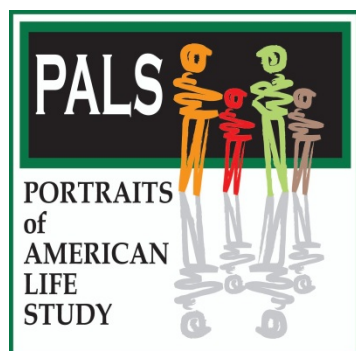


# What should be done with Illegal Immigrants? The Views of Americans

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## Introduction

The United States has always been the land of immigrants, but this reality has long been a contested one. Debates have raged for most of U.S history over how many immigrants should be allowed, what nationalities are preferred, and what characteristics they should possess. One result of these debates over the past century and quarter has been to pass laws restricting immigration, thereby creating a new class of people, dubbed by some as “illegal aliens,” and by others as “undocumented immigrants.”

Immigrant flows have long raised concerns and nativist tendencies. Severe concern began with the large Irish immigration beginning in the 1840s—they were seen as drunkards, prone to fighting and crime, Catholic in a largely Protestant nation, lazy and mentally slow—and spread to the subsequent massive German immigration—again, seen as prone to too much drinking, not speaking English, sticking to themselves, and protracted legal battles over issues such as bilingual education.

These large immigration flows—in the millions—led to the first federal immigration law, called the 1875 Immigration Act. It barred “undesirable immigrants” such as those engaged in “lewd” and “immoral” conduct. Exactly what these terms met was vague, and open to interpretation.

But it was the flow of Chinese laborers into California that led to the first national-origin based immigration law. Opponents of Chinese immigration labeled the Chinese as opium smoking, crime prone, desiring to steal white women, and undercutting American workers. This resistance led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, barring immigration from

China for 10 years and declaring the Chinese ineligible from becoming American citizens. This act excluding Chinese immigration was in 1892 extended another 10 years, and in 1902 made permanent.

While immigration to the United States declined during the 1890s, it rose steeply in the early 1900s, from less than 4 million in the 1890s to nearly 9 million a decade later. The national origins of these new waves of immigrants included Poland, Italy, Greece, Russia, Slovakia, and Bulgaria, most of them peasants being forced off of land in their home nations. Their often “foreign” religions, languages, and cultural practices, coupled with their poverty and limited formal education, led again to intense stereotyping and resistance on the part of U.S. citizens. Grave concerns ignited over the character of the United States and its future, given the massive influx of southern and eastern Europeans.

These concerns were written into law. Through a series of restrictive, often viciously racist immigration laws in the 1920s, immigration to the United States from outside the western hemisphere was severely curtailed. In a concerted effort to freeze the ethnic composition of the U.S. to what it was *before* the vast southern and eastern European immigration flows, the percentage of immigrants from each sending nation was fixed to the percentage of the U.S. population in 1890. If in 1890 40% of the U.S. was of English origin and 1% Italian origin, then henceforth, 40% of immigrants to the United States would be English, and 1% Italian. The effect of these 1920s laws was to cement the United States as—apart from its former enslaved population and a small, geographically limited population of often temporarily-in-the-U.S. Mexicans—a nation of people largely of northern and western European stock. It also dramatically reduced the overall number of immigrants, from its peak of 9 million at the turn of the last century to not even half

that many.

That is until the reforms of the 1960s. According to the 1960 census, 99.1% of Americans were either European white or African American.<sup>1</sup> The Hart-Celler Act of 1965 did away with the immigration laws of the 1920s and instead simply said the same number of people can emigrate from every country. It set up a preference system to give advantages to the highly educated, the creative, and those with money, and also placed a high value on family reunification.

The result has been nothing short of dramatic. Whereas 85% of all immigrants to the United States before 1965 were European, since then at least 85% of all immigrants have been non-European. As of 2010, the United States population is 16.3% Hispanic, 12.2% African American, 4.7% Asian, and 3.1 percent some other non-Anglo group.<sup>2</sup>

Then immigration policies of the 1960s placed limits on the number of immigrants from the western hemisphere, however, creating a new category of “illegal immigrants” from the Americas. Due to both push and pull factors, many millions of people have entered the United States without legal papers to do so. Estimates vary of course, but center around *11 to 12 million people* currently, to upwards of 20 million by some.<sup>3</sup> Using the low end figure, that is still more people than live in all but 7 U.S. states.

As in the past, the change in immigration flows and the large numbers of immigrants in the U.S illegally has led to heated debates, debates which are occurring in the halls of U.S Congress as we write. A key question in working on immigration reform

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is based on analysis of the 1960 U.S. Decennial Census, Summary File One. See Junia Howell. 2013. “The Racial Structure of Residence.” Master’s Thesis, Rice University.

<sup>2</sup> These figures are based on analysis of the 2010 U.S. Decennial Census, Summary File One. See Junia Howell. 2013. “The Racial Structure of Residence.” Master’s Thesis, Rice University.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2013/04/11/17691515-by-the-numbers-how-america-tallies-its-111-million-undocumented-immigrants?pc=25&sp=75](http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/04/11/17691515-by-the-numbers-how-america-tallies-its-111-million-undocumented-immigrants?pc=25&sp=75) for a discussion of how this number is calculated.

centers on what to do with immigrants already in the U.S., but here illegally. Should they be sent back to their home nations? Should they be allowed to remain in the U.S. illegally? Should they be allowed to remain in the U.S. and offered a path to citizenship?

We posed this very question to a scientifically gathered random sample of over 1300 adult Americans. The study, called the *Portraits of American Life Study*, talked with a representative sample of Americans in what averaged 75-minute interviews. The survey was conducted April through September of 2012.

The specific question we asked respondents was the following: Should most illegal immigrants working in the United States be offered a chance to apply for legal status, be sent back to the country they came from, or be allowed to stay in the U.S. and remain illegally? We report our findings here, in the hopes that it will be useful for the ongoing immigrant debates and inform policy makers.

## **Party and Ideology**

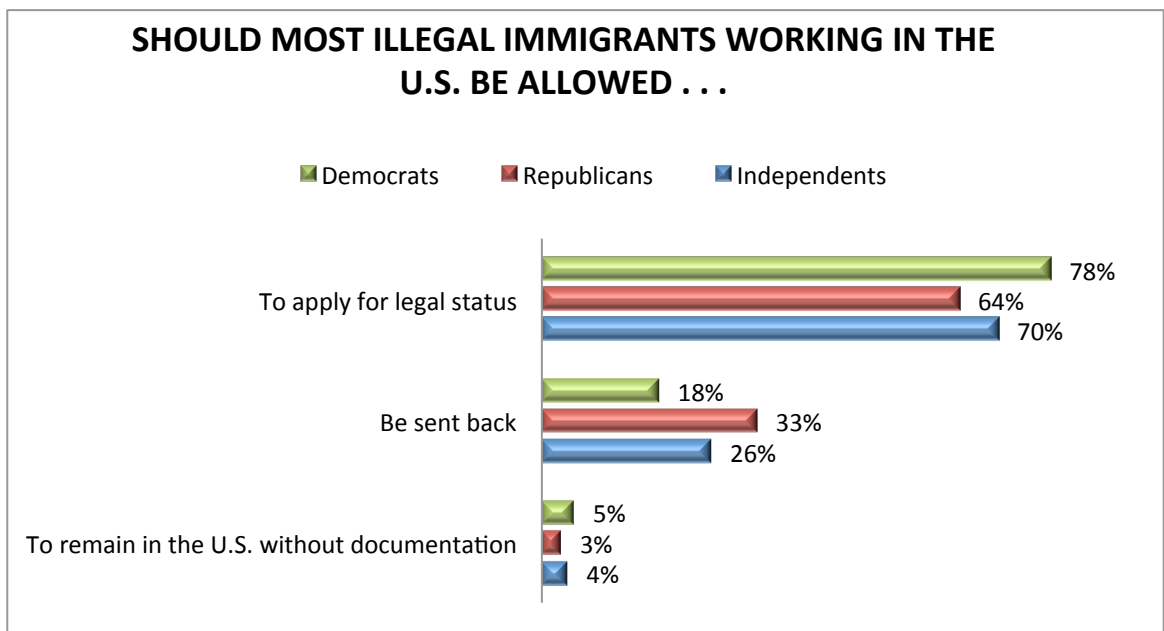
Overall, 71% of Americans favor illegal immigrants working in the United States being offered a chance to apply for legal status. This is a significant majority of Americans favoring a specific path, especially given the seemingly high level of passion and debate surrounding immigration reform.

We ran an experiment as part of this question, in which a random half of our respondents heard “illegal immigrants” and the other half “illegal aliens” as part of the question. We wanted to see if the term used influenced responses. It did not.

Regardless of which descriptive term was used, the same percentage favored a path to

legal status.

But might the responses vary by gender, party, or racial classification? Perhaps surprisingly, the responses are largely consistent across political and ideological lines. A full 63% of Republicans, 76% of Democrats, and 70% of Independents favor providing a path to legalized status.



Source: *Portraits of American Life Study*, 2012 conducted March-October 2012. Figure may not add to 100% because it does not include don't know and refused responses.

What if we divide Republicans—often thought to oppose legalization of undocumented immigrants—into their strength of affiliation with the party? For those who identify as Strong Republicans, 65% believe most illegal immigrants working in the United States should be allowed to apply for legal status. About the same percent of moderate Republicans (64%) also believe this. For Democrats, those who label themselves strongly so we find 76% prefer the path to legalized status option. The

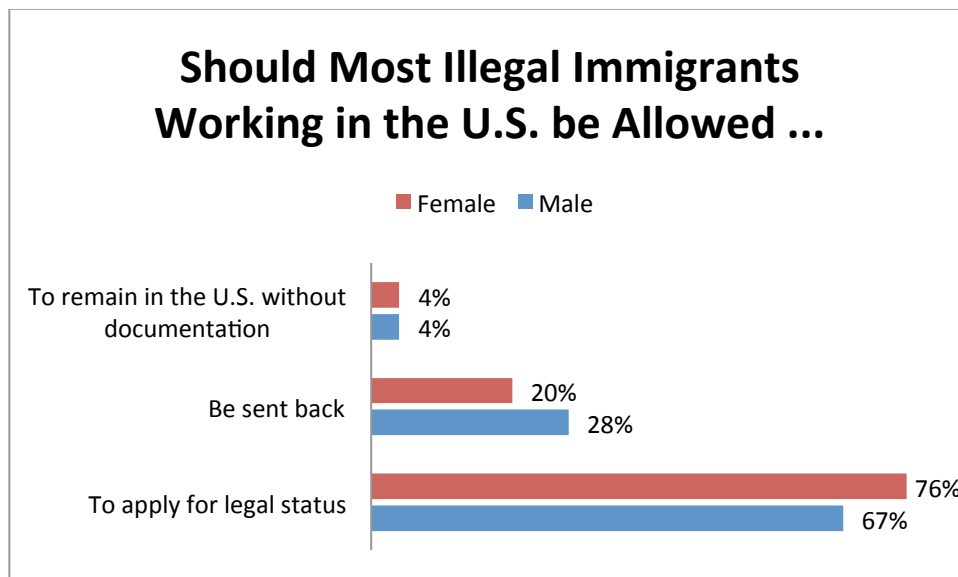
highest percentage is actually those who say they are moderately Democrat, at 79%.

CONSISTENT VIEWS ABOUT ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS <i>be allowed to apply for legal status...</i>	
Strong Democrat	76%
Moderate Democrat	79%
Neither	70%
Moderate Republican	64%
Strong Republican	65%

\*Kinder Institute of Urban Research. Portraits of American Life Survey. Conducted March – October 2012. Figure may not add to 100% because it does not include don't know and refused responses.

## Gender

Men are more inclined than women to believe that illegal immigrants working in the United States should be sent back to their home country (28% of males vs. 20% of females). However, two-thirds of men (67%) and three-fourths of women (76%) believe that illegal immigrants working in the United States should be allowed to apply for legal status.





## Race

Even when divided American's responses along by racial/ethnic lines, the findings shows significant support for allowing illegal immigrants to work toward legal status. White Americans have the lowest overall support for a path to legal status, but still a full 70% support this position. Among African Americans, about three-quarters (76%) support having working illegal immigrants being offered a path to legal status. Among the groups with the current highest percentage of immigrants—Hispanics and Asians—support for a path to legal status is also strong (81% and 75% respectively). Though the sample size of Native Americans is small, 100% in our sample preferred a path to legal status over the alternatives.

<b>Should Most Illegal Immigrants Working In The U.S. Be...</b>			
	<b>Allowed to Apply For Legal Status</b>	<b>Sent Back</b>	<b>Allowed to Remain in the U.S. Without Documentation</b>
White	68%	30%	2%
African American	76%	19%	2%
Hispanic	81%	11%	8%
Asian	75%	9%	15
Native American	100%	0%	0%

\*Kinder Institute of Urban Research. Portraits of American Life Survey. Conducted March – October 2012. Figure may not add to 100% because it does not include don't know and refused responses.

## Conclusion

Without exception, the majority of Americans are in favor of offering illegal immigrants a path toward legal status, rather than having them returned to their nations of origin or remaining in the U.S. illegally. It matters little whether the respondents are male or female, their racial identity, or the political party affiliation. In every case, the majority support offering working illegal immigrants a path to legal status over sending them back to their countries of origin and over allowing them to stay in the United States illegally. What is more, in our experimental design, it did not matter whether respondents heard “illegal immigrants” or “illegal aliens.” Always, the majority response was the same: favor a path to legal status.

While our question explored adult American’s views of but one aspect of the immigration debate, on this issue, it seems clear that Americans overwhelmingly favor a path for working immigrants to gain legal status. Policy makers, then, can know the will of the American people regarding the status of illegal immigrants currently working within the nation.

## Appendix: Survey Information

The Portraits of American Life Study (PALS) sheds light on a variety of attitudes and views of Americans. Wave II was conducted April through September of 2012. It interviewed 1315 Americans from the continental United States. To obtain a probability sample, yet achieve the goal of racially diverse oversamples, a four stage sampling procedure was used. Weights, using the 2010 U.S. Census, were then created to make the PALS sample fully nationally representative and of the highest scientific rigor. The response rate was 51%. The interviews, which averaged 75 minutes, were conducted via web, telephone, and in-person. The study was led by Michael O. Emerson, the Allyn & Gladys Cline professor of sociology and co-director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research. It was made possible by the generous support of the Lilly Endowment, Inc., and by supportive funding from Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research and the University of Notre Dame. For more information, visit [www.thearda.com/pals](http://www.thearda.com/pals).

