



The New Middle on Immigration

There is a new middle on immigration, and it is further to the right than many may realize. Most Americans believe the U.S. immigration system is broken, out of control, and antiquated. All hope for reform is not lost, however. The American people have an urgent desire for the federal government to develop an enforced, fair, and consistent process that addresses these systemic issues. Over the past year, the Bipartisan Policy Center and BPC Action have engaged in a major effort, including focus groups and a national survey, aimed at finding out what Americans think about the U.S. immigration system and what they want to see done to fix it. BPC is using that information to find ways to rebuild bipartisanship in the immigration discussion in America.

These efforts found that Americans overwhelmingly believe immigration helps the United States and that, as a nation of immigrants, the American people feel it is necessary to continue this strong tradition. They want the federal government to tackle immigration reform; it just needs to be the right kind of reform—focused on building a controlled system that prioritizes what they think is the right kind of immigrant. BPC also found that states and localities around the country are growing more frustrated that the federal government hasn't clarified a new immigration policy, and they are increasingly feeling pressure to intervene.

So, what does all this mean for the future of immigration reform?

Assessing America's Immigration System

Most Americans believe that the current system is **broken, out of control, and antiquated**. They don't feel that anyone is controlling the process or supervising who enters the country legally, and they think that insecure borders make it easier for people to come to the United States illegally.

OUR WORK FOUND THAT A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT **Immigration Helps the United States**

and are proud of its history as a nation of immigrants. **But they also believe that the government is mismanaging the current system**, and that strong immigration enforcement is necessary to establish control over immigration.



Voters, including more than half of Republicans and swing voters, are more concerned with having a **controlled system with clear criteria** for admission than with how many immigrants are admitted.

COMPETITION FOR BENEFITS IS A MORE IMPORTANT IMMIGRATION ISSUE **than wages, jobs, and the economy.**

In fact, the survey found that jobs and wages were among the lowest-rated immigration concerns for voters.

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Across the focus groups and surveys, there is a strong belief that immigrants are **taking benefits that should go to Americans first.**

What Americans Want in an Immigration System

The future U.S. immigration system must **prioritize national security, resolve the status of the undocumented, and include strict enforcement provisions.**

Immigration reform will require addressing multiple priorities.



Democrats prioritize opportunity to earn legal status for undocumented



Republicans prioritize national security and interior enforcement



Swing voters view all three as almost equally important

Therefore, addressing *all* these issues is necessary to gain broad-based voter support.

Border security is important to many Americans.

While respondents support the construction of a border wall, they also believe that technology and personnel, as well as border barriers, are critical to improving the nation's border security.



Democrats believe increasing legal visas is best to limit illegal immigration



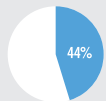
Republicans express higher support for the wall and other border investments



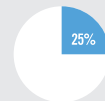
Swing voters believe an entry/exit tracking system should be a priority

Americans are clear in their preference for measures of success on border security: **They want to see a reduction in illegal crossings and drug trafficking rather than just increased apprehensions and deportations.**

Voters strongly believe that people living illegally in the United States **should have a path to legal status**, but it **shouldn't** be "for free."



44 percent of respondents support a path to citizenship if individuals pass a background check, pay "their fair share of taxes," and pay a monetary penalty.



Another 25 percent support permanent legal status but not citizenship.

Majorities of Republicans, Democrats and swing voters support one of these two options. Less than a quarter of respondents want to see his group deported.

The future immigration system should be **strongly enforced, fair, and consistent.**

Respondents chose these three words as their top descriptors for a future system, with "consistent" being the descriptor with the most consensus among Republicans, Democrats, and swing voters. In concrete terms, this means:



Americans want **strong enforcement** that includes border and interior enforcement to show the public that the government is actively managing immigration and enforcing the law.



Voters also want a **fair and consistent system** that everyone can understand and that works the same for all immigrants and Americans.



70 percent of respondents had little familiarity with the immigration system but wanted a simpler one, showing real demand for a fairer and more straightforward approach to managing immigration.



In addition, **75 percent of survey respondents want the federal government to take the lead in developing this system**, a sentiment echoed both by the public and by local elected officials.



Survey respondents placed the **most trust in President Trump and congressional Democrats** to offer the best solution, meaning that a bipartisan approach is critical for generating real reform.

Voters have **clear expectations** about the kinds of immigrants the government should allow into the U.S.



The survey found that Americans believe that **an immigrant's values matter more than their skills or family relationships** in determining which individuals can move to the United States.

Survey respondents identify **“law abiding,” “actively integrating into American society and learning English,” “hard working,” and “self-reliant”** as descriptors of the types of individuals who should immigrate to the United States.



While **learning English** is important to voters, **66 percent of respondents** say immigrants simply need to know **conversational English** to immigrate to the United States.

Nearly two-thirds of Americans find it very or extremely important that immigrants be able to hold a basic conversation in English, but **only 11 percent** believe immigrants should be fluent.



Only **11 percent** of Americans believe immigrants should be fluent in English.

Voters define merit broadly in an immigration system, suggesting that the United States should admit people who **share its values, abide by the law, have family members here, and can meet job vacancies**, whether high-or low-skilled.

How to Get There

The outcome of BPC and BPC Action's research shows that in the current polarized environment, **many of the strategies and messages used in the past to try and enact immigration reform are unlikely to be successful**. The recent shift of many advocates on both sides of the issues toward state-based actions may have short-term successes in certain areas of the country but may engender the opposite reaction in other parts of the country, making the overall situation uncertain for immigrants. Federal action will require changes to messaging and will mean revisiting certain policies and crafting a new blueprint for comprehensive reform that addresses this new middle.

All parties must recognize that there is a new middle on immigration, one further to the right than many realize.



Finding points of agreement will mean addressing areas where reaching bipartisan consensus has been historically difficult, including emphasizing enforcement and reimagining the immigration system—away from a strict employment-based or family-sponsored structure and toward a more merit-based approach that looks at all of the characteristics of the immigrants themselves, including family relationships and how they can contribute to the country.

Focusing on the numbers is not a way to get to a bipartisan deal; focusing on the characteristics of immigrants who come to the United States is.

Federal action is the only way to address immigration in an impactful and consistent way.

The **continuing divergence** among state and municipal policies makes federal action more urgent to achieve the consistency voters crave.

State-level action on immigration is likely to lead to more divides. State-based legislation is now as polarized as federal legislation is, with Republican state governments passing more **restrictive laws** and Democratic state governments passing more **progressive laws**.

Unless or until the makeup of state governments changes, this pattern is likely to continue.

President Trump and the Democrats must reach a deal.



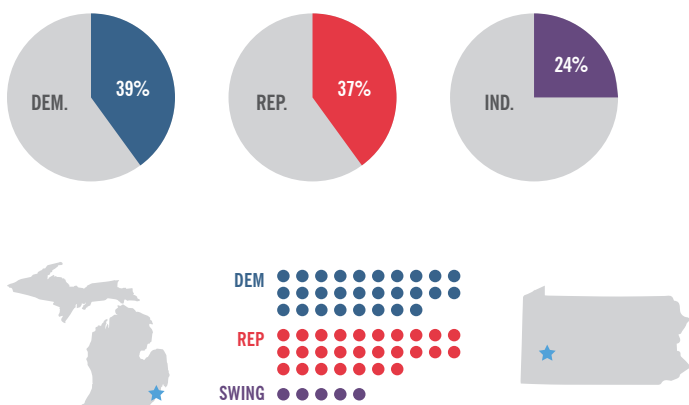
Democrats overwhelmingly trust congressional Democrats, while **Republicans trust President Trump**; very few Americans of any political stripe trust Republican lawmakers.

This indicates that to gain public support, a negotiated bipartisan solution must satisfy **both the White House and congressional Democrats**.

While these findings upend some of the prevailing wisdom about what immigration reform “should look like,” they provide a path towards developing a new coalition and consensus that can deliver a system that meets the needs of Americans and immigrants willing to contribute to this country.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this document stem from four initiatives: In April 2018, BPC Action contracted with Luntz Global to conduct a nationwide survey with 1004 voters to gauge public attitudes on immigration and support for reform options. **39 percent of survey respondents were Democrats, 37 percent were Republican, and 24 percent were Independent voters.** BPC Action also organized focus groups—in Pittsburgh and Detroit—with 28 Democrats, 27 Republicans, and five swing voters to gain more detailed perspectives on these issues.



Additionally, BPC co-hosted several roundtable meetings with the National Council of State Legislatures and the National Association of Counties, featuring elected and appointed officials from various regions around the country to hear how states and localities are dealing with immigration. Finally, BPC reviewed a National Conference of State Legislatures database of all state laws enacted since 2005 on immigration to understand why certain laws are advancing in certain areas at the state level and to see where there might be bipartisan agreement.

Learn more about our work at bipartisanpolicy.org/immigration

Immigration Policy Through A Regional Lens

The polling data revealed that respondents from the five regions in the survey have **differing opinions** on some issues related to immigration policy, including:

Regions have different border security priorities. For border security, respondents in the East, Industrial Midwest, and South considered terrorism the largest threat that border security measures need to address; respondents in the West/Midwest and Pacific believe that the system should deter drug trafficking into the United States.

All regions prioritize an individual's character and values as the key criteria for immigrants. While respondents in the East, Industrial Midwest, and Pacific want immigrants who are law-abiding, respondents in the West/Midwest and South want individuals who are integrating into society and learning English.

Regions have diverging views on how the immigration system should treat undocumented individuals. The Industrial Midwest and South believe that the system should treat all unauthorized immigrants the same under the law, while the East and Pacific want authorities to consider an individual's circumstances; the West/Midwest are evenly split on this issue.

While all regions want the federal government to lead immigration reform, they trust different actors to guide this process. The East and Industrial Midwest trust immigration and human rights advocacy groups the most, the West/Midwest and South trust President Trump the most, and the Pacific places their trust in a bipartisan congressional coalition.