and it provides further evidence that Americans do not want fewer immigrants. Since 1995, the percentage of Americans

who favored a reduction in legal immigrants dropped by more than half from 1995 to 2013. Opposition fell from 64 percent to 31 percent, while support rose from 33 percent to 60 percent.⁶

Chart 4: NYT Poll: Should legal immigration be increased, decreased, or kept the same?



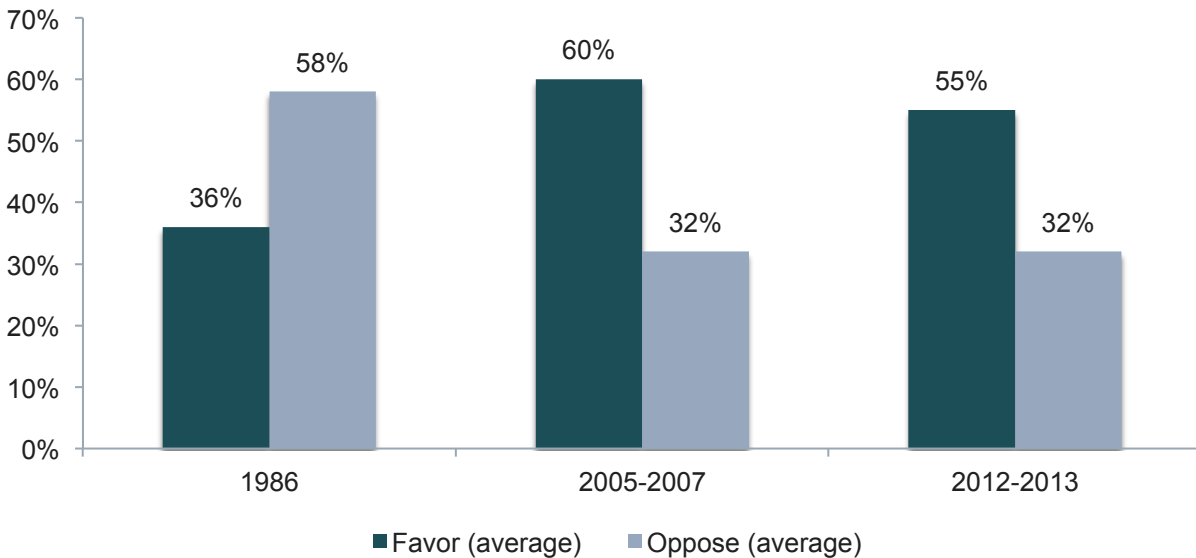
Separating out supporters of “increased” immigration from those who support the “present level,” the *Times*-CBS polls show that the percentage of Americans who favor more legal immigration has also grown since the 1990s, from an average of only 6.5 percent from 1986 to 2001 to 25 percent in 2013. This fourfold increase is significant, but again, this is not the full picture. The question fails to take into account those who may want to increase specific categories of immigration higher, but do not favor a generic increase. Several polls have shown that a majority of Americans favor an immigration system based more on skills.⁷ Many people could favor immigration for work, for example, but oppose immigration of extended family members, adult siblings, etc.

When asked about employer-based immigration, specifically temporary-worker programs, Americans have also become much more favorable toward a more open system. Analysis of 39 national public opinion polls on immigrant workers during the three comprehensive immigration reform debates in the last 30 years in 1986, 2005 through 2007, and 2012 through 2013—during which time almost all polls on the topic were taken—reveals that Americans have turned from strongly opposed to strongly in favor of allowing immigrants not currently in the United States to enter for employment.

Overall, support for admitting more immigrant workers has grown from 36 percent to 55 percent, and opposition has declined from 58 percent to 32 percent.⁸ A larger sample of 45 national polls from 2001 to 2014 shows average support at 56 percent with

opposition averaging 34 percent.⁹ In only six polls of the 45 polls over this period did proponents of restriction outnumber proponents of expansion.

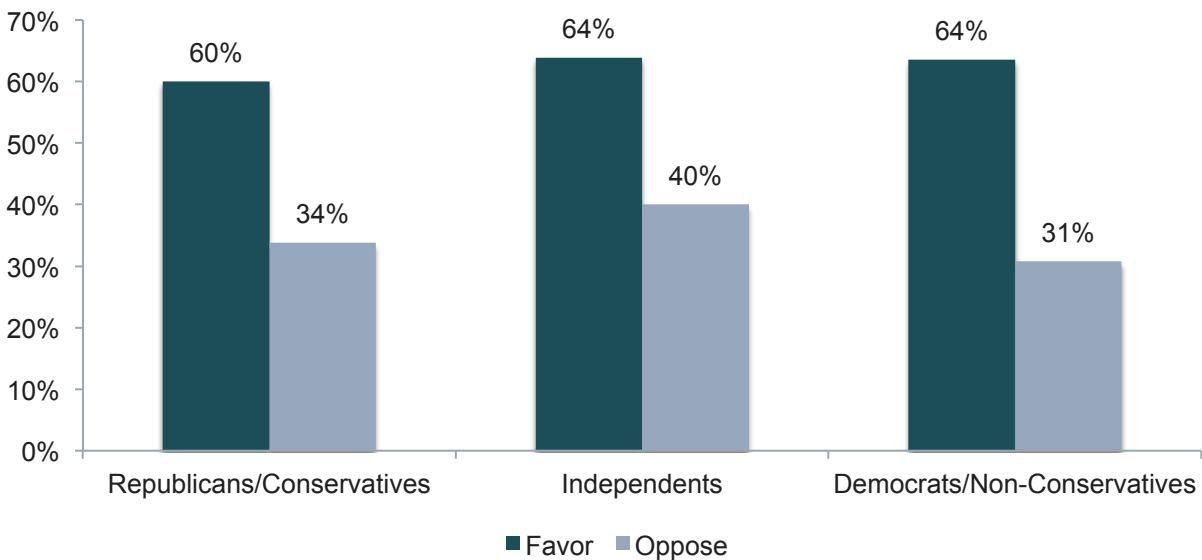
Chart 5: Polls: Do you favor or oppose admitting more immigrant workers?



For example, a *New York Times*-CBS News poll from May 2007, as the Senate voted to include a sunset on the guest worker provisions in the immigration bill under consideration at the time, found fully two-thirds of Americans favored such a program.¹⁰ In a 2011 Fox News poll, 63 percent of Americans favored increasing the number of legal immigrants so long as they "work, pay taxes, and obey the law."¹¹ In 2013, a Gallup poll found 72 percent of Americans supported "short-term visas" for skilled workers.¹²

Surprisingly, partisanship makes little difference in overall support for immigrant workers. In the 16 polls that have a partisan breakdown from 2001 to 2014, Americans of all political persuasions support new immigrant workers or new immigrants worker programs by at least 24 percentage points.¹³ Democrats are only slightly more supportive of immigrant workers than Republicans, but Republicans still supported foreign workers, 60 percent to 34 percent throughout the period. In 2013, for example, a 2013 ABC News-*Washington Post* poll found that more than 70 percent of both Democrats and Republicans favored "a guest worker program for low-skilled workers" and, separately, "more visas for highly skilled workers."¹⁴

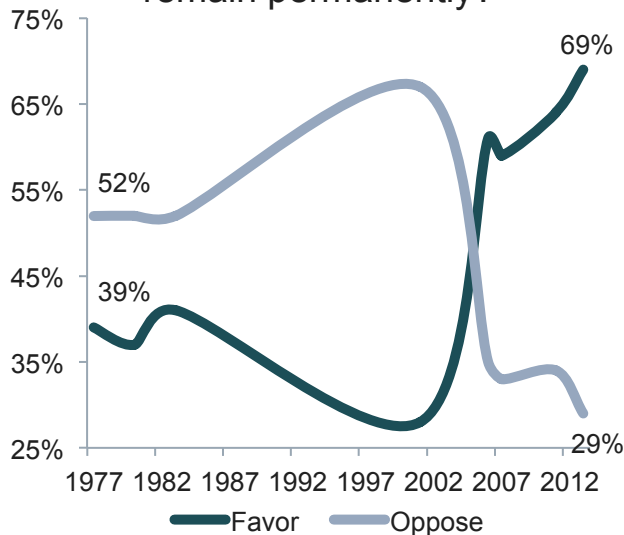
Chart 6: Partisan Support for More Immigrant Workers in Polls from 2001-2014



A 2009 academic survey of the period from 2001 to 2008 made similar conclusions. It reviewed 74 public opinion polls that asked respondents if they were for or against a “guest worker program” (often including currently unauthorized workers) and found that support for the idea averaged 54 percent, while opposition averaged 38 percent.¹⁵ The author of the survey concluded, “In sum, it appears that Americans are more supportive of a guest worker program when it is framed as applying to immigrants that are not already in the United States, and they are less supportive when it is framed as applying

to illegal immigrants who are already here.” In other words, they are more supportive of guest worker programs when they increase overall legal migration to the United States.

Chart 7: Gallup: Should illegal aliens be allowed to remain permanently?

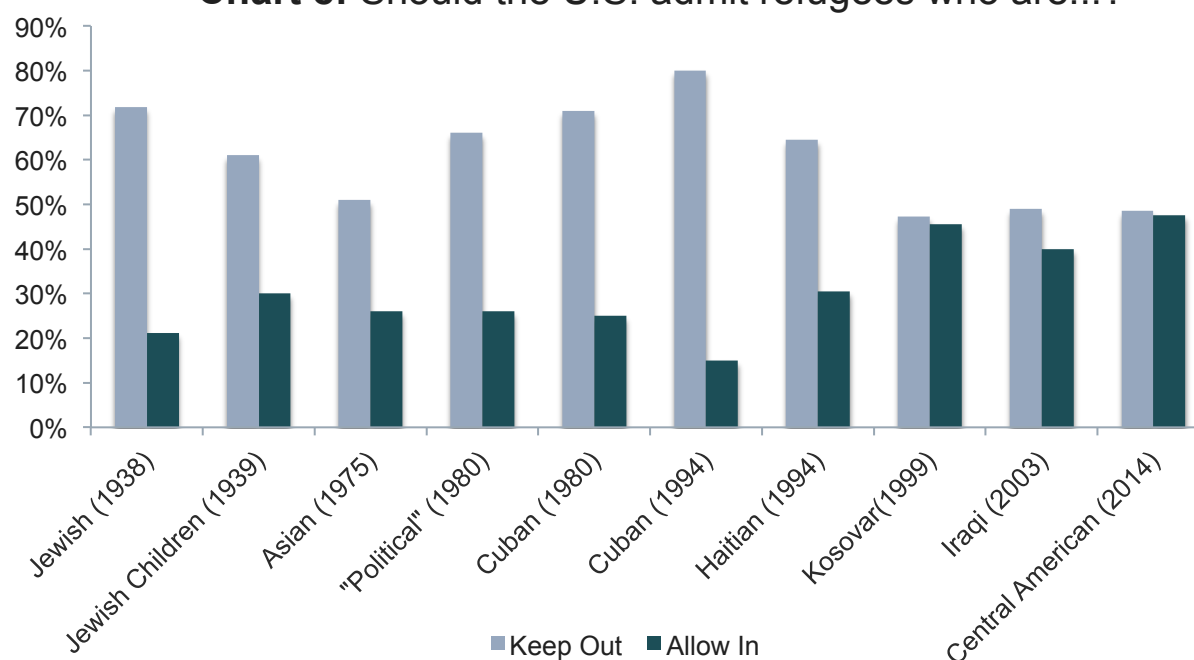


With regard to immigrants in the United States illegally, Americans have also become increasingly more favorable toward allowing them to stay in the United States. In the 1970s through the early 2000s, a majority of Americans clearly favored the removal of unauthorized immigrants. But in the mid-2000s, during the first immigration reform debate in Congress since 1986, a majority of Americans turned in favor of legalization. Chart 7 depicts the evolution

of the public's views using Gallup polls from 1977 to 2013. The policy averaged support of just 36 percent from 1977 to 2001 compared to 63 percent from 2006 to 2013, topping out at 69 percent in 2013.¹⁶

Even in areas in which the pro-immigration position is not a majority, the trend is clearly in this direction. Looking at eight refugee crises starting with the Holocaust, for example, average support in public opinion polls for refugee admissions has never topped 50 percent. But like other measures of support for immigration, support for refugees rose dramatically in the late 1990s. In 2014, during the influx of Central Americans to the border, the public was almost evenly divided on the question.¹⁷ This result follows polls from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs that show that from 1994 to 2014 the percentage of Americans who consider the “large number of refugees and immigrants” a “critical threat” to the nation has fallen from 73 percent to 41 percent.¹⁸

Chart 8: Should the U.S. admit refugees who are...?



AMERICANS ARE NOT ANTI-IMMIGRANT

Overall, taking into account legal and illegal immigration, are Americans fed up, as Senator Sessions implies, with immigrants? In 1993, and again since 2001, Gallup has asked, “On the whole, do you think immigration is a good thing or a bad thing for this country today?”¹⁹ By 2001 Americans had turned dramatically in favor of immigration, even taking into account illegal immigration, with support growing from 29 percent in 1993 to 63 percent in 2014.²⁰

Chart 9: Gallup: Is immigration a good or bad thing for the country today?

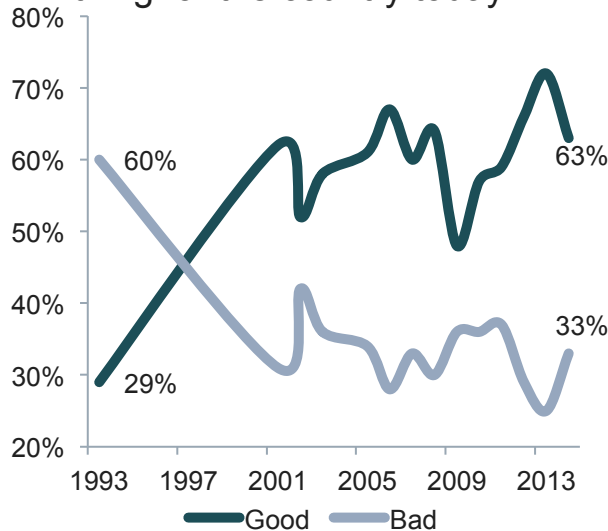
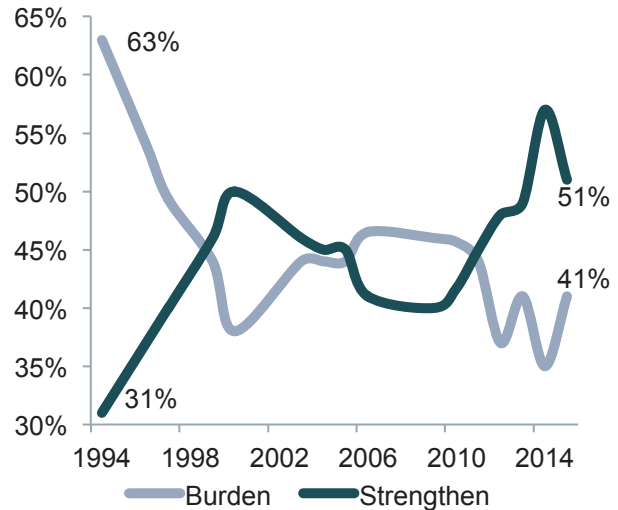
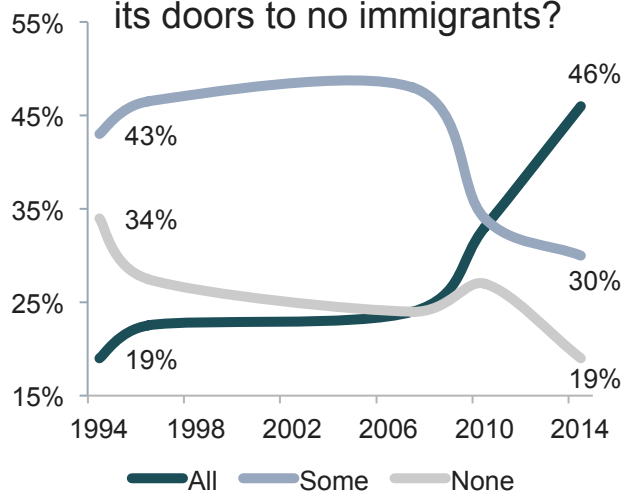


Chart 10: Pew: Do immigrants burden or strengthen our country?



Pew Research Center has conducted a similar poll periodically since 1994, which confirms that Americans are becoming more welcoming to immigrants and more opposed to restricting immigration. It asked, “What statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right? Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents. Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing, and health care.” Americans have changed from 63 percent viewing them generally as a burden in 1994 to 57 percent viewing them generally as one of America’s strengths in 2014.²¹

Chart 11: NY Times-CBS: Should America always welcome all, some, or open its doors to no immigrants?



Some of the strongest evidence for the reversal of public opinion on immigration is the rapid increase in those stating that America should “welcome” immigrants in polling from a series of *New York Times* and CBS News polls from 1994 to 2014. During that period, the number of respondents indicating that they would “always welcome all immigrants” grew from 19 percent in 1994 to 46 percent in 2014, a plurality of responses.²² The belief that Americans reject immigrants or are fed up with current policies could not be further from the truth.

CONCLUSION

Opponents of immigration are wrong to argue that Americans want to increase restrictions on immigration. Public opinion polls indicate that since the late-1990s, a growing majority of Americans continues to oppose immigration restrictions. Moreover, a large majority also favors increasing legal employer-based work visas. Americans consider immigration of great benefit to the United States, and given that immigration is already far from its historical average peak, Congress should find ways to reform the system to make it easier—not harder—for skilled foreigners to enter the United States legally.

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For other examples: *Los Angeles Times* found in 2006 that Americans favored a “guest worker program that would give a temporary visa to non-citizens who want to work legally in the United States,” 64 percent to 18 percent. USA Today/Gallup Poll in 2006, 79 percent to 19 percent. Pew Hispanic Research. “The State of American Public Opinion on Immigration in Spring 2006: A Review of Major Surveys.” May 17,

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USC Dornsife/*Los Angeles Times* found in 2013 that Americans favor “a guest worker program allowing immigrants to do low-skilled jobs that Americans are unable or unwilling to do,” 73 percent to 24 percent. USC Dornsife. “USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times Press Release.” March 24, 2013.

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Time Magazine (2006): 72 percent favor “granting temporary visas to immigrants not in the U.S. so they can do seasonal/temporary work and return to home countries”.

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¹¹ “Work and pay taxes” favored 63 percent to 33 percent. Fox News. “Fox News Poll.” December 9, 2011. <http://personal.crocodoc.com/B7ujDty>

American respondents said they were “not worried” about legal immigrants, 82 percent to 18 percent in 2011 and 78 percent to 21 percent in 2014.

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¹⁶ Questions: 1977, 1980, 1983: It has been proposed the illegal aliens who have been in the U.S. for seven years be allowed to remain in the U.S. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?
2001: “Do you think the United States should or should not make it easier for illegal immigrants to become citizens of the United States? Which of the following proposals would you prefer for illegal immigrants currently living in the United States -- [ROTATED: they should be granted general amnesty, (or) they should be allowed to stay in the United States only if they have worked and paid taxes for a certain length of time]?”

2006-2011: “Which comes closest to your view about what government policy should be toward illegal immigrants currently residing in the United States? Should the government -- [ROTATED: deport all illegal immigrants back to their home country, allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States in order to work, but only for a limited amount of time, or allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens, but only if they meet certain requirements over a period of time]?”

2013: “Would you vote for or against a law that would allow illegal immigrants living in the United States the chance to become permanent legal residents if they meet certain requirements?”

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Other polls confirm the mid-2000s swing. ABC News polled legalization from 2001 to 2013 and found support grew from 43 percent to 63 percent over the period with the change occurring between 2004 and 2007. Questions: 2001, 2004: Would you support or oppose a program in which illegal immigrants from Mexico would be allowed to live and work legally in the United States?

2007, 2013: Would you support or oppose a program giving UNDOCUMENTED immigrants now living in the United States the right to live here LEGALLY if they pay a fine and meet other requirements?

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²¹ 1994-2013: Pew Research Center. "Pew Research Center for the People & the Press: March 2013 Political Survey." March 2013. Accessed May 4, 2015. <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-questionnaires/3-28-13%20topline%20for%20release.pdf>

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²² Question: Which comes closer to your opinion: 1. America should always welcome all immigrants, OR 2. America should always welcome some immigrants, but not others, OR 3. America cannot afford to open its doors to any newcomers?

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