



WHERE AMERICANS STAND ON IMMIGRATION

A HIDDEN COMMON GROUND REPORT

By David Schleifer and Will Friedman
2020

INTRODUCTION

This report explores the views and values of the American public on immigration, including how much change people think the immigration system needs, their goals and priorities for changing it, and their views on various proposals for doing so. Drawing on a Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos national survey of American adults and four focus groups, the report's main findings include:

1. Americans across the political spectrum agree on several aspects of immigration policy, including creating a path to citizenship for people brought to the U.S. illegally as children; quickly and fairly processing people who enter the U.S. illegally; enforcing border security; and welcoming immigrants who are skilled, financially secure or escaping war. While Americans differ on whether to create a path to citizenship for people who came illegally as adults, they share a discomfort with allowing undocumented immigrants who fail to pay taxes or commit crimes to stay in the U.S.
2. Democrats and Independents consistently favor more welcoming immigration policies, while Republicans and apolitical people tend to express mixed or ambivalent views. For example, Democrats and Independents strongly support a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants while Republicans and apolitical people express different views on a path to citizenship depending on how they are asked. Republicans and apolitical people also express mixed opinions on whether to welcome low-wage workers as legal immigrants. Most Americans think immigrants

- play positive roles in our nation, but those views are strongest among Democrats and Independents while Republicans and apolitical people are often unsure.
3. Disagreement along the political spectrum is pronounced regarding building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, separating families at the border, and how to handle immigration during the coronavirus crisis. Few Americans think the wall will effectively stop people from entering the country illegally, but most Republicans say it is an important symbol, nonetheless.
 4. Many Americans are misinformed or unsure about key aspects of immigration. For example, few people know that most immigrants live in the U.S. legally or that many undocumented immigrants pay taxes. Americans who are more accurately informed tend to express more positive views of immigrants and favor more welcoming immigration policies.

Overall, this research finds areas of cross-partisan agreement on several aspects of immigration that could point the way towards workable policy solutions. While the research finds genuine cross-partisan disagreement on some aspects of this issue, the extent of ambivalence or mixed opinions is striking -- particularly among Republicans and apolitical people. Also striking is the prevalence of misperceptions about immigration, which tend to correspond with more restrictive views on immigration policy among respondents. It is our hope that this report, along with the other Hidden Common Ground activities that accompany it, can help to focus, frame, and stimulate an informed and productive conversation about improving our nation's immigration system.

METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

This report summarizes findings from a nationally representative survey of 1,054 adult Americans 18 years and older. The survey was fielded May 15-24, 2020 by Ipsos using the probability-based web-enabled KnowledgePanel®. Respondents completed the survey in English or Spanish. The survey was weighted to match Census figures to ensure full representation of the American people.

The research also draws from four demographically diverse focus groups that Public Agenda conducted in February and March 2020 in Miami, Florida; Columbus, Ohio; New York, New York; and Jackson, Mississippi. The focus groups were conducted before the coronavirus pandemic began. For a complete survey methodology, the topline with full question wording and cross tabulations by political affiliation, please go to <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/where-americans-stand-on-immigration-a-hidden-common-ground-report/> or email research@publicagenda.org.

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Ipsos, which not only fielded the survey but collaborated with Public Agenda on developing the survey instrument, analyzing the data and writing this report -- particularly Sara Machi, Chris Jackson, Cheryl Arnedt and Linda McPetrie.

FINDING 1: AMERICANS ACROSS THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM AGREE ON SEVERAL ASPECTS OF IMMIGRATION POLICY, INCLUDING CREATING A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP FOR PEOPLE BROUGHT TO THE U.S. ILLEGALLY AS CHILDREN; QUICKLY AND FAIRLY PROCESSING PEOPLE WHO ENTER THE U.S. ILLEGALLY; ENFORCING BORDER SECURITY; AND WELCOMING IMMIGRANTS WHO ARE SKILLED, FINANCIALLY SECURE OR ESCAPING WAR. WHILE AMERICANS DIFFER ON WHETHER TO CREATE A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP FOR PEOPLE WHO CAME ILLEGALLY AS ADULTS, THEY SHARE A DISCOMFORT WITH ALLOWING UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS WHO FAIL TO PAY TAXES OR COMMIT CRIMES TO STAY IN THE U.S.

Throughout American history, immigration has often been politically contentious, with serious consequences for families and for the character of our nation’s civic life. But are all aspects of immigration policy so contentious among Americans today?

Majorities of people in the U.S, regardless of political identification, age, race, income, education, region, and urbanicity, indicate support for several immigration policies. Notably, 77 percent of Americans -- including majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents -- all say it is important to create a path to citizenship for people who were brought to the U.S. illegally as children; see Figure 1.¹

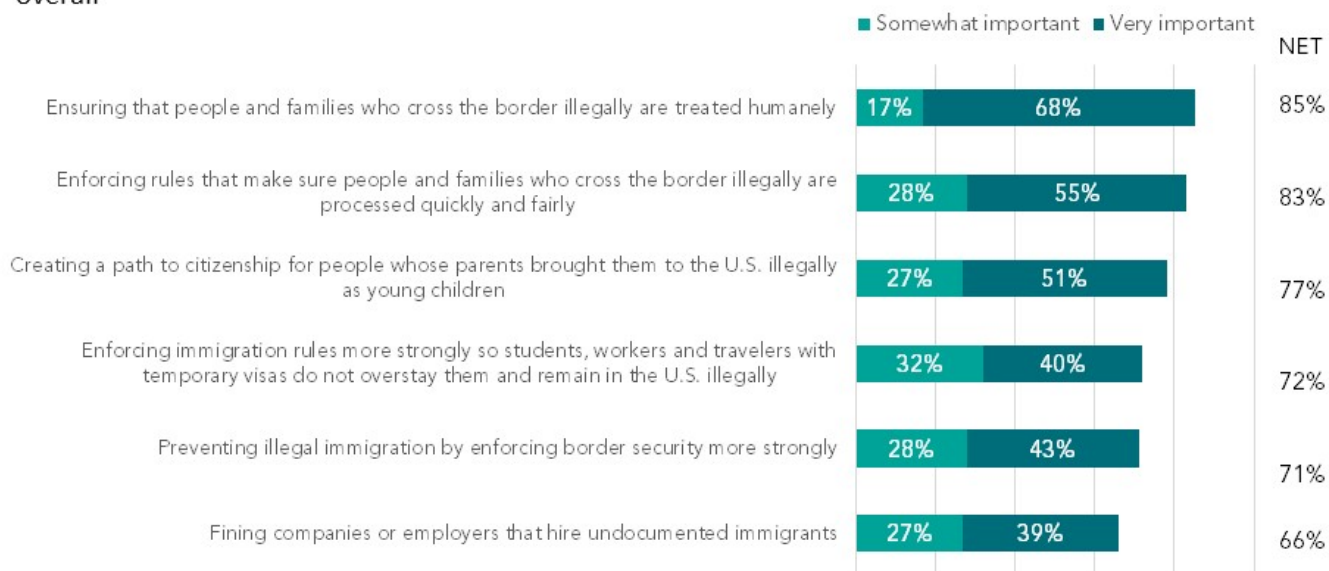
Identical majorities of Americans of all political affiliations also say it is important to ensure that people who cross the border illegally are processed quickly and fairly (83 percent) and to ensure that people and families who cross the border illegally are treated humanely (85 percent overall); see Figure 1. More Democrats (92 percent) and Independents (87 percent) than Republicans (83 percent) say it is important to ensure that people and families who cross the border illegally are treated humanely, as do 68 percent of apolitical people, i.e. those who report no political affiliation.

Majorities of Americans say it is important to prevent illegal immigration by enforcing border security; to prevent people from overstaying temporary visas; and to fine employers who hire undocumented immigrants; see Figure 1. More Republicans and Independents than Democrats say that these enforcement measures are very important.

¹ The Independent subgroup includes those who self-identify as Independents (N=269) or (in a small handful of cases) with another party (N=15). The “apolitical” subgroup includes those who have no preference towards political affiliation (N=98) or skipped the question (N=2), “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as...”.

Americans across the political spectrum agree on immigration policies including a path to citizenship for people brought to the US illegally as adults; quickly and fairly processing people who cross the border illegally; and enforcing border security.

Figure 1. Percent of Americans who say the following are very or somewhat important to U.S. immigration policy overall



Base: All respondents, N=1,054

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey – Immigration

In focus groups conducted for this research, participants expressed their desire for an immigration system that is orderly, efficient and that treats people humanely. They also wanted politicians to use less heated, divisive rhetoric on immigration.²

“When you have two political parties trying to score points off the issue, it becomes such a problem. You have smart, smart people in this country. You have infrastructure. You have money. It could be solved.”
– Miami, FL; in his 30s; White; Democrat; Immigrant

“There has to be a system in place because we cannot just open the doors and say everybody come.”
– Jackson, MS; in his 30s; Black; Independent; Non-immigrant

“The thing I think would help the immigration problem is efficiency if the bureaucracy was more efficient and accountable. Because a lot of people slip through the cracks.” – New York City, NY; in his 60s; Black; Independent; Non-immigrant

² Focus group quotes have been minimally edited for clarity.

Focus group participants also emphasized that employers should be punished for hiring undocumented workers and complained that employers rarely are.

“Employers are not punished at all. It’s the employees that are punished. I don’t understand that.”
– Jackson, MS; in her 60s; White; Democrat; Non-immigrant

“Let it affect the corporations’ bottom line and you’ll see everything get fixed really fast.” – New York City, NY; in his 60s; Black; Independent; Non-immigrant

MAJORITIES ACROSS THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM AGREE ON WELCOMING HIGHLY SKILLED IMMIGRANTS, THOSE WHO ARE FINANCIALLY SECURE AND THOSE ESCAPING WAR.

Most Americans, regardless of political identification, support legal immigration for people in a variety of circumstances, with support particularly strong for those who are highly skilled, such as doctors, engineers and scientists; see Figure 2. Apolitical people are more likely than Democrats, Republicans or Independents to say that they do not know whether or not they support each of these forms of legal immigration.

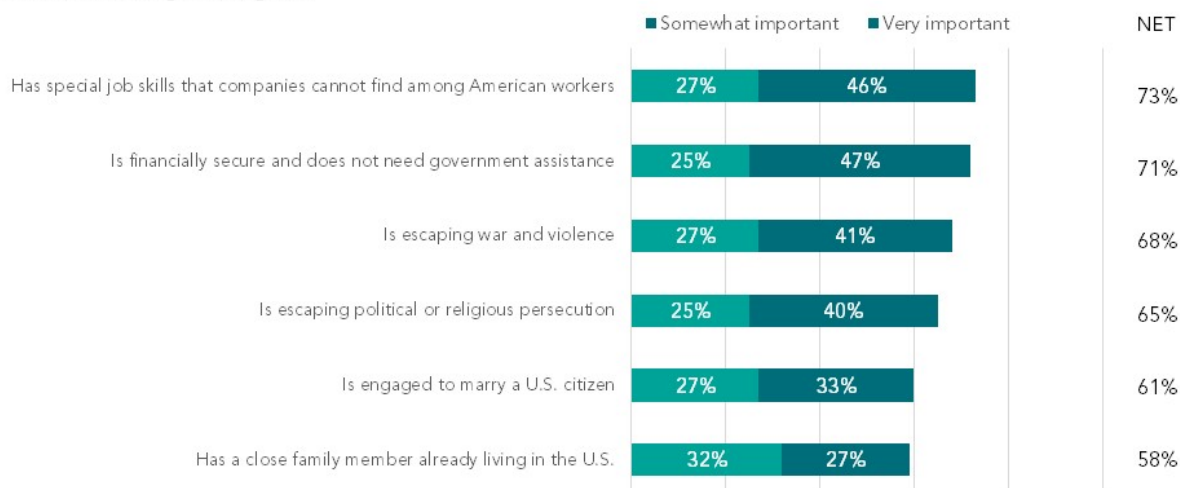
In the midst of the debate over federal “public charge” rules that limit immigration for people who have received public benefits such as food stamps and Section Eight housing vouchers, this research finds that Republicans (69 percent), Democrats (72 percent), Independents (76 percent) express statistically identical degrees of support for admitting immigrants who are financially secure and do not need government assistance, as do most apolitical people (63 percent); see Figure 2.³

There is also majority support among Republicans, Democrats and Independents for allowing legal immigration for those escaping war and violence, or political and religious persecution; see Figure 2. However, on many questions about which types of immigrants to admit to the U.S. legally, a substantial share of apolitical people say they do not know whether they are supportive or not.

³ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. “Public Charge Fact Sheet.” Washington DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2020. <https://www.uscis.gov/news/public-charge-fact-sheet>.

Majorities across the political spectrum agree on welcoming highly skilled immigrants; those who are financially secure; and those escaping war.

Figure 2. Percent of Americans who strongly or somewhat support the following coming to the United States as a documented, legal immigrant



Base: All respondents, N=1,054

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos/Hidden Common Ground Survey – Immigration

As finding 4 in this report explains, people who are less knowledgeable about immigrants and immigration are less supportive of all the above forms of legal immigration. Meanwhile, this research finds that registered and likely 2020 voters and higher-income Americans tend to be more supportive of legal immigration.

Focus group participants wrestled with the question of whether welcoming highly skilled immigrants to the U.S. would mean that qualified American citizens would lose out on good jobs.

“We’re losing jobs here because we don’t have enough people who have those kinds of skills. So, I think [immigrants with special skills] should be given priority.” – Jackson, MS; in her 60s; White; Democrat; Non-immigrant

“Maybe give tax credits to corporations to train internally and not be allowed to have these skilled immigrants unless there are extreme cases. It should be limited because it does drive down wages.” – New York City, NY; in her 50s; White; Republican; Non-immigrant

“We don’t have a shortage of workers. We have plenty that are graduating but they’re not getting hired because they’re hiring immigrants.” – New York City, NY; in her 50s; Latina; Republican; Immigrant

“I don’t feel there should be an effort to seek those highly qualified persons from outside of the country when we have a pool of persons right here.” – Jackson, MS; in his 30s; Black; Independent; Non-immigrant

AMERICANS DIFFER ON WHETHER TO CREATE A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP FOR PEOPLE WHO CAME ILLEGALLY AS ADULTS, BUT THEY SHARE A DISCOMFORT WITH ALLOWING UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS WHO FAIL TO PAY TAXES OR COMMIT CRIMES TO STAY IN THE U.S.

This survey presented respondents with five hypothetical examples of undocumented immigrants, and asked whether each should be allowed to stay in the U.S., should not be allowed to stay in the U.S., or if it depends:

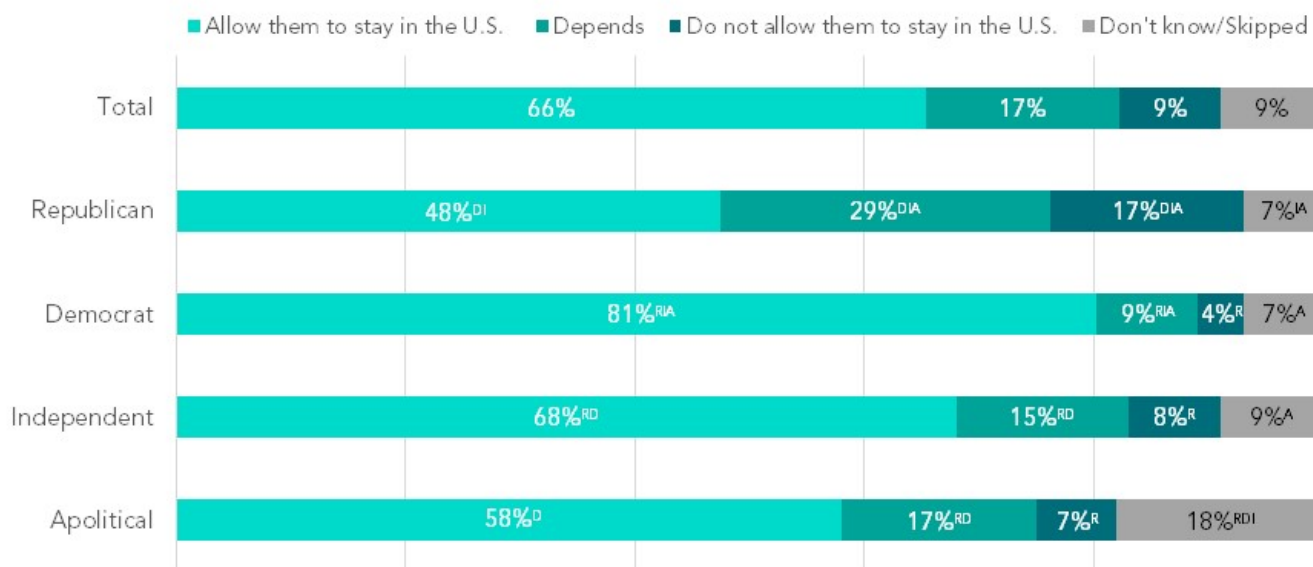
1. **Law-abiding Dreamer:** 66 percent of Americans would allow “a young adult who was brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents as a child, is currently in college and has never been in trouble with the law” to stay in the U.S.
2. **Tax-paying parent:** 58 percent of Americans would allow “a parent who came here illegally with young children to make a better life for their family, is currently employed and pays taxes” to stay in the U.S.
3. **Dreamer who commits a misdemeanor:** 27 percent of Americans would allow “a young adult who was brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents as a child, is currently employed but has committed a minor crime” to stay in the U.S.
4. **Tax scofflaw:** 13 percent of Americans would allow “a parent who came here illegally with young children to make a better life for their family, is currently employed but does not pay taxes” to stay in the U.S.
5. **Felon Dreamer:** 6 percent of Americans would allow “a young adult who was brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents as a child, is currently employed but has committed a major crime” to stay in the U.S.

While Americans differ in their willingness to let these five types of undocumented immigrants stay in the U.S. -- with less than half of Republicans willing to let any of them stay -- failure to pay taxes and committing a crime depress support across the political spectrum. In addition, almost a quarter to a half of Americans say it depends or that they are unsure if each type of undocumented immigrant should be allowed to stay; see Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

1. **Law-abiding Dreamer:** Two-thirds of Americans would allow an undocumented young adult to stay in the U.S. if they were brought illegally by their parents as a child, is currently in college and has never been in trouble with the law. More Democrats than Republicans would allow a law-abiding Dreamer to stay in the U.S., with Independents and apolitical people falling in between; see Figure 3.

Most Americans would allow a law-abiding undocumented dreamer to stay in the U.S.

Figure 3. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think the government should allow or not allow a young adult who was brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents as a child, is currently in college and has never been in trouble with the law to stay in the U.S.



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

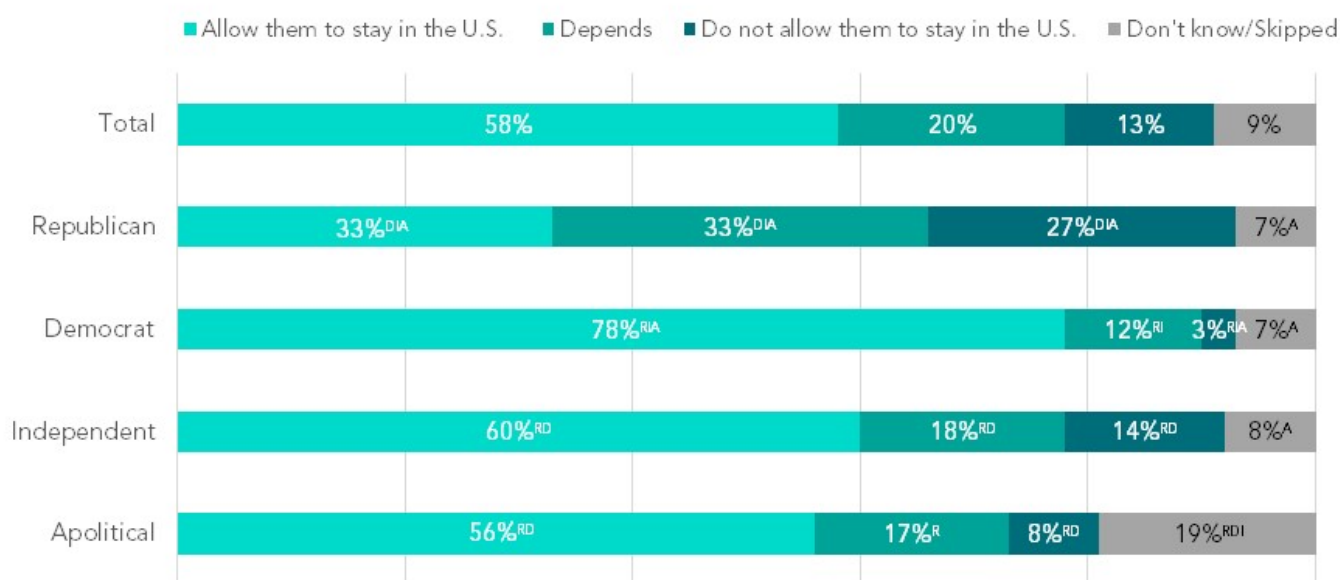
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2. **Tax-paying parent:** Coming to the U.S. voluntarily as an adult -- rather than being brought involuntarily as a child -- substantially depresses Republican support for allowing an undocumented immigrant to stay, but barely affects support among people of other political affiliations.

A third of Republicans would allow a parent who came here illegally with young children to make a better life for their family, is currently employed and pays taxes to stay in the U.S. But near equal numbers of Democrats, Independents and apolitical people support letting a law-abiding dreamer stay as a tax-paying parent; see Figure 4.

Support is highest among Democrats for allowing a tax-paying, undocumented parent to stay in the U.S.

Figure 4. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think the government should allow or not allow a parent who came here illegally with young children to make a better life for their family, is currently employed and pays taxes to stay in the U.S.



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

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3. **Dreamer who commits a misdemeanor:** For people of all political affiliations, committing a minor crime depresses support for permitting an undocumented person to stay in the U.S., even if they were brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents as a child and they are employed; see Figure 5. Still, more Americans are willing to allow a Dreamer who commits a misdemeanor to stay in the U.S. than are willing to allow a tax scofflaw to stay.

Committing crime, even minor crime, loomed large in focus group discussions about whether undocumented immigrants should have a path to citizenship. Even focus group

participants who favored creating a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants often noted that entering the U.S. illegally is a crime.

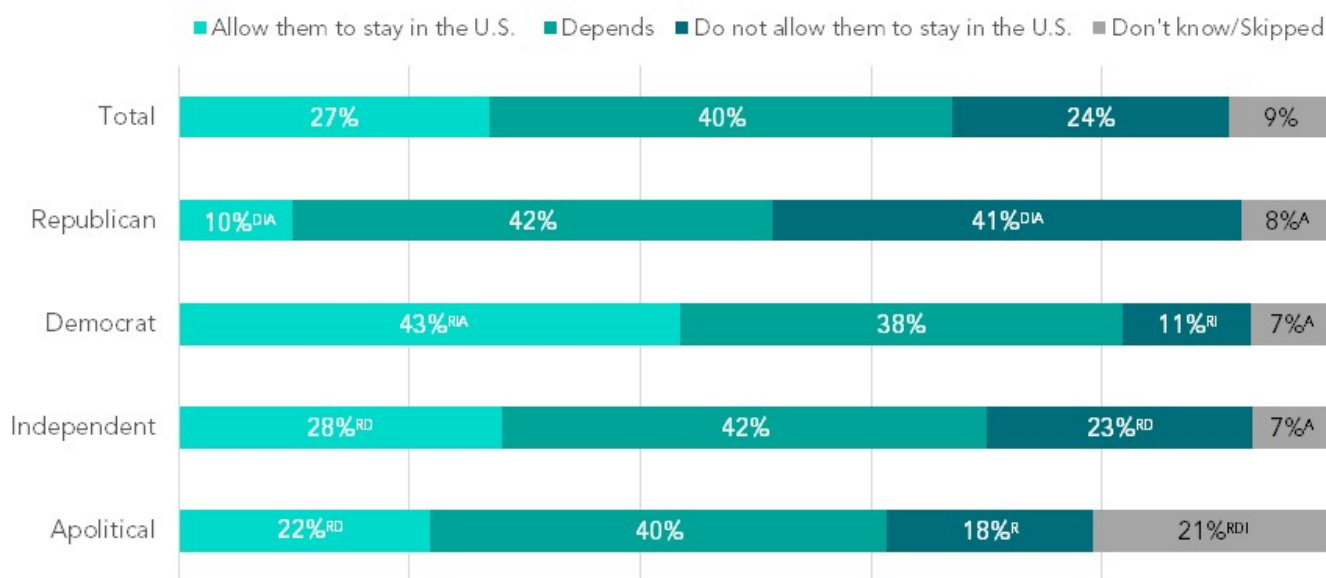
“They should be allowed to stay here if they are productive members of society who are paying their taxes, following laws, haven’t been arrested for anything, jaywalking, spitting on the ground, public intoxication. Once they get arrested, that’s a dealbreaker for me.” – New York City, NY; in his 50s; Black; Independent; Non-immigrant

“I’m from the Bahamas and it’s a delicate issue. We have some immigrants who come and do positive things and we have some immigrants that come here that add to the crime rate.” – Miami, FL; in his 50s; Black; Republican; Immigrant

“Sneaking over here is unlawful. If you break the law, then there should be some consequences. There are people who come here because they genuinely need help. But if they came here illegally, then they have to pay.” – New York City, NY; in his 30s; Black; Apolitical; Non-immigrant

Only a quarter of Americans would allow an undocumented dreamer who committed a minor crime to stay in this country.

Figure 5. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think the government should allow or not allow a young adult who was brought to the U.S illegally by their parents as a child, is currently employed but has committed a minor crime to stay in the U.S.



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

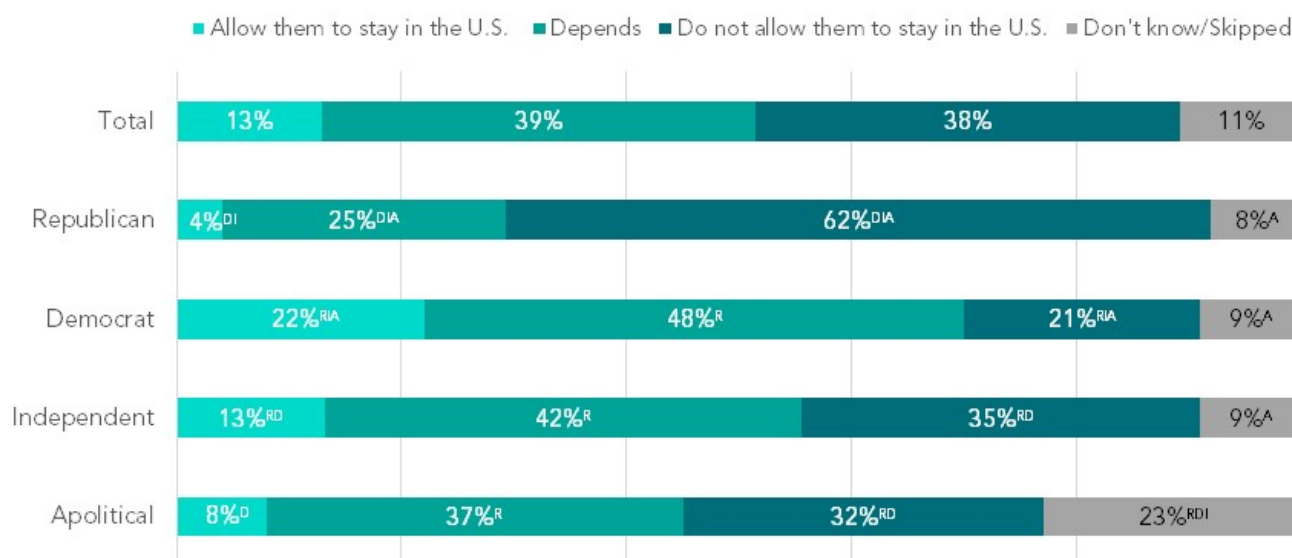
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4. **Tax scofflaw:** For people of all political affiliations, failing to pay taxes depresses support for allowing an undocumented immigrant to stay in the U.S. even more than committing a minor crime does. Only 13 percent of Americans say the government should allow a parent who came here illegally with young children to make a better life for their family, is currently employed but does not pay taxes to stay. Nearly half of Americans say it depends or they do not know; see Figure 6.

Only 13 percent of Americans would allow an undocumented parent who fails to pay taxes to stay in this country.

Figure 6. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think the government should allow or not allow a parent who came here illegally with young children to make a better life for their family, is currently employed but does not pay taxes to stay in the U.S.



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

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Paying taxes was prominent in focus group discussions about immigration. Participants were concerned about undocumented immigrants not paying their fair share for resources that are already stretched thin, like education and medical services.

“I think we need to find a way to make sure that they are paying taxes because of the schools. Their kids will need to be in school.” – Jackson, MS; in her 50s; Black; Democrat; Non-immigrant

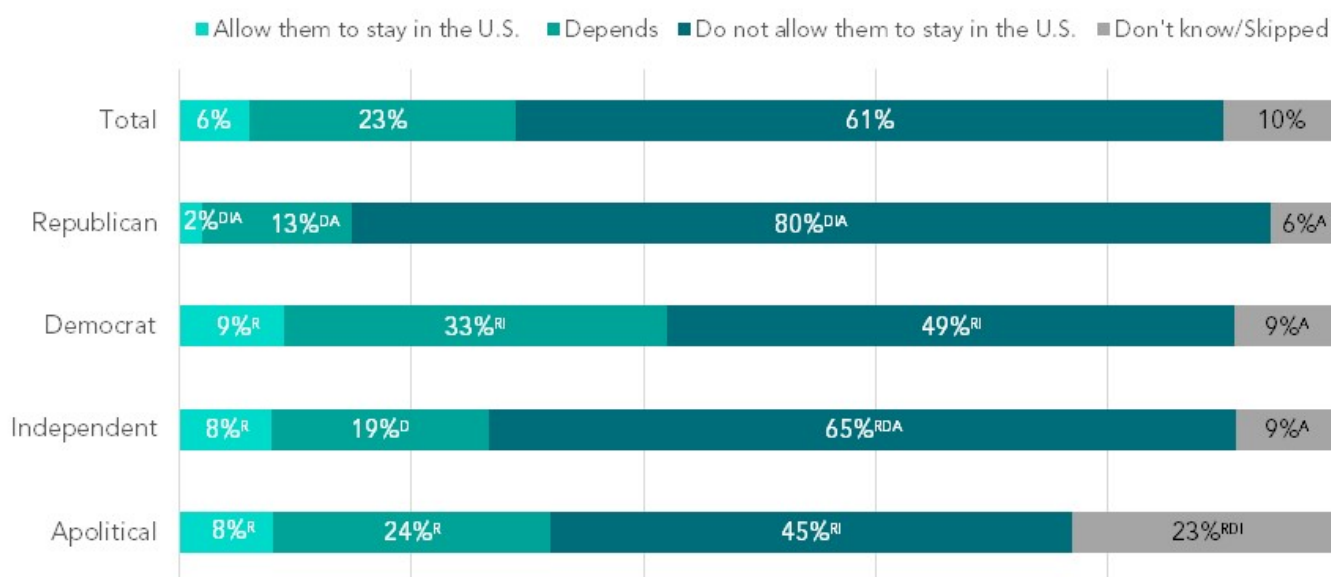
“These people use the school system, go to hospitals and don’t pay taxes. The illegals are not sharing in any of that. If people are here illegally now, try to give them the chance to stay here. So, catch up with your taxes. Catch up with your status.” – Miami, FL; in her 40s; Latina; Republican; Immigrant

As Finding 4 explains, Americans underestimate how many undocumented immigrants pay taxes, a misunderstanding that is associated with more restrictive views on immigration.

5. **Felon Dreamer:** If a person was brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents as a child and is currently employed but has committed a major crime, support for allowing them to stay drops to the single digits across the political spectrum; see Figure 7

Hardly any Americans would allow an undocumented dreamer who committed a major crime to stay in this country.

Figure 7. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think the government should allow or not allow a young adult who was brought to the U.S illegally by their parents as a child, is currently employed but has committed a major crime to stay in the U.S.



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

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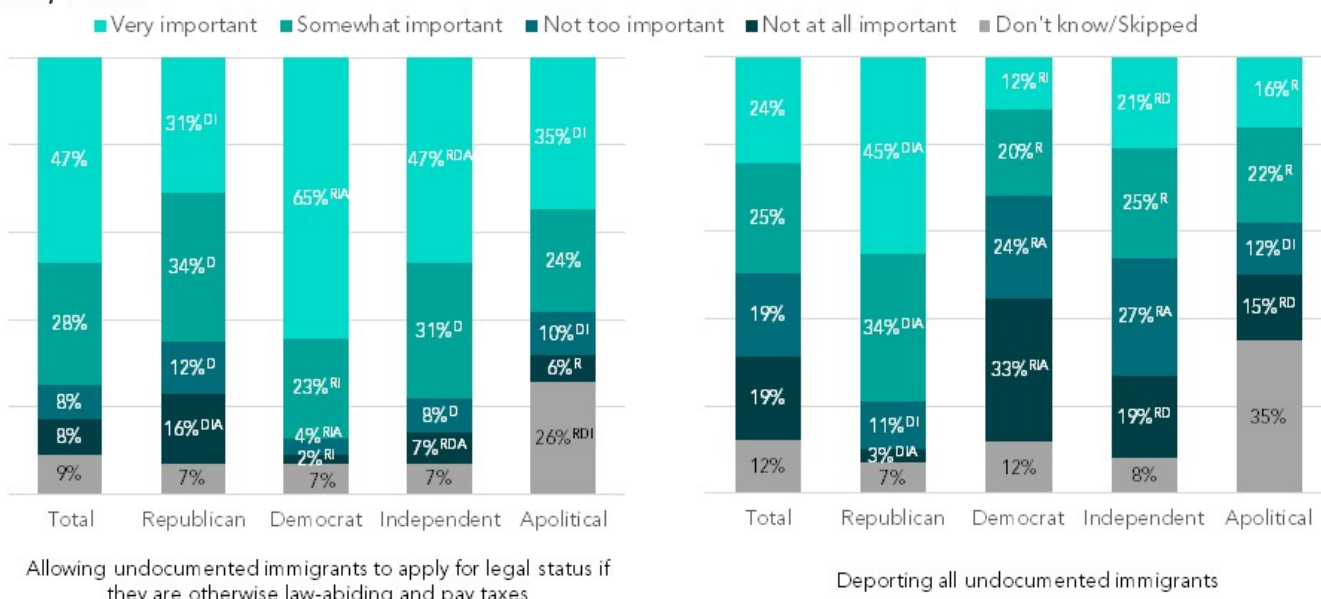
FINDING 2: DEMOCRATS AND INDEPENDENTS CONSISTENTLY FAVOR MORE WELCOMING IMMIGRATION POLICIES, WHILE REPUBLICANS AND APOLITICAL PEOPLE TEND TO EXPRESS MIXED OR AMBIVALENT VIEWS. FOR EXAMPLE, DEMOCRATS AND INDEPENDENTS STRONGLY SUPPORT A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP FOR UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS WHILE REPUBLICANS AND APOLITICAL PEOPLE EXPRESS DIFFERENT VIEWS ON A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP DEPENDING ON HOW THEY ARE ASKED. REPUBLICANS AND APOLITICAL PEOPLE ALSO EXPRESS MIXED OPINIONS ON WHETHER TO WELCOME LOW-WAGE WORKERS AS LEGAL IMMIGRANTS. MOST AMERICANS THINK IMMIGRANTS PLAY POSITIVE ROLES IN OUR NATION, BUT THOSE VIEWS ARE STRONGEST AMONG DEMOCRATS AND INDEPENDENTS WHILE REPUBLICANS AND APOLITICAL PEOPLE ARE OFTEN UNSURE.

Questions about how policymakers should address undocumented immigrants who come to this country as adults reveal Democrats' and Independents' more consistently welcoming views on immigration and Republicans' and apolitical people's more mixed, ambivalent views.

No matter how they are asked, Democrats and Independents consistently support creating a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who come as adults. Republicans express different views depending on how they are asked: 65 percent of Republicans say it is important that U.S. immigration policy allow undocumented immigrants to apply for legal status if they are otherwise law-abiding and pay taxes. However, 79 percent of Republicans also say it is important to deport all undocumented immigrants. A sizeable minority of apolitical people do not know what they think about these questions; see Figure 8.

Most Americans, including most Republicans, agree that undocumented immigrants who came as adults but are otherwise law-abiding should have a path to citizenship. But most Republicans also favor deporting all undocumented immigrants.

Figure 8. Percent of Americans who say the following are very or somewhat important to U.S. immigration policy overall



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100
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When given three choices for how to handle undocumented immigrants -- deportation, providing temporary worker status, or letting people stay and become citizens -- Republicans are almost evenly divided between each option, while a majority of Democrats support providing undocumented immigrants with a pathway to citizenship; see Figure 9. Republicans could be divided on how to manage undocumented immigrants for numerous reasons, either because sentiment around this issue isn't settled among the party, or a fourth option, like immigrants pursuing citizenship from their country of origin, was not an option in the survey.

When given a choice between deportation, pathway to citizenship or temporary worker status for undocumented immigrants, Democrats favor a pathway to citizenship while Republicans are divided.

Figure 9. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think the government should deport all undocumented immigrants back to their home country, allow undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. in order to work but only for a limited amount of time, or allow undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. and become citizens but only if they meet certain requirements over a period of time



Base: All respondents, N=509; Republican, N=154; Democrat, N=166; Independent, N=143; Apolitical, N=46

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DEMOCRATS AND INDEPENDENTS SUPPORT WELCOMING LOW-WAGE WORKERS AS LEGAL IMMIGRANTS. REPUBLICANS AND APOLITICAL PEOPLE ARE AMBIVALENT.

Views on whether to welcome documented low-wage workers are another example of how Democrats and Independents consistently favor more welcoming immigration policies, while Republicans and, to a lesser extent, apolitical people hold more mixed views.

For example, two-thirds of Democrats and Independents, and a modest majority of Republicans (59 percent), say that it is important to U.S. immigration policy to allow immigrants to come to the U.S. as documented workers and to take low-wage jobs that Americans do not want. Almost a third of apolitical people do not know; see Figure 10.

However, only 44 percent of both Republicans and apolitical people express support for allowing legal immigrants into the U.S. to work in low-wage jobs that Americans do not want. Meanwhile, Democrats and Independents again have a positive outlook: two-thirds say they

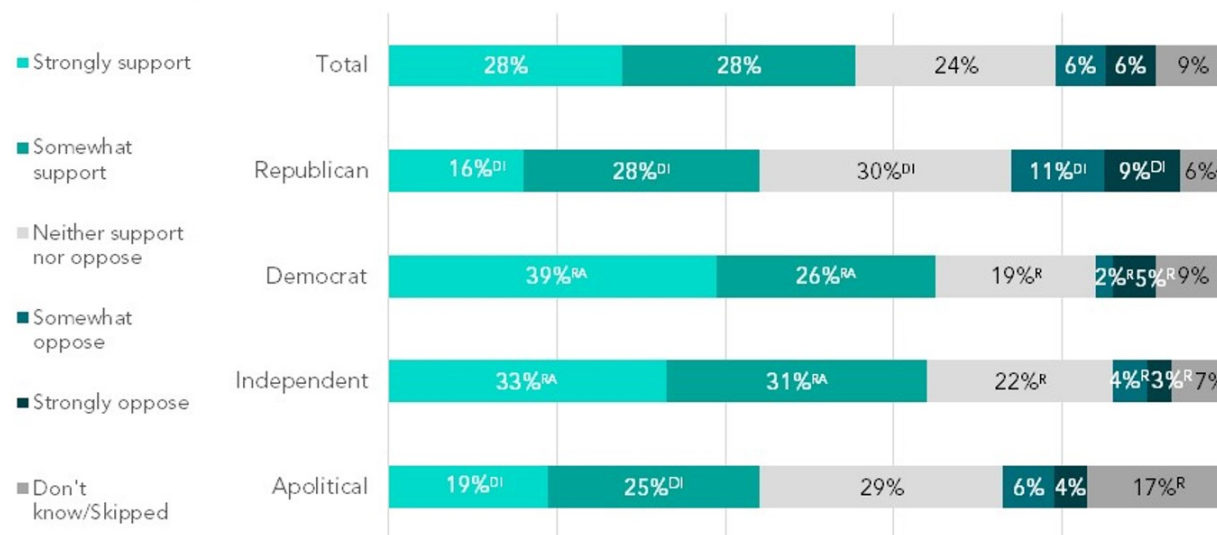
support admitting low-wage workers as legal immigrants; see Figure 10.

Democrats and Independents support welcoming low-wage workers as legal immigrants. Republicans and apolitical people are ambivalent.

Figure 10. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think allowing immigrants who will take low-wage jobs that Americans do not want to come to the U.S. as documented workers is important or not important to U.S. immigration policy overall



Percent of Americans who support or oppose those who will work low-wage jobs that Americans do not want coming to the United States as a documented, legal immigrant



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100
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Focus group participants struggled with the pros and cons of immigrants working low wage jobs, expressing admiration for how hard they think immigrants work while also sharing concerns that they take opportunities away from U.S.-born citizens.

“Not many people like to work those jobs. They’re low paying jobs. They’re immigrants. They’re willing to settle for less, do the hard work, do the hard labor.” – New York City, NY; in his 30s; Latino; Republican; Non-immigrant

“They work hard and they will take the money that many people often say is not enough. But other racial groups aren’t afforded the same opportunities.” – Jackson, MS; in his 30s; Black; Independent; Non-immigrant

“Versus African Americans getting those things and getting that help? I can see why many people would be upset.” – New York City, NY; in her 30s; Black; Apolitical; Non-immigrant

MOST AMERICANS THINK IMMIGRANTS PLAY POSITIVE ROLES IN AMERICAN SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND CULTURE. PLURALITIES OF REPUBLICANS AND APOLITICAL PEOPLE ARE NOT SURE.

The number of immigrants in the U.S. has grown substantially in the living memory of many middle-aged and older Americans. Today, 13.6 percent of the U.S. population are immigrants, compared to only 4.7 percent in 1970 -- although that remains lower than 1890, when the proportion of immigrants in the U.S. peaked at 14.8 percent of the population.⁴

In the context of these substantial demographic changes, a 56 percent majority of Americans think that in the long run, immigrants make American society better. Forty-five percent of Americans said the same in a similar question asked by Pew in 2015.⁵ Compared to 2015, 18 percent more Democrats and 19 percent more Independents now say immigrants make society better. In contrast, just 2 percent more Republicans say that, and the plurality are unsure of their view (39 percent). This suggests that Democrats and Independents played a key role in the overall American shift from negative to positive views of immigrants in the last five years, while Republicans shifted from negativity to uncertainty; see Figure 11.

Most Democrats and Independents think immigrants make American society better compared to roughly a third of Republicans and apolitical people who share that belief. Pluralities of

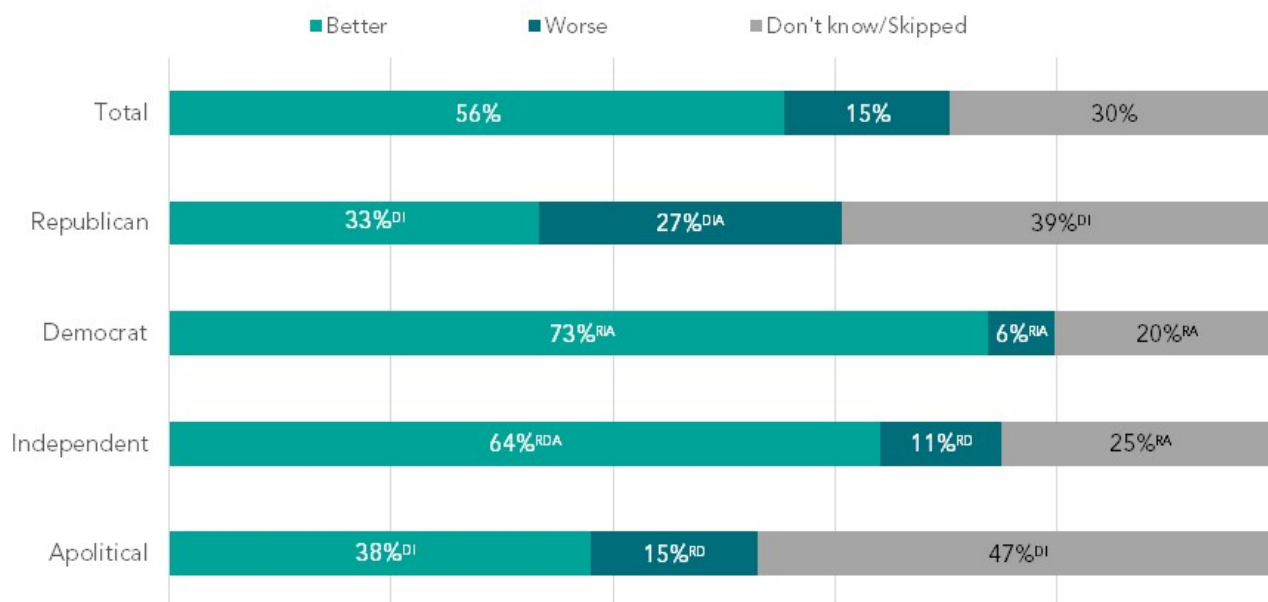
⁴ Radford, Jynnah. “Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants.” Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>

⁵ Krogstad, Jens Manuel. “On Views of Immigrants, Americans Largely Split along Party Lines.” Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/30/on-views-of-immigrants-americans-largely-split-along-party-lines/>

Republicans and apolitical people say they do not know whether immigrants make American society better or worse. Overall, 29 percent of Americans say they don't know if immigrants in the U.S. make American society better or worse; see Figure 11.

Most Americans think immigrants make American society better. Pluralities of Republicans and apolitical people are not sure.

Figure 11. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think immigrants in the U.S. make American society better or worse in the long run



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey – Immigration

The preponderance of economic research shows that immigrants fuel economic growth,⁶ and on a variety of questions, most Americans view immigrants as playing positive roles in the economy. But Republicans and, to some extent, apolitical people have more ambivalent views on immigrants' economic impacts than Democrats and Independents.

⁶ Goldin, Ian, Andrew Pitt, Benjamin Nabarro, and Kathleen Boyle. "Migration and the Economy: Economic Realities, Social Impacts and Political Choices." Citi-Oxford Martin School GPS. Oxford UK: Oxford Martin School, 2018. <https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/publications/migration-and-the-economy-economic-realities-social-impacts-and-political-choices/>

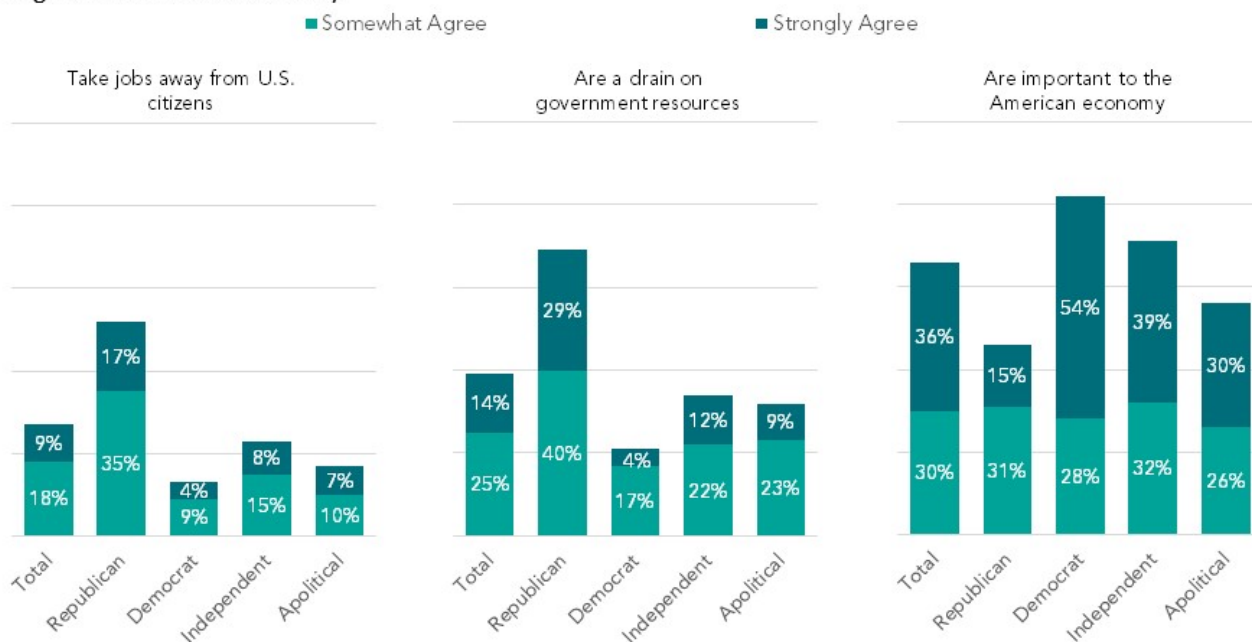
For example, while overall two-thirds of Americans think immigrants are important to the American economy, around half of Republicans and apolitical people agreed compared to strong majorities of Democrats and Independents; see Figure 12.

Only a quarter of Americans think immigrants take jobs away from U.S. citizens, with Republicans leading on this question. Just over two-thirds of Republicans strongly or somewhat agree that immigrants are a drain on government resources, a view held by far fewer Democrats, Independents and apolitical people; see Figure 12.

When it comes to undocumented immigrants, 63 percent of Americans think they mostly fill jobs that U.S. citizens do not want. Democrats (78 percent) and Independents (71 percent) are more likely to think this than Republicans (42 percent) or apolitical people (55 percent). About a quarter of Americans (26 percent) are unsure if undocumented workers fill jobs citizens do or do not want.

Most Americans think immigrants play positive roles in our nation's economy, views that are strongest among Democrats and Independents.

Figure 12. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who agree with the following statements regarding immigrants in American society



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey – Immigration

While focus group participants often talked about how hard-working immigrants are, they also described them as using up government resources, illustrating the conflicting feelings that immigrants and immigration can sometimes evoke.

“We need them. They help a lot. Overall, they’re good people and they have to work harder.” – Miami, FL; in her 40s; Latina; Independent; Immigrant

“To tell you the truth, not many people like to work those jobs. They’re low paying jobs. Immigrants, they’re willing to settle for less, to do the hard labor. And little by little build themselves up.” – New York City, NY; in his 30s; Latino; Republican; Non-immigrant

“I am Mexican. My mother is from South Texas. I do think it is a strain on the resources. In my son's school there was an influx of Somalian population. Now all of a sudden, it has a lot of overcrowding. That is a strain on everybody.” – Columbus, OH; in his 20s; White; Independent; Non-immigrant⁷

“They come here, they have children, they use our health care system, our education system. It’s a drain. We can’t build shelters for homeless people but we’re going to let illegal immigrants come in? I think it’s wrong.” – New York City, NY; in her 50s; White; Republican; Non-immigrant

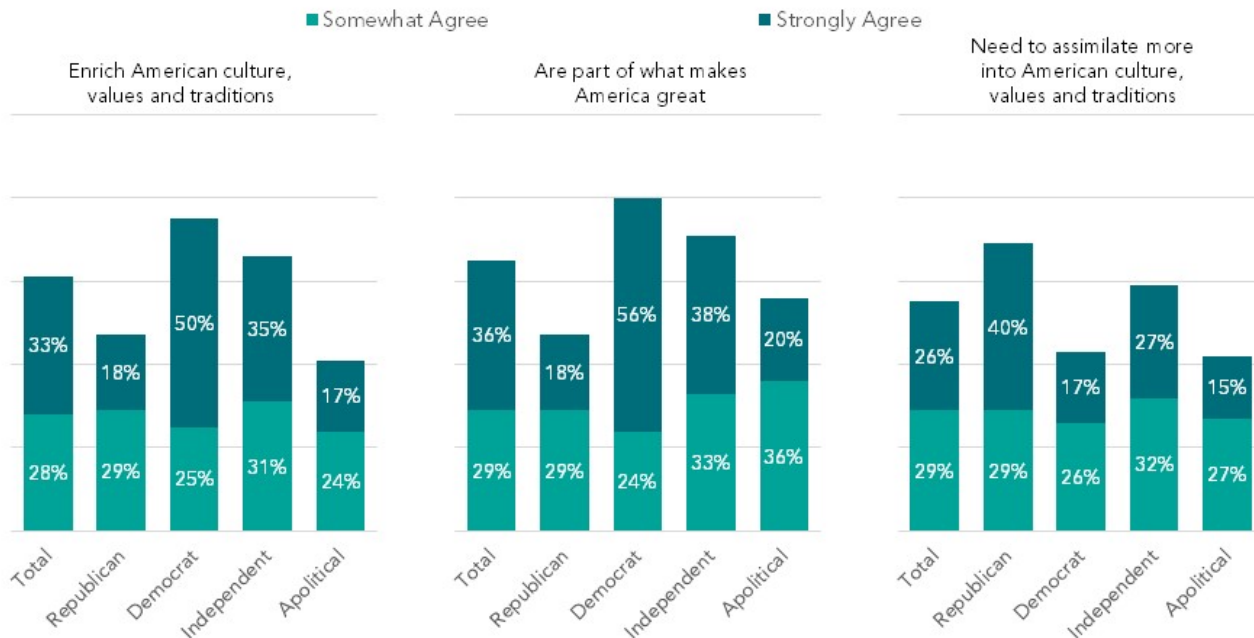
Most Americans see immigrants’ cultural contributions positively. Two-thirds say immigrants are part of what makes America great and nearly as many say they enrich American culture, values and traditions. While this is a majority position across the board, more Democrats and Independents view immigrants in these positive ways than Republicans or apolitical people; see Figure 13.

Just over half of Americans also think immigrants need to assimilate more into American cultural values and traditions, including higher proportions of Republicans and Independents than Democrats and apolitical people; see Figure 13.

⁷ This focus group participant identified himself as "white" in the participant screening process and also said he was Mexican during the focus group conversation.

Most Americans think immigrants play positive roles in our nation’s culture, views that are strongest among Democrats.

Figure 13. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who agree with the following statements regarding immigrants in American society



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Public Agenda/USA Today/IpsosHidden Common Ground Survey – Immigration

Focus group participants often acknowledged the importance of immigrants to our nation.

“There would be no America without immigration. America has been built on immigration from its inception whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.” – Jackson, MS; in his 30s; Black; Independent; Non-immigrant

“That’s what our country is founded on. It’s the talents, the perspectives that they bring from different countries. Their creativeness. You never know what they can bring to be in our country.” Jackson, MS; in his 20s; Black; Independent; Non-immigrant

“We’re all immigrants, we’ve all come here, and we all have something to offer.” – Columbus, OH; in her 30s; Black; Democrat; Non-immigrant

FINDING 3: DISAGREEMENT ALONG THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM IS PRONOUNCED REGARDING BUILDING A WALL ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER, SEPARATING FAMILIES AT THE BORDER, AND HOW TO HANDLE IMMIGRATION DURING THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS. FEW AMERICANS THINK THE WALL WILL EFFECTIVELY STOP PEOPLE FROM ENTERING THE COUNTRY ILLEGALLY, BUT MOST REPUBLICANS SAY IT IS AN IMPORTANT SYMBOL, NONETHELESS.

The ongoing process of building a wall across the U.S.-Mexico border is a highly visible feature of the Trump administration's immigration policy, and one that reveals differences between people's perceptions and priorities. A quarter of Americans -- including half of Republicans -- think continuing to build a wall will stop almost all people from crossing the border illegally; see Figure 14. As finding 4 will explain, only about a quarter of Americans know that more undocumented immigrants arrive in this country by air and overstay their visas rather than by crossing the southern border.

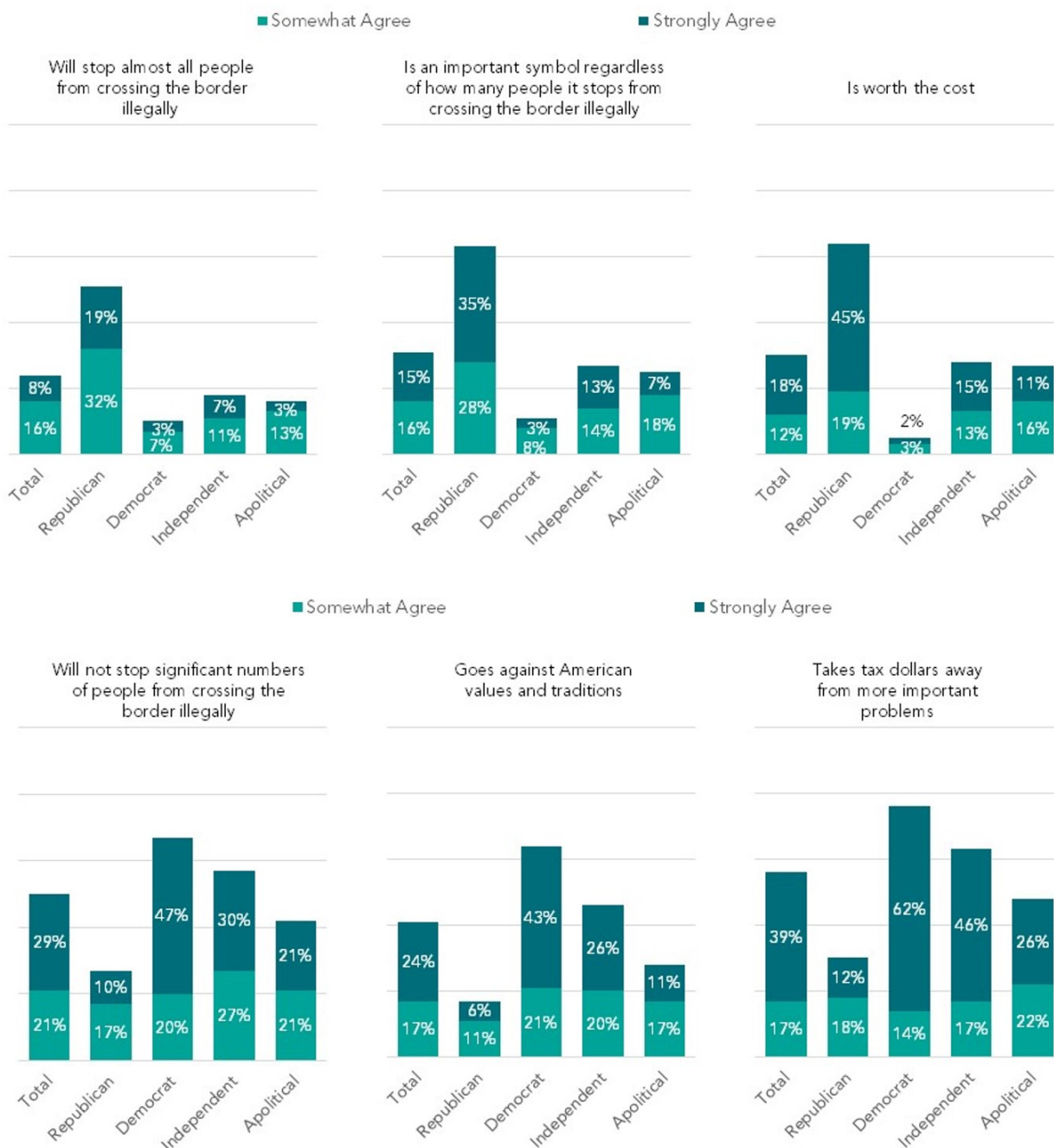
However, views on building a wall are more nuanced than simply whether it will function as promised. Two-thirds of Republicans say it is an important symbol regardless of how many people it stops from crossing the border illegally. Two-thirds of Republicans also say continuing to build a wall is worth the cost. Only a quarter of Independents or apolitical people and hardly any Democrats share Republicans' views on these questions; see Figure 14.

By contrast, two-thirds of Democrats say continuing to build a wall goes against American values and traditions, while only 28 percent of apolitical people and 17 percent of Republicans agree; see Figure 14. Another 20 percent of apolitical people do not know whether continuing to build a wall goes against American values and traditions.

Democrats and Independents also object to building the wall because they doubt that it is worth the money. Three-quarters of Democrats and two-thirds of Independents say that continuing to build a wall takes tax dollars away from more important problems. Less than a third of Republicans share this sentiment; see Figure 14.

Building a wall along the US-Mexico border reveals differences in values and priorities across political affiliations.

Figure 14. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who agree with the following statements about continuing to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey – Immigration

MORE REPUBLICANS FAVOR SEPARATING FAMILIES AT THE BORDER THAN PEOPLE OF OTHER POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS.

Only about a quarter of Americans think it is very or somewhat important to the nation's immigration policy to separate family members when they cross the border illegally so that others will be less likely to come to the U.S. A 43 percent plurality of Republicans say it is important to separate family members while fewer Democrats (23 percent) Independents (26 percent) and apolitical people (16 percent) say the same.

However, the extent of uncertainty on family separation is striking, especially among apolitical people. A 43 percent plurality of apolitical people does not know if separating families is important or not. Eighteen percent of Republicans are unsure, along with 12 percent of Democrats and 13 percent of Independents.

DURING THE CORONAVIRUS, MOST REPUBLICANS FAVOR DEPORTATIONS AND OTHER RESTRICTIVE POLICIES WHILE MOST DEMOCRATS FAVOR HALTING IMMIGRATION RAIDS.

How to address immigration during the pandemic reveals areas of mixed partisan consensus. Most Americans, regardless of political affiliation, think all immigrants entering the U.S. legally should be tested for the virus. Most also support providing undocumented immigrants with testing and treatment. Fewer Republicans and apolitical people support this than Democrats or Independents; see Figure 15.

A strong majority of Republicans support temporarily restricting all immigration, which only about half of Democrats and two-thirds of Independents support. A bare majority (56 percent) of Republicans support deporting all undocumented immigrants during the coronavirus crisis, which very few Democrats or Independents support; see Figure 15.

On the other hand, about seven in ten Democrats support halting all immigration raids while people are required to shelter in place. About half of Independents and a third of Republicans support stopping raids of this kind. Seventy-two percent of Democrats also support allowing undocumented immigrants who are essential workers to stay in the U.S. during the coronavirus crisis. Only about half of Independents and a quarter of Republicans support this measure; see Figure 15.

During the coronavirus, most Republicans favor deportations and other restrictive policies while most Democrats favor halting immigration raids.

Figure 15. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who support the government taking each of the following actions during the coronavirus crisis



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey – Immigration

FINDING 4: MANY AMERICANS ARE MISINFORMED OR UNSURE ABOUT KEY ASPECTS OF IMMIGRATION. FOR EXAMPLE, FEW PEOPLE KNOW THAT MOST IMMIGRANTS LIVE IN THE U.S. LEGALLY OR THAT MANY UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS PAY TAXES. AMERICANS WHO ARE MORE ACCURATELY INFORMED TEND TO EXPRESS MORE POSITIVE VIEWS OF IMMIGRANTS AND FAVOR MORE WELCOMING IMMIGRATION POLICIES.

Responses to three knowledge questions reveal that misperceptions about immigration are commonplace among the American public. When asking how many immigrants live in the U.S. legally, how many undocumented immigrants enter this country via the U.S.-Mexico border, and how many undocumented immigrants pay taxes, 45 percent of Americans answer all three of these knowledge questions incorrectly. Contrastingly, just 8 percent answer all correctly.

More than half of Americans without a four-year college degree (54 percent) answer none of these questions correctly, compared to 29 percent of those with at least a bachelor's degree who answer none correctly. More rural (54 percent) than urban Americans (40 percent) answer none of these questions correctly, with 47 percent of suburban Americans answering none correctly. A plurality of Republicans (60 percent) and apolitical people (55 percent) did not answer any of the knowledge questions correctly, while a plurality of Democrats (69 percent) and Independents (57 percent) answered at least one question correctly. Many Americans admit that they do not know the answers to these questions -- particularly apolitical individuals; see Figures 16, 17 and 18.

FEW AMERICANS KNOW THAT MOST IMMIGRANTS ARE LIVING IN THE U.S. LEGALLY.

About three quarters of immigrants in the U.S. (77 percent) are living here legally and about a quarter are undocumented.⁸ But less than a third of Americans know that most immigrants are living in the U.S. legally; see Figure 16. When focus group moderators explained that three quarters of immigrants live in the U.S. legally, participants expressed considerable surprise.

“I didn’t think it was that many that was legal.” – Jackson, MS; in her 50s; White; Democrat; Non-immigrant

“I really did think it was higher. The way people make it sound you would think it was so much higher.” New York City, NY; in her 20s; Latina; Independent; Non-immigrant

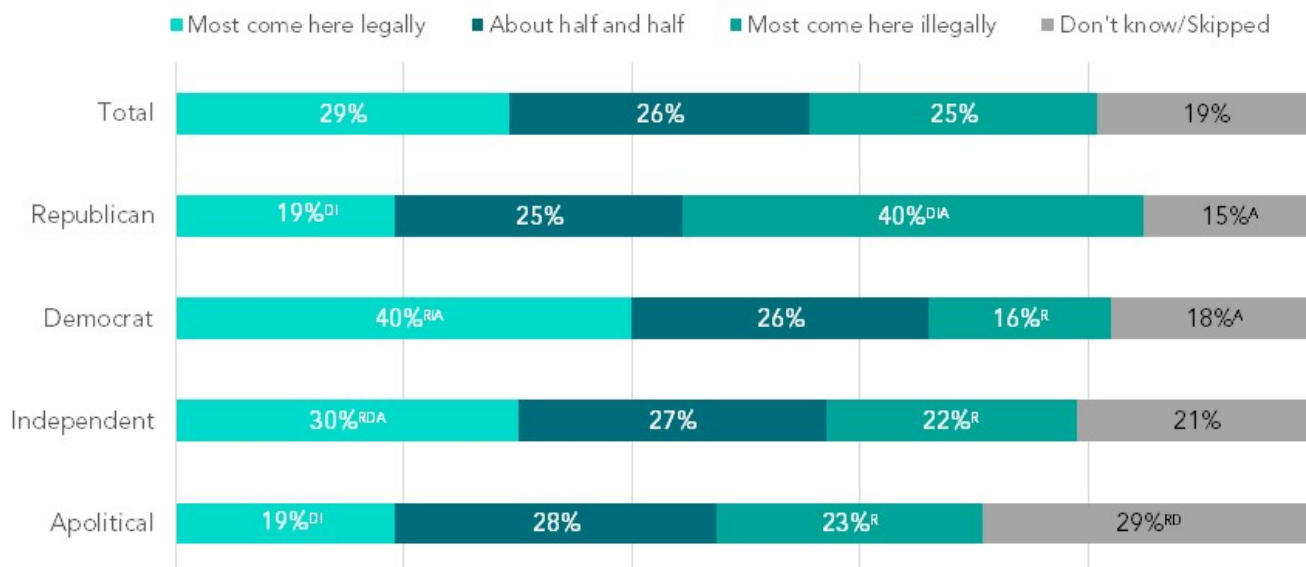
“I would be interested in seeing those numbers. It depends on who you get your news from as to what news you get. You really have to check things out.” – Jackson, MS; in her 70s; White; Republican; Non-immigrant

⁸ Radford, Jynnah. “Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants.” Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2019.

Fewer Republicans and apolitical people know that most immigrants are living in the U.S. legally than Democrats or Independents. Almost one in five Americans admit that they do not know, including 28 percent of apolitical people; see Figure 16.

Few Americans know that most immigrants are living in the U.S. legally.

Figure 16. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think most immigrants in the United States have come here legally or illegally



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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FEW AMERICANS KNOW THAT MOST UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS OVERSTAYED THEIR VISAS RATHER THAN CROSSING THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER.

Most undocumented immigrants -- 62 percent -- arrived in the U.S. legally by air and overstayed their visas. Only 38 percent illegally crossed the U.S.-Mexico border.⁹ Yet few Americans (only 28 percent) know that; see Figure 17.

⁹ Warren, Robert. "U.S. Undocumented Population Continued to Fall from 2016 to 2017 and Visa Overstays Significantly Exceeded Illegal Crossings for the Seventh Consecutive Year." *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 7, no. 1 (2019): 19–22.

A plurality (38 percent) of Americans think most undocumented immigrants are here because they illegally crossed the southern border. This misconception is particularly common among Republicans. A third of Americans say they do not know how most undocumented immigrants arrived, including half of apolitical people; see Figure 17.

As with the question of how many immigrants arrive illegally, focus group participants also expressed considerable surprise when moderators explained how many undocumented immigrants enter the country by air rather than by crossing the southern border.

Few Americans know that most undocumented immigrants overstayed their visas rather than crossing the US-Mexico border.

Figure 17. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think most undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. are here because they illegally crossed the U.S.-Mexico border or are here because they overstayed their work, student or travel visas



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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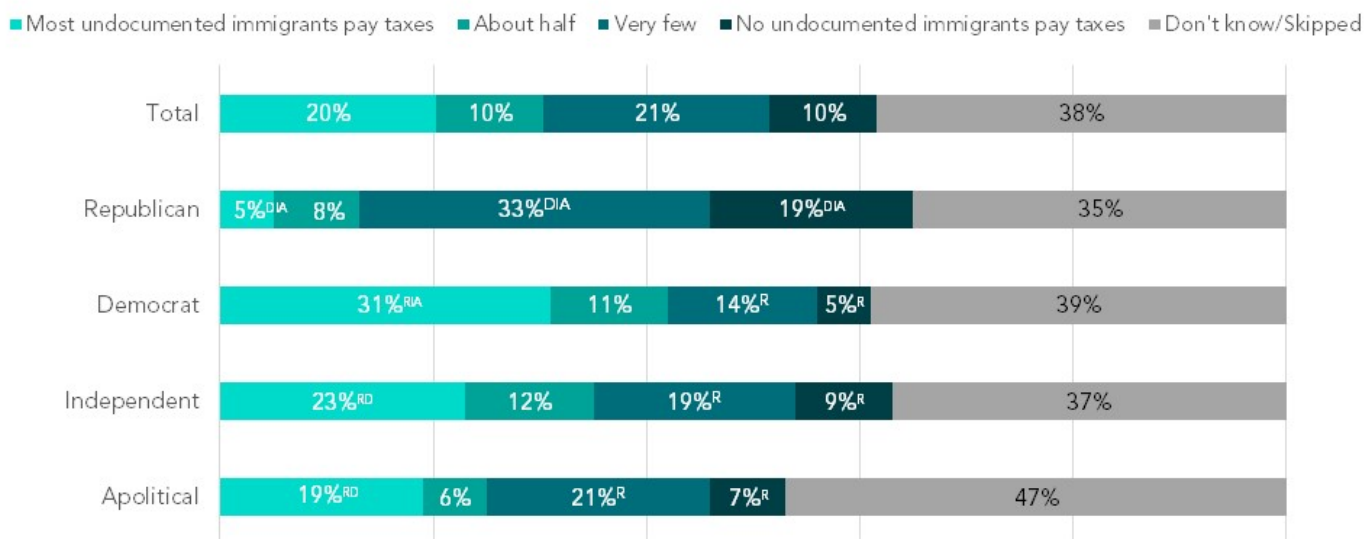
FEW AMERICANS KNOW HOW MANY UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS PAY TAXES.

About half of undocumented immigrants file income tax returns, typically using Individual Tax Identification Numbers. Many who do not file returns nonetheless have income taxes deducted from their paychecks. Undocumented immigrants also pay sales taxes and property taxes.¹⁰

However, a 38 percent plurality of Americans does not know whether most undocumented immigrants pay federal, state or local taxes, including 45 percent of apolitical people who say they do not know. A third of Americans think very few or no undocumented immigrants pay federal, state or local taxes. This view is most common among Republicans, with more than half saying that few or no undocumented immigrants pay these taxes; see Figure 18.

Few Americans know how many undocumented immigrants pay taxes.

Figure 18. Percent of Americans by political affiliation who think most, half, very few or no undocumented immigrants pay federal, state or local taxes



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; Republican, N=325; Democrat, N=345; Independent, N=284; Apolitical, N=100

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding

Estimates indicated with a ^R are statistically significant from the Republican estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^D are statistically significant from the Democrat estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^I are statistically significant from the Independent estimate. Estimates indicated with a ^A are statistically significant from the Apolitical estimate. Estimates are statistically significant at the p<0.05 level.

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¹⁰ Gee, Lisa Christensen, Matthew Gardner, Misha E. Hill, and Meg Wiehe. “Undocumented Immigrants’ State & Local Tax Contributions.” Washington DC: Institute on Taxation & Economic Policy, 2017.

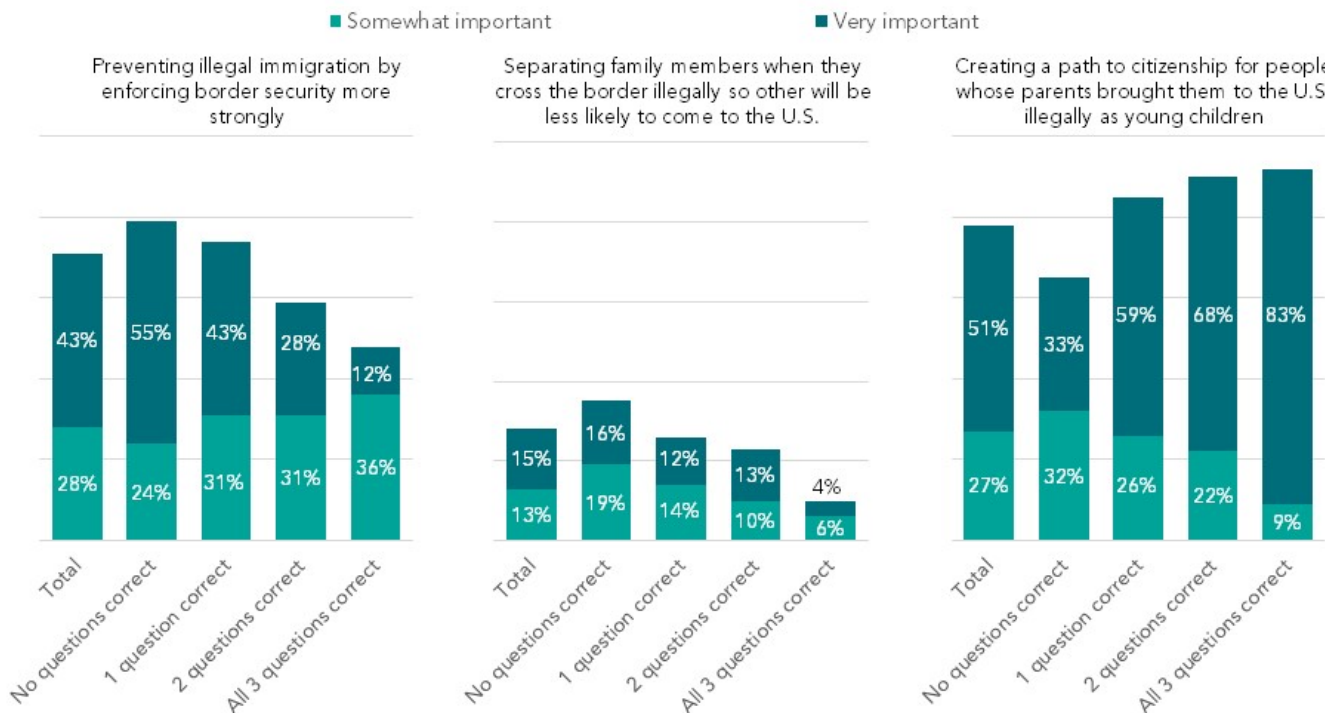
AMERICANS WHO ARE MORE ACCURATELY INFORMED ABOUT IMMIGRATION TEND TO FAVOR MORE WELCOMING IMMIGRATION POLICIES AND TO BE MORE SKEPTICAL OF BUILDING A WALL.

Americans who answer more questions correctly -- about how few immigrants are living in the U.S. legally, about how few undocumented immigrants crossed the southern border and how many undocumented immigrants pay taxes -- tend to favor more welcoming policies regarding both documented and undocumented immigration, and to place less importance on border security measures.

For example, people who answer more of these questions correctly are also more likely to believe that the government should allow undocumented immigrants to remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens. In fact, those who answer two or more questions correctly are more than twice as likely to agree with this than those answering no questions correctly (29 percent of those answering none correctly versus 73 percent of those answering two questions correctly, 76 percent of those answering three questions correctly). People who answer more questions correctly are also more likely to support creating a path to citizenship for people whose parents brought them to the U.S. illegally as young children. Moreover, they are less likely to support separating family members when they cross the border illegally; see Figure 19.

Americans who are more accurately informed about immigration tend to favor more welcoming policies towards undocumented immigrants.

Figure 19. Percent of Americans by number of correct answers to knowledge questions who think the following are important to U.S. immigration policy overall



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; No questions correct, N=477; 1 question correct, N=310; 2 questions correct, N=181; 3 questions correct, N=86

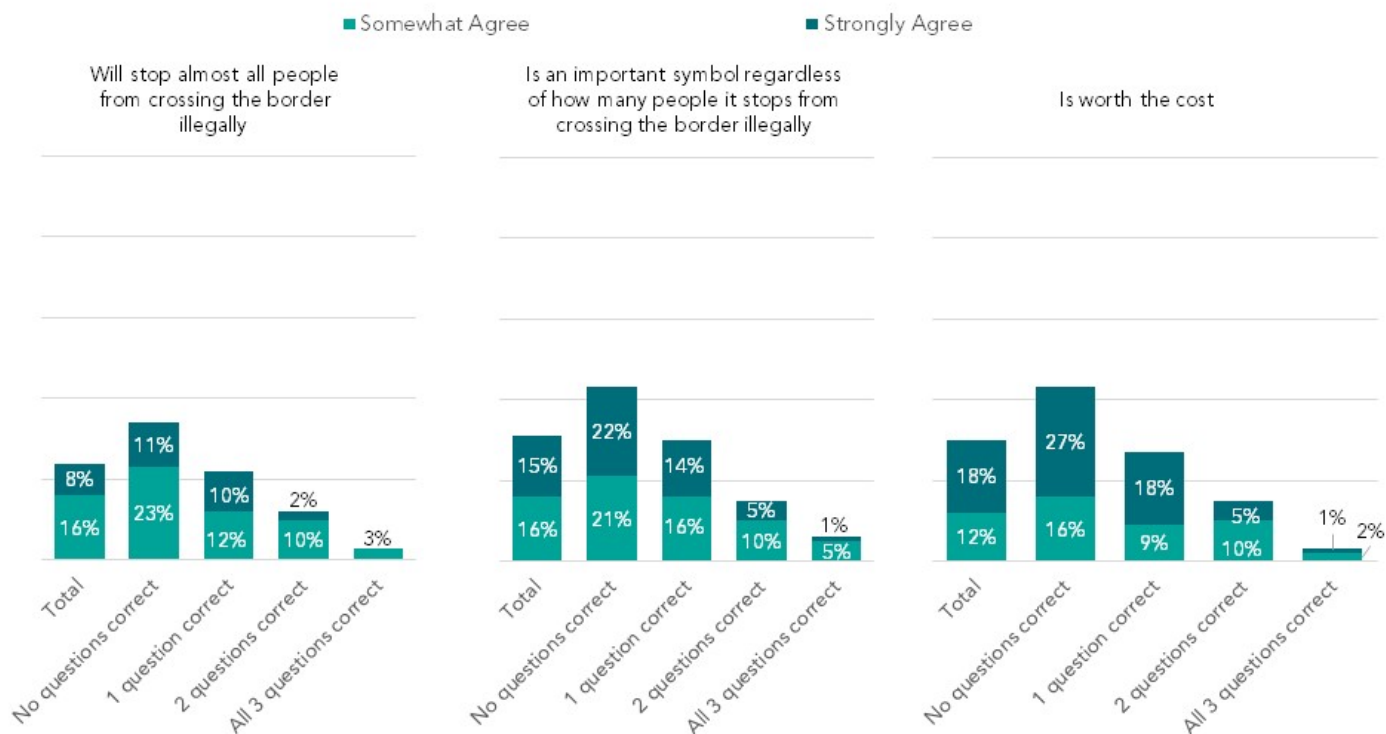
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People who are more aware of the true picture of immigration in the U.S. also tend to be more skeptical about building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. Only three percent of Americans who answered all knowledge questions correctly say that continuing to build a wall would stop almost all illegal border crossings or that it is worth the cost; see Figure 20.

Americans who answer more of these questions correctly also tend to be more welcoming of all forms of legal, documented immigration, including people who are escaping war and violence as well as those who are highly skilled.

Americans who are better informed about immigration tend to be more skeptical of building a wall.

Figure 20. Percent of Americans by number of correct answers to knowledge questions who agree with the following statements about continuing to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; No questions correct, N=477; 1 question correct, N=310; 2 questions correct, N=181; 3 questions correct, N=86

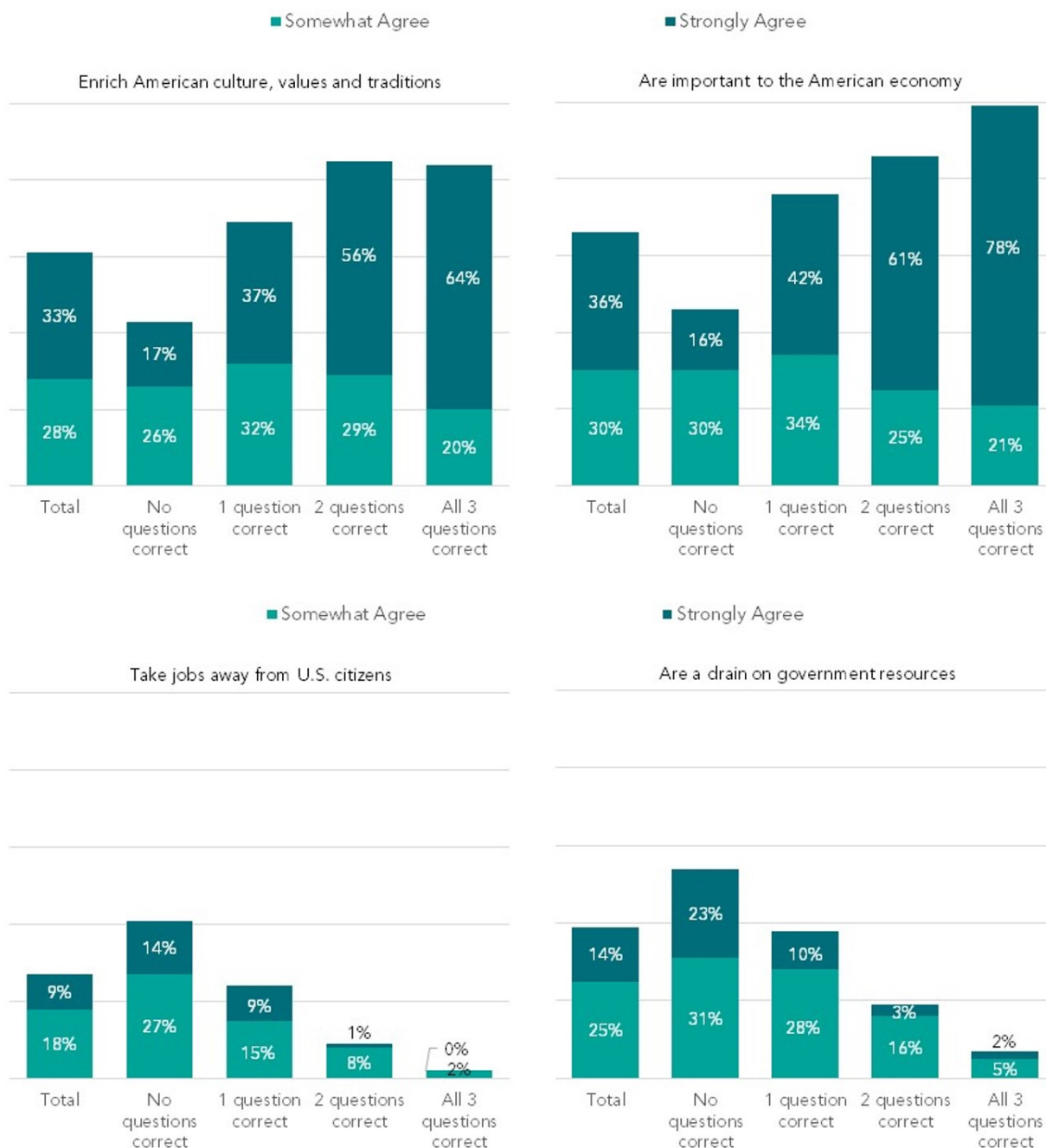
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AMERICANS WHO ARE MORE ACCURATELY INFORMED ABOUT IMMIGRATION TEND TO EXPRESS MORE POSITIVE VIEWS OF IMMIGRANTS.

Americans who answer more of these questions correctly also tend to express more positive attitudes about immigrants. For example, people who answer more of these questions correctly more often say that immigrants make American society better, enrich the culture, and are important to the economy. Fewer people who answer these questions correctly think that immigrants take jobs away from U.S. citizens; see Figure 21.

Americans who are more accurately informed about immigration tend to express more positive views of immigrants.

Figure 21. Percent of Americans by number of correct answers to knowledge questions who agree with the following statements regarding immigrants in American society



Base: All respondents, N=1,054; No questions correct, N=477; 1 question correct, N=310; 2 questions correct, N=181; 3 questions correct, N=86

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SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS:

While immigration is often framed as inherently controversial, this research illuminates not just where Americans disagree on the subject but also where they agree. Building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border is predictably divisive, but Americans across the political spectrum agree on many other aspects of immigration policy. These include creating a path to citizenship for people brought to the U.S. illegally as children; quickly and fairly processing people who enter the U.S. illegally; enforcing border security; and welcoming immigrants who are skilled, financially secure or escaping war.

Overall, Democrats and Independents tend to be more welcoming towards immigrants than Republicans and apolitical people, who often favor more restrictive immigration policies. But rather than the simplistic, polarized picture depicted in much political rhetoric and media coverage, the data paint a more interesting and nuanced portrait of how Americans truly feel about immigration. Democrats and Independents evince consistent and stable views while Republicans and apolitical people tend to hold ambivalent or mixed views or are otherwise uncertain about how they feel. This suggests that the views of the latter groups are likely to be more reactive to dramatic events and influenced by external cues. It also means that their views could evolve as they learn and think more about immigration in America.

In fact, our research suggests that the significant “hidden common ground” among Americans on immigration could grow as the public learns more and corrects a number of commonplace misperceptions. We asked about several points of fact: how many immigrants are living in the U.S. legally as opposed to being undocumented, how undocumented immigrants came to the U.S., and the proportion of undocumented immigrants who pay taxes. Those who answer more of these questions incorrectly also tend to have more restrictive attitudes toward immigration. This suggests that if people’s perceptions were to accord more closely with reality, they might develop less restrictive attitudes toward immigration. At the same time, common ground around those sorts of policy preferences might grow and strengthen.

One could argue that such “learning” is unlikely to happen because people are biased toward evidence that accords with their preexisting beliefs and prejudices. On the other hand, there were no hard and fast beliefs among survey respondents with more restrictive policy preferences. Instead, we saw inconsistent, uncertain, ambivalent and changeable responses. The large number of “Don’t Know/Not Sure” responses in many instances opens the door to learning and change that could lead to more common ground going forward.

Still, while the research suggests room for more consistently welcoming views toward immigration to grow among the American people as a whole, not all the areas of common ground described by our data fit snugly on the left side of the partisan ledger. We find, for example, a solid cross-partisan consensus for strong border security -- there is no call here for open or loose borders. We also find low tolerance across the board for undocumented immigrants who commit crimes or fail to pay taxes. American overall want to set some conditions on any potential path to citizenship -- starting with paying taxes and obeying the law.

On balance, then, the research offers reasons to believe that more common ground - including more welcoming and inclusive public sentiments toward immigrants and immigration - could grow as people learn more and wrestle with the issue. And while correcting misperceptions may be one step towards more common ground, simply injecting data into the public conversation is rarely enough to change people's minds. But given the extent of ambivalence on this issue, creative engagement and communications that dials down divisive rhetoric and fosters more informed and empathic public consideration and conversation could lay the groundwork for evolving attitudes and practical problem-solving. Certainly, those aspects of immigration policy on which Americans already agree, offer promising ground on which to build greater consensus across the American public in the months and years to come.

WHERE AMERICANS STAND ON IMMIGRATION

A Hidden Common Ground Report from

Public Agenda

By David Schleifer and Will Friedman

2020

Available online at: <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/where-americans-stand-on-immigration-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>

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The Charles Koch Foundation supports research, educational programs, and civil discourse to advance an understanding of how people can best live together in peace and prosperity. The Foundation provides grants to support a wide range of inquiry on issues including criminal justice and policing reform, free speech and open inquiry, foreign policy, economic opportunity, and those addressed through its Courageous Collaborations initiative among others.



ABOUT THE ROCKEFELLER BROTHERS FUND

Founded in 1940, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund advances social change that contributes to a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. The RBF's grantmaking is organized around three themes: Democratic Practice, Peacebuilding, and Sustainable Development. Through its grantmaking, the Fund supports efforts to expand knowledge, clarify values and critical choices, nurture creative expression, and shape public policy.