



BACKGROUND

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Talking About Illegal Immigration

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Illegal immigration is one of the most pressing and divisive topics in American politics today. The argument has traditionally been between social conservatives and pro-business conservatives. But now Americans are demanding answers from all their leaders, and progressives cannot afford to be caught empty handed. We must address Americans' legitimate concerns about the problems of illegal immigration while remaining true to our principles of tolerance and openness.

We Must Engage on This Issue

Some consultants, the same ones that erroneously told progressives to dodge national security for so long, recommend that we avoid discussing illegal immigration. But even if we wanted to avoid this divisive issue, it won't be possible for long: in a recent Democracy Corps poll, the top answer participants gave to "why the country is going in the wrong direction" was "Our borders have been left unprotected and illegal immigration is growing."¹ Sean Hannity now includes "open borders" among his top three ways progressives will ruin America. *Illegal immigration is this year's gay marriage. If our strategy is avoidance, we will be caught flat-footed.* We must respond to conservative charges and address Americans' concerns.

In doing so, we must remember:

Immigration is a character issue. People are asking: do progressives care about enforcing the law? Do they care about the safety of our communities? Do they care about fairness for working-class Americans, businesses, and legal citizens? Are they in touch with ordinary people who feel they are losing their communities?

Progressives start out in a hole. Progressives are being successfully portrayed as bleeding hearts who want to help illegal immigrants at the expense of hardworking Americans who play by the rules. Even worse,

Americans who want to stop illegal immigration feel that progressives see them as racist, isolationist, or just plain mean. But 2/3 of Americans feel that our government needs to do more to prevent illegal immigration.² They deserve leaders who take their feelings seriously.

There are ways to think, plan, and communicate about illegal immigration that address the valid concerns of Americans, reach out to Latinos, and maintain our values. They require us to:

- Connect emotionally;
- Offer tough, practical solutions to the problem of illegal immigration;
- State clearly that America welcomes legal immigration and that hard-working immigrants make our country strong.

First: Share Americans' Valid Concerns

The first thing a progressive says will either confirm - or begin to dispel - the assumptions that progressives are out of touch on this issue. We must remain true to our values, but we can easily begin by showing that we understand and care about Americans' valid concerns.

Illegal immigration creates real problems. Illegal immigration strains public resources, such as schools, hospitals, fire, and police. It harms manual laborers by depressing wages. It disadvantages honest businesses who play by the rules and hire legal workers. And from a security standpoint, it shows the weakness of our porous borders. Illegal immigration is a real problem, and we must work together to enforce our laws, secure our borders, and restore fairness to our system.

Connect with people's feelings. It is not enough to say we are concerned: we must truly empathize so that Americans feel our concern. Intellectual policy answers are not enough: we must show that we understand how people feel about this issue.

¹ Democracy Corps Poll, November 2007. Forty percent of respondents chose immigration as their top concern.

² ABC News poll, 9/07, MoE ±3.



How Americans Feel About Illegal Immigration

This is a crucial issue. 60%+ say illegal immigration is "very" important; only 11% say it's not important.³ Two-thirds of Americans feel that the government is not doing enough to stop illegal immigration.⁴

The key feelings are those of fairness. Many people have concerns that immigrants overburden local public services but do not pay their fair share of taxes. While the latter concern is not factually accurate, "Fairness to taxpayers" is a top policy goal for Americans.⁵

Hispanics agree with the general population. 67% of Hispanics also feel that illegal immigration is an important issue, share the concerns of fairness and overburdening social services, and 51% even support deportation.⁶

Americans oppose benefits for illegal immigrants, including symbolic benefits like drivers' licenses. Americans do not want illegal immigrants using hospitals and schools ahead of citizens who have paid for with them their taxes. 75% reject drivers' licenses for illegal immigrants.⁷ A driver's license is the closest thing we have to a national ID card, and it is seen as unfair to offer that to people here illegally.

Deportation is not the answer. While 70% say illegal immigrants should be deported as per current law,⁸ 85% recognize that deporting all illegal immigrants is impractical,⁹ and 60%+ feel that we should not deport illegal immigrants who have been living and working peacefully here two years.¹⁰

Cracking down on employers is expected. Americans understand that illegal immigrants come here for jobs. 3/4 of Americans support increasing fines on employers who hire illegal immigrants.¹¹

A path to legal status is accepted. Surveys find 40%-65% of Americans concede that illegal immigrants should have a path to legal status under specific, strict conditions, including paying a steep fine for illegal entry; paying all taxes and back taxes owed; learning English; registration and fingerprinting; maintaining a clean criminal record; receiving no government benefits until legalized.¹² Americans support such a path intellectually, but emotionally, many still would prefer deportation.

Most Americans have positive feelings about legal immigrants.¹³ We should make a clear distinction between legal and illegal immigrants, to make it clear that we are maintaining our laws, not demonizing others. This is essential to our values, and to reaching out to Latinos, as well as other immigrants.

³ USA Today/Gallup poll, 7/07, MoE ±3.

⁴ ABC News poll, 9/07, MoE ±3.

⁵ Third Way/Benenson Strategy Group poll, 5/06.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll, 10/07, MoE ±3.

⁸ CBS News/New York Times poll, 5/07, MoE ±3.

⁹ NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 6/07, MoE ±3.

¹⁰ CBS News/New York Times poll, 5/07, MoE ±3.

¹¹ LA Times/Bloomberg poll, 4/07, MoE ±3.

¹² NPR/Public Opinion Strategies/Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, 10/07, MoE ±3; USA Today/Gallup poll, 3/07, MoE ±3.

¹³ ABC News poll, 9/07, MoE ±3.

Second: Call for preventing additional illegal immigration by enforcing border and workplace laws

We must first keep the problem of illegal immigration from getting even worse. Under conservative government, this problem has exploded. In the last 6 years, 5 million new illegal immigrants have entered the country. From 1993 to 2000, we caught an average of 20% of illegal immigrants on our southern border—by 2002, that number had dropped to just 5%. But we already have the laws we need. To stop illegal immigration we must enforce our current laws - at the border and at the workplace.

Secure our borders: our first priority. A fence might appear to be the easiest way to secure the border—but it is actually one of the least effective and more costly solutions. Border patrol agents know that illegal immigrants and their handlers will simply build tunnels under fences. The fences we have already built just push immigrants to other, less patrolled areas. A fence is a twentieth century solution to a twenty-first century problem. Instead, border patrol agents want to be provided with new remote surveillance equipment. But this Administration failed to give border guards the tools they need to do their jobs, much the same way it failed to deliver proper equipment to our troops in Iraq.

We need to secure our southern border, but that is not enough. We also need to secure our northern border, which is how the Millennium Bomber entered the country. And we need to secure our visa processes: more and more illegal immigrants are arriving by airplane, as the 9/11 bombers did. We need total border security, not just a band-aid.

Prevent illegal hiring by enforcing the laws conservatives haven't. The people coming across our southern border are not on vacation - they come here for work. And as long as there is that demand, there will be a supply. A significant reason we have an immigration crisis today is that conservatives have stopped enforcing our laws - instead, they have hung out a 'Help Wanted' sign on our border. In the year before Bush took office, 417 businesses were fined for hiring illegal immigrants. In 2004, only three businesses were fined. That is a 99% decrease in enforcement. We must demand that businesses abide by our laws, and create a level competitive playing field for business owners that play by the rules.

Deal with illegal immigrants already here by offering a tough, practical solution. Legalizing the status of illegal immigrants is an emotionally fraught issue. Many Americans understandably don't want to reward those

who have "jumped the line" and broken our laws in coming here. The Reagan administration offered such a reward, granting illegal immigrants blanket amnesty - and that, combined with the Bush Administration's refusal to enforce the laws against businesses, are key reasons why we have an estimated twelve million illegal immigrants in our country today.

Deportation meets the popular demand for fairness, but it is not realistic, practical, or cost-effective to deport 12 million people. From a security standpoint, the most important goal is to know who is in our country and get control of our borders. But deportation provides no incentives for illegal immigrants to come out of the shadows, or pay back taxes. And the reality is that there are sectors of our economy whose economics now depend on low-wage labor currently supplied largely by immigrants. We do not want illegal immigrants to remain in the shadows or form a permanent underclass. We need to roll up our sleeves and deal with this problem.

Offer a tough, practical path to legalization with strong conditions for immigrants already here. If immigrants have no criminal records, and are working, they should be able to earn legal status after paying back to society for entering illegally. We will not make the mistake conservatives made and offer amnesty. Instead, illegal immigrants who want to earn their legal status should have to pay a stiff fine for coming here illegally. They must pay any back taxes owed. And they must learn English—for their own sake, to prevent exploitation and to assimilate into American society. There are a number of bipartisan plans that spell out these details. What we need are leaders who take this problem seriously, and work towards a serious solution.

Third: Recognize that Legal Immigration Makes Our Country Strong

We are a country built on the dreams of generations of immigrants from all over the world, who have left everything they know behind and ventured to our shores to build a better life for themselves and their families. Dealing with illegal immigration means we have more room for legal immigrants who play by the rules, who come here to learn, to build businesses, and to live the American dream. We must get control of our borders, regain control of our cities, and address the real problem of illegal immigration. In doing so, we will never forget that our country is what it is today because of the generations of people who came here to work hard, realize their dreams, and make this country great.

¹⁴ Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand and Norman Malone, "Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration," Russell Sage Foundation 2002.

¹⁵ Spencer Hsu and Kari Lydersen, "Illegal Hiring is Rarely Punished," The Washington Post, June 19, 2006.

¹⁶ In recent Third-Way polling, anywhere from 15% to 83% of those polled supported a legal path to citizenship, but 60% still said it was a "good goal to deport all illegal immigrants."



Good Answers to Tough Questions

Behind any specific query is a more crucial, implicit, emotional question: do you care about this issue and appreciate its importance? Show your strong concern first. Only then will you be taken seriously when you address the question posed.

Q: Would you offer illegal immigrants "amnesty"? A: "I will not let illegal immigrants off the hook for coming here illegally. Any illegal immigrant who wants to live here legally will face stiff fines and a long probation for breaking the law to come here. They cannot cut in line ahead of legal immigrants."

Q: Do you support benefits for illegal immigrants? A: "Current law forbids providing federal benefits to illegal immigrants, and I support that position. Otherwise, the principle is: "U.S. citizens must come first. Illegal immigrants should not come to our country illegally and use services they have not paid for, and that is why we need to stop illegal immigration in the first place. But remember, most illegal immigrants do not come here for benefits, they come here for work. And many are actually paying taxes from their paychecks while receiving no benefits."

Q: Do you support caring for illegal immigrants in public hospitals? A: "Illegal immigrants should not be denied care, they are human beings. But US residents should be seen first except in case of emergency."

Q: Do you support allowing children who are not legal U.S. residents into public schools? A: "This is a local issue for local communities to decide: they pay for extra resources for their schools, and they have to look after the children in their communities." Local officials A: "Innocent kids should not suffer for the transgressions of their parents. But we first need to ensure that American citizens' children can receive a top-quality education before we help others."

Q: Should local authorities report illegal immigrants to federal authorities? A: Immigration is a federal issue, and the real question is what the federal authorities should do: They do not have a problem finding illegal immigrants to deport, but it would take such a vast outlay of resources to deport all illegal immigrants that it is simply not feasible. So we are forcing our authorities to make choices that do not reflect our values: Do they deport those who choose to come clean and get out of the shadows? Do they break up families, separating one spouse here legally from one here illegally, or separate parents from their children? This is why we have to have comprehensive reform."

Q: Do you support driver's licenses for illegal immigrants? A: "Driver's licenses are a benefit for legal residents only. Period." Or for those already committed to driver's licenses, A: "Our federal immigration policy is broken, and the states are being forced to consider clearly crazy ideas to try to govern this massive population of people living under the radar. We need to fix the whole system. In the meantime, states have to deal with the broken system however they can."

Q: Do you support a border fence? A: "We definitely need to secure the border, but a fence won't do the job. If you talk to Border Patrol agents, they'll tell you a fence will be tunneled under before you finish it. They need more agents and more high-tech surveillance equipment to monitor remote border areas."

For more information on immigration policy from the Truman perspective, please visit <http://www.trumanproject.org/pubs.php> and refer to Truman Doctrine *Open and Secure: American Immigration in an Age of Terrorism* or <http://www.trumanproject.org/paper.htm> and Truman Paper *Reforming Immigration: A Strong Security, Pro-Immigrant Policy for Progressives*.

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