

Political Implications of U.S. Public Attitudes Toward Immigration on the Immigration Policymaking Process

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Policymakers and researchers alike are concerned about the political challenges that liberal states face when attempting to regulate immigration through policy reform amid increased migration and trade (Freeman 1994; Hollifield 1992). At times, U.S. immigration (and immigration policy) corresponds with the ebb and flow of economic conditions—namely that during times of economic prosperity, policy is more expansive, and during times of economic downturns, it tends to be more restrictive. However, there are times when the U.S. government passes expansive immigration measures in the face of economic downturns. Irrespective of real-world conditions that can be traced to increased globalization and trade and to increased levels of both illegal and legal immigration, governmental drives toward expansive or restrictive immigration policy are mediated by the public's acceptance of immigration and immigration policy.

I argue that liberal governments must take the public will into consideration when making policy. When does public opinion matter to the policy process? Anthony Downs (1972) tells us that not every issue that gains public attention gets addressed on the policy agenda. Indeed, the public, when confronted with the economic and/or social costs, may lose interest and cease pressuring the government to make policy reforms. For example, one policy option for curbing the hiring of illegal labor is to require both citizens and immigrants to carry a national identification card. Gallup polls show that, until recently, the American public has

considered a national identity card too great a cost to pay for resolving the problem of identifying undocumented migrants (cited in Hunt 2003).

Immigration reform has long been a source of internal divisions in both the Republican and Democratic parties (Tichenor 2002). Because of the potential for policy stalemate, parties have an incentive to keep immigration off the policy agenda as much as possible. For example, negotiations around the North American Free Trade Agreement did not include provisions for regulating immigration from Mexico or Canada. The trade agreements were devoted to policy development for the transfer of goods and services.

Lawmakers were able to keep immigration issues off the government's policy agenda for two key reasons. First, opinion polls indicated that the American public considered immigration to be much less important than other issues, such as the state of the economy, crime levels, and, after the 9/11 attacks, the war in Iraq and terrorism. Second, the American public had seldom punished elected officials for immigration policy stances that may have been counter to public preferences.

Heightened public attention to immigration has exacerbated the polarization within and between parties over immigration reform. In addition, factors such as rising levels of illegal immigration since the mid-1990s, the effects of globalization on domestic labor markets, public uncertainty about individual and national economic well-being, and public concerns about national security due to the porous U.S. border have pushed out in the open the parties' internal divisions about the most appropriate policy alternative for addressing unauthorized and legal immigration.

Public Attitudes Toward Immigration Issues: Before and After 9/11

For decades, Americans have displayed ambivalence toward immigrants and immigration policy (Fetzer 2000; Simon 1985; Simon and Alexander 1993; Simon and Lynch 1999). At certain times, Americans profess appreciation for the presence of immigrants and even embrace the notion of immigrants' importance to the nation's development. For example, American national identity is often associated with the concept of being a nation of immigrants (Reimers 1992). Yet, Americans express animosity toward each new wave of migrants into the nation's social, political, and economic fabric.

As public opinion scholars Simon and Lynch (1999) demonstrate, the American public expresses positive feelings about immigrants who came to America in the distant past and negative feelings toward immigrants who came during whatever period the survey was conducted. Since the late nineteenth century, Americans have regarded each new wave of migrants as a threat to economic

well-being and as a challenge to cherished touchstones of American identity. In a recent study, anthropologist Leo Chavez (2001) investigated the interplay of public discourse and media coverage of immigration on ten American national magazine covers from 1965 to 1999 and how the coverage coincided with real-world conditions such as economic upswings and downturns. Patterns of positive and negative depictions coincided with shifts in the economy. Positive depictions appeared during economic upswings, while negative images and stories of immigrants ran during economic downturns. Chavez finds that national magazines published positive depictions of immigrants on their covers during the Independence Day period, a time when Americans are open to embracing their immigrant heritage.

Three developments in U.S. public attitudes have emerged since the 2001 terrorist attacks. First, Americans have shifted their thinking about the salience or importance of immigration issues. Second, they have changed their level of attentiveness to immigration as a national problem. Third, as awareness of immigration issues and divisiveness in political parties have increased, they have begun to use immigration as an evaluative criterion for vote choice.

This study analyzes the causes and implications of these shifts in public attitudes toward immigration on the U.S. political landscape. Specifically, I address how changes in public attitudes have political implications for the 2006 midterm elections and on current policy reform efforts. Real-world conditions shape U.S. immigration policy and the country's ability to control unwanted migration. The impact of these real-world conditions cannot be understood without taking into consideration the role of U.S. public attitudes in the policy process. I argue that the impact of these real-world conditions on immigration is mediated by public perceptions of these factors.

Ebb and Flow of Public Attentiveness to Immigration Issues: Before and After 9/11

Before 9/11, the American public paid less attention to immigration than to other issues. When asked what they think is the most important problem facing the nation, Americans consistently rank immigration at the very bottom of public priorities, with crime, the economy, and the war in Iraq consistently polling as most important.

For example, political controversy over 1994 California Proposition 187 focused national public attention on illegal immigration issues. The California initiative sparked public debate over whether immigrants constituted a fiscal burden by overcrowding schools and hospitals, depressing wages, and using scarce social-service resources without paying into the public coffers. The public increased its attentiveness to immigration, particularly amnesty provisions for illegal migrants in the U.S., as well as guest-worker programs and the problem of unauthorized migration from Mexico.

Immigration moved from regional to national policy agendas. Congress addressed illegal immigration after the 1994 midterm elections, during which the Republican Party regained the majority of the House and Senate. It passed the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.

After this flurry of legislative activity, public attentiveness to immigration waned for the rest of the 1990s. But after 9/11, Americans began to pay more attention to immigration. Several surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press from 2005 to 2006 show that immigration moved to the top tier of most important problems facing the nation. Table 1 compares the results of five Pew surveys conducted between November 2005 and September 2006. The September survey shows that immigration ranks as one of the top six most important problems. The issues Americans considered most important were the war in Iraq (25 percent), terrorism (14 percent), the economy (9 percent), energy prices (7 percent), immigration and government (6 percent each).

Public Understanding of Immigration Issues: Before and After 9/11

The public exhibits fairly consistent and articulated opinions about immigrants and immigration policy. Prior to 9/11, Americans generally understood immigration issues primarily as economic, fiscal, or social problems. Problems tended to focus on job displacement issues (for example, whether immigrants take jobs away from native-born workers or take jobs that native-born workers do not want) and the impact of immigrants on social resources (whether immigrants act as a drain on social services or represent a net gain by way of paying federal taxes).

Two significant changes in public understanding about immigration and immigrant issues emerged after the 9/11 attacks. The first involves a shift in public perceptions of national security. Before 9/11, U.S. national security was often

Table 1
Most Important Problem (*Percent*)

Q: "What do you think is the most important problem facing the nation?"

	Nov. 2005	Jan. 2006	March 2006	May 2006	Sept. 2006
War in Iraq	29	23	20	18	25
Terrorism	6	6	8	5	14
Economy	11	11	7	7	9
Energy prices	4	5	5	14	7
Immigration	2	3	4	10	6
Government/politics	7	5	10	13	6

SOURCE: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2006b).

framed as an international or foreign-policy issue. After 9/11, Americans began to view security as a domestic issue. The second, related shift involves changes in the perceived threat that illegal immigration poses to the nation. Before 9/11, the threat of legal and illegal immigration was contextualized as threats to personal or national economic well-being or as threats to national identity. After 9/11, the public began to perceive immigration in general, and unauthorized immigration in particular, as threats to domestic security. Unauthorized migration became linked with terrorist infiltration of the U.S. through illegal border crossing.

These two shifts in the public's understanding or framing of immigration issues, coupled with increased public attentiveness relative to other issues, helped move immigration from the margins to the center of public and national governmental agendas.

Impact of Public Attitudes Toward Immigration on Voters' Decisionmaking: Before and After 9/11

A key implication of changes in the context and level of public attentiveness to immigration is the degree to which immigration now influences U.S. electoral politics. Until recently, there was little evidence that voters use their attitudes toward immigration as a factor for making electoral decisions. Several recurrent issues are high on the national policy agenda: crime, health care, the state of the economy, and unemployment (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Presidential races have usually involved voters' evaluations of which candidate would be better on addressing crucial electoral issues such as crime, as in the 1988 Bush–Dukakis race (Mendelberg 2001); who is more fit to turn the economy around, as in the 1992 Clinton–Bush race; or who is more fit to handle terrorism or the war in Iraq, as in the 2004 Bush–Kerry race.

Tarrance Group and Lake Research Partners (2006a, 2006b) surveys of registered voters conducted March 26–28, 2006, and July 9–13, 2006, however, provide preliminary evidence that voters are connecting their evaluations of immigration with their prospective vote choices. The March 2006 survey asked voters: "What issue is the most important for your member of Congress to deal with?" The top response was the war in Iraq (15 percent). Next, tied with jobs and the economy at 11 percent, was immigration. The significance of this finding is that immigration ranks at the same level of importance as issues that voters traditionally use to make voting decisions.

A large percentage of the respondents viewed immigration as a problem of serious magnitude. When asked about the severity of the problem, 61 percent considered illegal immigration to be a very serious (28 percent) or extremely serious (33 percent) problem.

The Tarrance survey results suggest that this perception has a "priming effect" on voters' decisionmaking. In other words, when voters pay attention to immigra-

tion issues, they use their understanding of the issue to evaluate the performance of elected representatives (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Table 2 displays the results of respondents' answers to the following question:

"What if there were a candidate who stood for most of the things you believe in, but took a stand on immigration that you really disagreed with? Would you probably/definitely vote for that candidate, or probably/definitely not vote for that candidate?"

Sixty-four percent of respondents said they would vote for a candidate who supports policy preferences with which the voter disagrees. One in three voters, or 30 percent, would *not* vote for a candidate who disagrees with the voter's policy preferences.

The July 2006 Tarrance survey asked respondents about their attitudes toward the very different congressional legislative reform bills debated in the House and Senate.¹ The House bill (HR 4437), referred to as the enforcement-only bill, provides resources for the deportation of unauthorized (illegal) immigrants with no option of returning to the U.S. The bill passed the House in December 2005 on a vote of 239–182, with 92 percent of Republicans favoring and 82 percent of Democrats opposing. The Senate bill (S 2611), referred to as the comprehensive immigration bill, provides expansive policy options for addressing the problem of illegal immigration and the presence of illegal immigrants already in the U.S. These include a guest-worker program and a process for unauthorized migrants who have been in the U.S. for at least two years to apply for permanent residence after payment of penalties and taxes (a pathway to citizenship). The Senate bill passed in May 2006 on a vote of 62–36, with 90 percent of Democrats approving and 59 percent of Republicans opposing.

Responses to several key survey questions about these bills give evidence for the shift of the immigration issue from the margins to the center of national politics (*Tables 3A and 3B*). A majority of respondents, or 62 percent, indicated that they felt illegal immigration was an important problem that Congress needs to resolve in 2006 (33 percent called it "extremely important" and 29 percent said it was "very important").

Table 2
Voter Attitudes on Immigration Reform (Percent)

"What if there were a candidate who stood for most of the things you believe in, but took a stand on immigration that you really disagreed with? Would you probably/definitely vote for that candidate, or probably/definitely not vote for that candidate?"

Probably/definitely vote for:	64
Probably/definitely not vote for:	30

NOTE: Number = 1,010; margin of error \pm 3.1 percent.

SOURCE: Tarrance Group and Lake Research Partners (2006a), March 26–28, 2006.

Yet, respondents were ambivalent about the policy alternatives on the government’s agenda. They were asked (Q2, Table 3A) if they would oppose or support legislation that would tighten borders, toughen penalties on employers and workers who violate immigration laws, create an expanded guest worker program, and make most current illegal immigrants ineligible for citizenship. Forty-six percent favored this restrictive measure, while 49 percent opposed it. In comparison, there was significant divergence in responses to the comprehensive bill (Q1, Table 3A). Seventy-one percent favored the comprehensive bill, while 23 percent opposed it.

The Tarrance study also polled respondents about the connection of their policy preferences on immigration with their prospective vote choices/support of candidates. Respondents were divided on whether they would vote for a candidate who supports the enforcement-driven policy option (Q3, Table 3A). Forty-

Table 3A
U.S. Voter Attitudes Toward Immigration Policy Reform Options (Percent)

Would you favor or oppose passage of this legislation?

Q1: "...Provide resources to greatly increase border security; impose penalties on employers who hire illegal workers; allow additional workers to come to the U.S. to work for a temporary period; create a system in which illegal immigrants could come forward and register, pay a fine and receive a temporary-worker permit; provide these temporary workers with a multiyear path to earned citizenship if they get to the end of the line and meet certain requirements for living crime free, learning English, paying taxes?"

Q2: "...Tighten the borders; put tougher penalties on employers and workers who violate immigration laws; create an expanded guest-worker program that allows people to work here only temporarily; and most current illegal immigrants would never be eligible for citizenship?"

Follow-up question asked after Q1 (comprehensive) and Q2 (enforcement only):

Q3: "...And, would you be more likely or less likely to vote for a candidate who supports this legislation?"

	Q1 Comprehensive ("provide resources")	Q2 Enforcement only ("tighten borders")
Favor	71	46
Unsure	6	5
Oppose	23	49

	Q3 Comprehensive	Enforcement only
More likely	66	45
Unsure	9	6
No difference	4	2
Less likely	22	47

NOTE: Number = 1,000; margin of error ± 3 percent.

SOURCE: Tarrance Group and Lake Research Partners (2006b), July 9–13, 2006.

five percent said they were more likely and 47 percent less likely to support a candidate who supports this legislation.

When asked about supporting a candidate who delays action or passes enforcement-focused legislation (*Q4 and Q5, Table 3B*), respondents were also divided. For example, 58 percent said they were less likely to support a candidate who supports restrictive legislation, compared with 38 percent who were more likely to do so.

Political Impact of Public Perception of Increased Levels of U.S. Immigration

It is important that we examine the relationship between increased immigration flows and U.S. public attitudes and the impact of that relationship on the policy process. The annual level of legal admissions had steadily increased beginning in the 1970s. Following the 9/11 attacks, legal admissions decreased from 1,059,356 in 2002 to 703,542 in 2003 but increased in subsequent years, from 957,883 legal admissions in 2004 to 1,122,373 in 2005 and to 1,266,264 in 2006.² According to 2006 U.S. Census reports, the foreign born compose 12.4 percent of the total U.S. population.³

The effects of increased levels of legal admissions on the potential for policy reform are mediated by public perceptions of the consequences. When the public connects increased levels of unauthorized immigration to specific costs borne by the public or state, it increases the likelihood that citizens will call for restrictive reforms. However, research provides mixed support for this thesis. Jack Citrin

Table 3B

U.S. Voter Attitudes Toward Immigration Policy Reform Options (Percent)

"Please tell me whether you would be more likely or less likely to support a candidate for Congress who supported that solution to the current immigration problem."

Q4: "Passing no legislation this year and taking a fresh look at this issue next year when election year politics will not be looming over the process."

Q5: "Passing legislation which only increases border security and enacts tougher penalties on employers but does not include a guest-worker program and does not include a path to citizenship for current illegal immigrants."

	Q4	Q5
	Pass no law this year	Pass enforcement only law
More likely	49	38
Unsure	5	3
No difference	1	1
Less likely	45	58

NOTE: Number = 1,000; margin of error \pm 3 percent.

SOURCE: Tarrance Group and Lake Research Partners (2006b), July 9–13, 2006.

and colleagues (1997) examine the degree to which Americans' attitudes toward immigrants are based on their economic situations and concerns—namely, labor market competition, overall concern for the U.S. economy, and concerns due to increases in the percentage of foreign born. The researchers find that respondents in states with high levels of foreign born are no more likely than respondents in other parts of the country to support restricting immigration levels.

A 2006 Pew Research Center survey of voters in red (Republican) and blue (Democratic) counties shows similar responses in attitudes toward illegal immigration (*Table 4*). Red county residents have far less contact with the foreign born than residents in blue county areas. When asked if illegals should leave the country, 44 percent of residents in counties with higher concentrations of foreign born (blue) agreed, compared with 57 percent of red county residents. Voter partisanship and concentration of foreign born seem to matter. Sixty percent of Republican respondents in red counties who reported their personal finances as excellent agreed with the statement, while 39 percent of their Democratic counterparts believed illegal immigrants should leave the country.

What are the options for policy reform resulting from shifts in public perception about the negative consequences of either legal or unauthorized migration? The public seems responsive to enforcement policies for regulating illegal immigration and overall favors decreasing or at least maintaining current levels of legal admissions.

Table 4
Differences in Voter Attitudes in Red and Blue Counties in the U.S. (Percent)

	Red counties	Blue counties	Swing counties
<i>“Illegals should leave the U.S.”</i>	57	44	54
Total personal finances			
Excellent/good	52	45	51
Only fair/poor	62	43	56
Among Republicans			
Excellent/good	60	51	59
Only fair/poor	72	65	71
Among Democrats			
Excellent/good	39	44	48
Only fair/poor	53	38	54

NOTE: The term “red counties” denotes counties where the majority of voters vote for Republican presidential candidates. “Blue counties” refers to those counties where the majority of the voters vote for Democratic presidential candidates. The terms are generally used to refer to states.

SOURCE: Doherty (2006).

Where We Are Now: Political Impact of Immigration and Public Opinion

Immigration Policy Reform in the 109th Congress (2005–06)

To some observers, immigration as a major issue seems to have come out of nowhere and captured the attention of the public, the media, and national government. Media pundits on all the major news networks regularly feature programs about “broken borders,” invasions of illegal immigrants, and the threat of immigrants to job security for native workers. Cities such as Hazleton, Pennsylvania, have taken up immigration in their city council meetings. Hazleton’s mayor and city council voted to fine landlords for renting to illegal immigrants and to withhold business permits to employers of undocumented workers. In Arizona, a group of citizens called the Arizona Minutemen has “volunteered” its services to the U.S. Border Patrol, its leader claiming that the efforts are necessary because the federal government has dropped the ball in protecting U.S. borders. Public protests and demonstrations by immigrant rights activists were joined by a body of newcomers, the immigrants themselves. Thousands of immigrants, legal and undocumented, took to the streets of major U.S. cities such as Dallas, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago to protest the restrictive immigration-policy reform measures debated in Congress as well as in cities and states across the country.

Republican Party leaders in the House and Senate are divided over supporting enforcement-only over comprehensive efforts to curtail illegal immigration. However, the current state of affairs in immigration policy is due to a confluence of economic, political, and institutional factors at work in this highly contentious policy arena.

The current policy reform efforts are taking place in a very challenging political environment. I will identify and discuss each of the factors shaping these policy efforts. Next, I will discuss the policy reform alternatives in Congress.

The following factors are at play in the current immigration policy debates and policy process:

1. Internal divisions in the Republican and Democratic parties
2. Divisions between the House and Senate
3. Immigration’s salience to the president’s policy agenda
4. Increases in the percentage of foreign born in the U.S. and a shift in the destinations of the foreign born from traditionally high-impact states (Florida, California, and Texas) to new states (Indiana, Georgia, and North Carolina)
5. The return of highly negative public sentiment toward immigrants and public attentiveness to illegal immigrants

In 2005, Congress took up its first major efforts on regulation of illegal immigration since the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Table 5 reports the comparisons between the House and Senate bills. House members reported out a bill (HR 4437) that is more restrictive than the Senate bill. While both chambers focus on illegal immigration, the House focuses exclusively on efforts to curtail illegal immigration. HR 4437, the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, deals only with border enforcement. The bill proposes to build a 700-mile fence along the U.S.–Mexico border. Instead of a “catch and release” policy, Border Patrol would be required to apprehend and immediately deport unauthorized migrants. Employers would be required by 2012

Table 5
Comparison of House and Senate Immigration Reform Bills HR 4437 and S 2611

	House HR 4437 Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 Passed December 16, 2005 239 Y/182 N (13 not voting)	Senate S 2611 Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 Passed May 25, 2006 62 Y/36 N (2 not voting)
Border enforcement	700-mile double-layer fence on U.S.–Mexico border. Mandatory detention of all non-Mexican illegal immigrants. Mandatory sentencing of smugglers of illegal immigrants.	370-mile triple-layer fence and 500-mile vehicle barrier. Authorize 14,000 more Border Patrol agents by 2011.
Employer sanctions	Starting in 2012, all employers required to verify Social Security identification of all employees.	Employment Eligibility Verification System
Fines	\$40,000 maximum fines to employers of illegal immigrants.	\$20,000 maximum fine for each violation and jail time for repeat offenders.
Pathway to citizenship		Legalization provisions through a deferred mandatory deportation status and blue card.
Guest-worker program		Create a new nonimmigrant temporary worker category (an H-2C guest worker visa); H-2Cs would increase the number of annual guest-worker admissions by 200,000.

SOURCE: Data for each bill are compiled from the online access of the Daily Digests of the *Congressional Record*.

to verify Social Security identification for all employees. Fines up to \$40,000 would be imposed on employers of illegal immigrant workers along with prison sentencing. The bill does not include guest worker steps toward legalization.

S 2611, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006, also addresses border enforcement and employer sanctions. The bill calls for 370 miles of triple-layer fence, with a 500-mile vehicle barrier at the border. The measure would create the Employment Eligibility Verification System, under which all employers would be required to verify the status and documentation of all employees. The measure also addresses what to do with the 11.5 million undocumented migrants in the U.S. The Senate measure provides multiple “pathways to citizenship” for undocumented migrants who have resided in the U.S. for different year intervals. Undocumented migrants residing in the U.S. for five years or more would show verification of continuous employment, pay fines and back taxes, and take English-language courses to be eligible to apply for citizenship. Undocumented migrants residing in the U.S. between two and five years would be required to leave the U.S. and could apply for return upon receipt of a temporary work visa. As guest workers, they would be eligible to apply for citizenship status. Undocumented migrants with less than two years’ residency would be required to leave the U.S., with no guarantee of a work visa or eligibility for the citizenship pathway process. The measure also calls for a guest-worker program.

President Bush’s policy preferences for immigration reform are closer to the Senate measure than to the House measure. House Republicans did not shy away from being vocal about the policy differences between House leadership and the president. Some of the open opposition can be traced to concerns the Republican leadership has about the president’s low approval ratings with the public and the need to minimize possible negative repercussions of those ratings in the 2006 midterm elections. According to surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press (2006a) from September 6–10, 2006, 37 percent of people polled approved of the way the president handled his job, while 53 percent disapproved of the president’s job performance.⁴ The president usually is a major positive factor in bolstering rank-and-file voter turnout for congressional candidates within his party. The president, as head of the party, can provide an electoral boost to candidates in contested races—*if* he has popular appeal. The Republican Party faced a midterm election year in which there was highly negative public sentiment toward Congress, Republican leadership, and presidential performance. The survey responses discussed in prior sections of this essay suggest that the public is predisposed to punishing or rewarding candidates according to their policy positions on immigration.

The open divisions between House and Senate Republican leadership, and between House leadership and the president, may have induced the Republicans to delay sending the two measures to conference committee, where differing bills

from the two chambers are sent for resolution and final vote by the full Congress. Instead, Republican leadership held a series of public hearings on immigration in cities throughout the U.S. in the summer of 2006.

Upon Congress members' return to session in early September 2006, the House focused on passing a series of bills that were essentially pieces culled from HR 4437 (Table 6). The House passed HR 4844 (the Federal Election Integrity Act of 2006), requiring valid photo identification verifying U.S. citizenship for persons to register to vote in federal elections. A second measure, HR 6061 (the Secure Fence Act of 2006), authorizes the construction of a 700-mile, double-layer fence. A third measure, HR 4830 (the Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2006), prohibits unauthorized construction of tunnels between the U.S. and its neighbors. These measures will provide Republican Party candidates with a legislative record of efforts to address public concerns about curtailing illegal immigration.

Immigration and the 2006 Midterm Elections

What are the implications of increased public attentiveness to immigration for the midterm elections of 2006? Congressional (and presidential) candidates have seldom developed electoral strategies that included immigration issues. The notable exception is the 1994 California governor's race, in which Republican incumbent Pete Wilson rode the negative public sentiment of California voters against illegal migrants and made illegal immigration a central theme in his successful bid for reelection. Conventional wisdom is that the political divisiveness engendered by immigration issues makes it hard to contain public furor over any particular stance. Indeed, the Republican Party expressed concerns over the potential political backlash from Hispanic voters. Census data show that the Hispanic population is the fastest-growing voting bloc. Polls of the Hispanic voting-age population show that Hispanics tend to lean more toward Republican parti-

Table 6
U.S. House Bills on Immigration Reform Acted On After Passage of HR 4437

House	Measure	Vote
HR 6061 Secure Fence Act of 2006	700-mile double-layer fence on U.S.-Mexico border.	September 14, 2006, 283-138 (11 not voting)
HR 4844 Federal Election Integrity Act of 2006	People registering to vote in federal elections required to show photo identification.	September 20, 2006, 228-196 (8 not voting)
HR 4830 Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2006	Prohibits the unauthorized construction of tunnels between U.S. and any other country.	September 21, 2006, 422-0 (10 not voting)

SOURCE: Data for each bill are compiled from online access of the Daily Digests of the *Congressional Record*.

sanship and affiliation. Given the Republican Party's concerted efforts to recruit Hispanic voters and the trajectory of Hispanic voters figuring more significantly in future national electoral races (DeSipio 2006), the development of a coherent Republican national policy platform on immigration will be important.

Public perception of the degree to which immigration has specific public costs will determine the likelihood of public calls for policy reform. Many public policy and congressional scholars argue that when policy costs are diffuse and benefits are specific, the public and, thus, voters are less likely to connect the harms of a policy and call for legislative reform (Arnold 1990; Gimpel and Edwards 1999; Wilson 1980). Congressional scholars Gimpel and Edwards make a case for this in their study of immigration policy process in Congress. They contend that the costs of immigration are diffuse and the benefits are specific to particular segments within the economic and political realms. Specifically, agricultural and service-industry employers benefit significantly from a steady and reliable source of immigrant labor.

Immigration's appeal as an electoral issue has increased during the 2006 mid-term election cycle. While a comprehensive analysis of all House and Senate races in 2006 is beyond the scope of this essay, it is helpful to review an illustrative case of how candidates have included immigration issues in their campaign strategies.

In border states such as New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and California, national and state legislators have had to contend with the public's concerns about illegal immigration and have felt the repercussions of the public's shift in using immigration issues in vote choice. Of the estimated 11.5 million unauthorized migrants in the U.S., approximately 500,000 live in Arizona, a state that shares a 375-mile border with Mexico. From 2000 to 2005, Arizona experienced a 45 percent increase in unauthorized migration (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2006). Arizona leans Republican in partisanship; the Republican presidential candidate from the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections carried the state.

Conclusion

Congressional scholar John Kingdon (1984) says that a political issue is an idea whose time has come. This observation rings true for immigration policy debate in the twenty-first century. Immigration has been on and off the national policy agenda. Throughout history, Americans have revisited the debate over what it means to be a nation of immigrants, to be a country that opens its doors to scientists, laborers, and refugees. However, the degree to which the nation has become attentive and involved in the policy debate is unlike any other period since the early 1920s. We now see immigration debated in city councils in tiny burgs and in municipalities of new destination states such as Iowa, Georgia, and

Indiana. Immigration is an issue whose time has come in almost all sectors of the American political and social landscape.

The political implication for the short term of this heightened attention is that immigration has gained a place that is high on the media, governmental, and policy agendas. The degree to which this heightened attention leads to policy change remains to be seen.

Notes

- ¹ At the time of writing this analysis in late 2006, the House and Senate were at a stalemate over resolution of the two bills. A conference committee to resolve differences on the bills had been postponed.
- ² The data for U.S. legal permanent residents are derived from Table 1 of the *2005 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*. The category legal permanent resident comprises immigrants who had already been in the country and have been granted legal residence status (i.e., adjustment of status) and new arrivals of that given year. See *2005 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Office of Immigration Statistics, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- ³ The 2006 total household population for the U.S. is 288,378,137. See U.S. Bureau of Census table.
- ⁴ The Pew survey asked the following question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?" The Pew Research Center has asked this same question of the American public in monthly surveys since 2001.

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