



The Politics of Immigration, and the (Limited) Case for New Optimism: Perspectives from a Political Pollster

Jeremy D. Rosner
Executive Vice President
Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc.



The Migration Policy Institute is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide.

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This paper was commissioned by the Transatlantic Council on Migration for its meeting held in May 2009 in Bellagio, Italy. The meeting's theme was "Public Opinion, Media Coverage, and Migration" and this paper was one of several that informed the Council's discussions.

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Suggested citation: Rosner, Jeremy. 2009. *The Politics of Immigration and the (Limited) Case for New Optimism: Perspectives from a Political Pollster*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

I. Executive Summary

Recent developments in the United States (including the 2008 elections and shifts in organized labor's stance on immigration) have created new openings for comprehensive immigration reform, possibly including a path to legal residence and citizenship for illegal immigrants. But my sense — as a political pollster and as someone who has had to do battle with immigration opponents in the campaigns our firm advises in the United States and around the world — is that the extent of this opening may be overstated by some advocates. This is partly because public opinion polls, which deal mainly in the aggregate and obscure the influence of vocal minorities and electoral dynamics, do not accurately capture either the intensity or effectiveness of anti-immigrant sentiments at the margins.

One mistake is the belief among some reform advocates that politicians have misread their publics and *misjudged* the strength of public anger over immigration (“the misperception of opposition”). In fact, the opposition to immigration reform is real, intense, and politically persistent. It taps into broader frustrations with modern politics and society in many countries, particularly the perceived shortcomings of public services relative to tax burdens and the feeling that many aspects of life in a globalized state are increasingly “out of control.”

Public opinion polls on this issue (as on others), while useful in many ways, tend to overlook important dynamics that are crucial in the political process, such as intensity of opinions, attitudes among small but pivotal audiences, the interplay with other issues, and the power of particular issues in electoral campaigns. Yet all of these are important factors in the political processes that shape immigration policy, and they tend to tilt against comprehensive immigration reform.

While there are new openings for immigration reform and liberalization, they come more from changes in demographics, coalitions, elections, and the opportunity for messages that address voters' frustrations, and less from the favorable nature of public opinion regarding immigration. The prospects for immigration reform and liberalization may be improving, but only marginally. It will still take tremendous skill and effort to achieve comprehensive reform.

II. Introduction¹

Does the latest polling data from the United States and Europe give reason to hope that there are new openings for enacting progressive immigration reforms? Have politicians on both sides of the Atlantic perhaps been misreading the public's views on this issue and overestimating the opposition? This paper argues the openings are real, but offers what may sound like strange advice coming from a political pollster: don't put too much faith in the polling results.

Without question, there are a number of encouraging signs for those who would like to pursue progressive and comprehensive immigration reform, particularly in the United States:

¹ The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and should not be construed to represent the views of his firm or the Transatlantic Council on Migration.

- There is broad recognition in the United States that immigrants work hard and contribute to the economy and society. There is particularly enduring support for the concept that we are “a nation of immigrants.”
- Even during a period of strong antipathy toward illegal immigration, a comprehensive reform proposal that included legalization for millions of unauthorized immigrants made significant progress in Congress in 2006 and 2007, and both major parties nominated presidential candidates who actively supported the measure.
- The Obama administration has signaled a commitment to resume progress on such legislation by the end of 2009, and the past two electoral cycles have given Democrats strong congressional majorities that may be able to deliver the needed votes.
- Hispanics, the fastest-growing segment of the US electorate, voted overwhelmingly for Democrats in 2008, gaining some leverage over the Obama administration’s agenda, and chastening Republicans for strident anti-immigration rhetoric in recent years.
- The major US labor unions have made a strategic shift over the past decade toward working cooperatively with supporters of comprehensive immigration reform.
- Although the recession intensifies competition for jobs, there is also evidence that it is reducing the net flow of unauthorized immigrants into the United States, which may somewhat ease tensions over immigration.
- The economic downturn has moved attention massively away from concerns over terrorism, and that also eases some concerns about control of the nation’s borders. Recent drug-related violence in and near Mexico revives these worries to a degree, but not to the levels that existed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

But these favorable developments — and the many favorable aspects of the polling data in the United States and Europe — provide grounds for only limited optimism in the face of an issue that fundamentally tilts against reform. At the start, it is worth cutting through the reams of polling data on immigration with a foundational observation. Although attitudes toward migration are complex, and although publics in the United States, United Kingdom, and most other countries bring conflicted perceptions and attitudes to the topic, publics virtually everywhere in the world prefer *more* rather than *less* control of migration. This is a playing field that generally tilts steeply against migrants and liberalization of immigration policies.

III. The Evidence from Public Opinion Polls

A 2007 Pew study of attitudes in 46 countries plus the Palestinian Territories finds majority support in 44 of these 47 locations for the proposition that “we should restrict and control entry of people

into our country more than we do now.”² In nearly half of those places (20 of the 44) — including both the United States and United Kingdom — the margin of agreement over disagreement was overwhelming: *at least 50 points*.³ Moreover, while there has been some change in these figures since 2002, the improvement in most Western states is only in the single digits

We have seen this sentiment play out in our own firm’s work across the world’s electoral arenas. Politics and campaigns in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria, Australia, Georgia, and elsewhere have all featured public anger toward immigrants. In each case, the strong public sentiments and the leaders who campaign on the issue call for *more* restrictive or punitive measures. That is, it is an asymmetrical fight. Virtually everywhere, conservative media and politicians virulently attack would-be liberalizers, not the other way around.

IV. “The Misperception of Opposition”: Reasons for Caution

Veterans of policy fights over immigration around the world understand well the difficulties in achieving reforms and liberalizing immigration policies. Yet some pro-immigration advocates tend to take solace in the positive currents that run through the polling data and downplay the real signs for caution. The implication — echoing the old quip about Wagner’s music — seems to be that the politics of immigration is better than it sounds:

- Roberto Suro, elsewhere in this volume, suggests that the heated opposition in the United States to the 2006 immigration reform bill, and the bill’s ultimate demise, “have produced a misimpression, apparently widely shared, that some large measure of the American public opposed the legalization proposal. The evidence from public opinion surveys clearly contradicts this assessment: A clear majority of the public supported the idea of legalization.”⁴
- Ayesha Saran, also in a paper in this book, suggests that conservative-owned media in the United Kingdom, and perhaps elsewhere, feed self-reinforcing misperceptions about public antipathy to liberalization: “Policy responses are frequently predicated upon assertions that a sizable proportion of the British public is hostile to the current level of immigration — prompting politicians to tout increasingly restrictive measures which in themselves reinforce the perception that immigration is a problem for the country.”⁵

² Pew Global Attitudes Survey, “World Publics Welcome Global Trade — But Not Immigration” (Washington, DC: The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2007), p. 25, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/258.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Roberto Suro, “America’s Views of Immigration: The Evidence from Public Opinion Surveys” in *Migration, Public Opinion and Politics*, eds. Bertelsmann Stiftung and Migration Policy Institute (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009).

⁵ Ayesha Saran, “Public Attitudes on Immigration: The United Kingdom in an International Context,” in *Migration, Public Opinion and Politics*, eds. Bertelsmann Stiftung and Migration Policy Institute (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009).

These analyses suggest that politicians have incorrectly read their publics, and that there *is*, in fact, widespread popular support for liberalized immigration policies. We have seen similar arguments in the field of US national security, which for many years deterred Democrats in the United States from taking steps to fix their perceived weaknesses in this area. Many Democrats took solace in the argument of some pollsters that the public really *supported* the United Nations, foreign aid, and multilateral peacekeeping, and that this strong support just needed to be pointed out to the politicians. It was only when the Democratic Party took the public's concerns seriously and embraced new ways of acting and talking on national security that the public started to listen more to Democrats on these issues.

More broadly, while politicians sometimes *do* misread their publics, it is a bad bet to believe that they do so regularly or over long periods, given that their professional survival depends on picking up subtle clues about their constituents' views. There are four reasons, in particular, to believe that the political leaders who rail against immigration may be reading their publics better than some outside observers believe — and better than some polls might suggest.

First, polling often obscures the contours of intensity in attitudes that can be even more important to elected leaders than the aggregate balance of opinion. That is particularly important on this issue, where passions run high. I am struck by the unusually large number of polling questions on immigration where responses are dominated by strong feelings on both sides. For example, in our firm's polling for Democracy Corps, we ask whether “immigrants give more to our country than they take,” or take more than they give. Two thirds of the respondents who pick one choice or the other say they feel that way *strongly*.⁶ And not only do intense responses dominate on both sides of the argument across a range of immigration questions, but the intensity generally is also greatest on the *anti*-immigration side, which helps explain why the politics seems to skew more anti- than pro-reform. In our focus groups in both the United States and Europe, participants often raise this issue unprompted and with real passion, even though it may not register at the top of national concerns in surveys in those states.

Second, aggregate polling typically ignores the small audiences that often determine political outcomes. In both the United States and United Kingdom, for example, there is less support in marginal and swing districts for liberalized immigration than across the electorate as a whole. Moreover, given the prevalence of safe congressional seats in the United States, what really matters to most members of Congress is not the balance of opinion among the full electorate — which is what most polls report — but rather attitudes among their “primary electorates” — the small, partisan, atypical segment who will vote in the low-turnout primaries for that member's party. Narrowing the analysis to this segment substantially changes the picture. For example, in our Democracy Corps polling, the full public leans only narrowly toward the view that immigrants take more than they give to America, 49-41 percent.⁷ But among the most likely voters in safe Republican congressional districts, the margin is an overwhelming 70-22 percent. When Republicans rail against illegal immigration, they are therefore reflecting something quite real about the voters who hold the key to their reelection. During research on other issues, one member of the House Republican

⁶ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, Inc. survey for Democracy Corps, “Frequency Questionnaire,” conducted November 29 – December 3, 2007 (based on a survey of 1,000 likely voters), p. 10, <http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/uploads/120307fqnationalimmigration.doc>.

⁷ Ibid.

leadership, from a very safe Republican seat, privately told me in 2006 this was the only issue that could defeat him.

Third, public opinion polls often define the boundaries and meaning of an issue too narrowly. Immigration policy evokes questions about how a nation defines its identity, whether citizens feel they are getting their money's worth from public services, and whether their leaders (particularly on the left) are generally too permissive. In this regard, it is important to note the observation from the Pew Research Center, in their Global Attitudes Survey, that global "opinions about immigration are closely linked to perceptions about threats to a country's culture. In 46 of 47 countries [studied], those who favor stricter immigration controls are also more likely to believe their way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence."⁸ Thus, even where publics have broadly favorable feelings toward many aspects of immigration, it is still often possible for politicians to play on their fears about their diminishing ability to control social and economic forces within their countries. I return to this point below.

Fourth, the kind of polling questions used in academic and nonpolitical research often fail to capture the dynamics of electoral campaigns, which is what motivates politicians. Even though publics are conflicted about immigration, there is nothing conflicted about the way the issue plays in campaigns — virtually always as a cudgel against those who favor liberalizing reforms. In our work in the last three British elections, it was instantly clear that, despite the electorate's multifaceted views on the issue, immigration provided one of the most powerful attacks for the Tories against Labour. Favorable strands of opinion about immigration matter little to politicians if the issue continually provides one of the most potent lines of attack in the heat of campaigns. Some may counter that most of the candidates who ran harsh ads about immigration in the last US elections did not win — which suggests that this was not a particularly effective issue. But virtually all of those ads were run by Republicans, and most Republicans (over 70 percent in competitive races) went down to defeat anyway in 2008. The 2008 results do not prove that the anti-immigration ads were ineffective — only that the Democratic tide was able to overwhelm that issue, along with all the other issues that various Republicans deployed.

V. Conclusion: How to Improve the Politics of Immigration Reform

There is, therefore, good reason to be wary of any suggestion that public opinion on immigration, in the United States or elsewhere, is suddenly favorable to liberalizing immigration policies in ways it was not in the past. But that is not to say that polling is useless in efforts to assess and improve the politics of the issue. Indeed, recent polling from a number of sources provides insights into three promising strategies to move immigration reform forward.

Understanding the Desire for a Sense of Control

Many publics around the world today feel an acute sense of loss of control over their lives and their countries. Initially fueled by globalization, this attitude has now been sharpened by the global

⁸ Pew Global Attitudes Survey, "World Publics Welcome Global Trade — But Not Immigration," p. 27.

collapse of domestic economies and employment markets. It is important for advocates of immigration reform to take this anger over loss of control and national identity seriously. Tony Blair did this when he counseled his party that it did not constitute racism for voters to be upset about asylum seekers. Similarly, in our polling for Democracy Corps⁹ we have found that it is crucial for progressive US politicians to show that they “get it” — they understand voters’ anger over the loss of control of America’s borders and job markets — and that they are serious about improving enforcement regarding borders and illegal hiring, *as a precondition* to being heard on their ideas for liberalizing reforms.

Understanding the Desire for a Sense of Responsibility

The new public demand for responsibility that President Obama has noted goes well beyond holding bank and auto executives accountable in the wake of the economic meltdown. At least in the United States, the public responds strongly to the sense that unauthorized immigrants must embrace certain responsibilities in exchange for a path toward citizenship.¹⁰ A major part of the animosity toward unauthorized immigrants stems from the sense that they are “getting away with something” — including using public services without paying taxes (even though that perception may not square with reality). It is particularly notable that our polling during the lead-up to last year’s presidential election found strong public support for the idea of *requiring* unauthorized immigrants to become legal, including requirements to pay taxes, learn English, and pursue citizenship. A message built on this approach led seven in ten voters to be more likely to support a Democratic candidate for Congress.¹¹ In June 2008, then-nominee Obama endorsed this approach when he said he supported “reform that finally brings the 12 million people who are here illegally out of the shadows *by requiring* them to take the steps to become legal citizens.”¹² [Emphasis added.]

The same rising desire for responsibility also helps explain why much of the public’s anger about illegal immigration is directed at employers, whom the public sees as exploiting vulnerable immigrants and weak border controls to increase their profits. Stronger steps against such employers consistently rank among the most popular remedies for resolving illegal immigration.¹³

⁹ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Inc. survey for Democracy Corps, “Winning the Immigration Issue: A Report on New National Survey on Immigration,” December 18, 2007, <http://www.democracycorps.com/strategy/2007/12/a-report-on-new-national-survey-on-immigration/?section=Analysis>.

¹⁰ See Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2009) p. 61, which reported that 63 percent of respondents said they favor providing a way for unauthorized immigrants already in the country to gain legal citizenship if they pass background checks, pay fines, and have jobs — up from 58 percent recorded during a similar December 2007 survey; <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf>.

¹¹ Unpublished Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, Inc. survey for Center for American Progress and America’s Voice (based on 1,200 likely voters in 65 battleground congressional districts) conducted April 30-May 11, 2008), p. 12.

¹² Transcript of speech by presidential candidate Barack Obama on June 28, 2008 to the National Association of Latino Elected Officials, http://www.cfr.org/publication/16689/obamas_speech_at_naleo_on_immigration.html.

¹³ For example, in the December 2007 “Frequency Questionnaire” for Democracy Corps, 80 percent favor “tougher enforcement so businesses don’t hire illegal workers,” making it the second most favorably rated immigration initiative of ten tested. See p. 10, <http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/uploads/120307fqnationalimmigration.doc>.

Understanding the Latino Vote

Latino attitudes on immigration are often misunderstood. It is simply not the case, for example, that most Latino voters see immigration reform as a top-tier voting issue and are strongly motivated to support candidates who back such reforms. It is true that Latinos are somewhat more supportive of immigration than non-Hispanic whites, but a May 2008 survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for the Center for American Progress finds that both “immigration” and “illegal immigration” are second-tier concerns for Latinos — just like for non-Hispanic whites — far behind the economy, jobs, Iraq, energy, and health care.¹⁴ Indeed, politicians usually err when they speak to Latino voters with appeals on immigration before stressing issues such as education, health care, and national security. Immigration is, however, a *threshold* issue for large portions of the Latino electorate; that is, many will turn away from candidates or parties who take a strident or punitive tone toward immigrants. That is the key story of the past two years, as many Latinos closed the door on the Republican Party after 2005-2006 for fanning anti-immigrant wildfires. Our polling for Democracy Corps shows that Latino voters gave the two parties comparable favorability ratings during the first half of 2005, but thereafter they steadily gave the Democratic Party better ratings, which grew to a 24-point advantage by the last half of 2008.¹⁵ That rejection of the Republicans did indeed play a significant role in last year’s elections, and will make it harder for the Republican congressional leadership to allow its rank-and-file to play to the party’s more anti-immigration voices when reform proposals next come before Congress.

It is these kinds of changes — changes in demographics; changes in real voting patterns; and changes in how leaders, parties, and interest groups choose to talk and act regarding immigration — that have the most profound influence on the politics of immigration. The polls provide some guidance, but it is real changes by real people that provide the new (if limited) case for optimism.

¹⁴ Unpublished Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, Inc. survey for Center for American Progress and America’s Voice, May 2008, p. 3.

¹⁵ Unpublished Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, Inc. time-series data from polling for Democracy Corps, 2004-2009.

VI. About the Author

Jeremy D. Rosner is Executive Vice President at Greenberg Quinlan Rosner in Washington, DC, one of the world's leading consultants for political parties, candidates, governments, NGOs, and corporate leaders. He specializes in using public opinion research to help global leaders design and implement winning political and communications strategies. Since joining GQR in 1998, Dr. Rosner has directed public opinion research and provided strategic advice for dozens of leaders, governments, and campaigns in the United States, Europe, and Latin America, as well as for major corporations and issue organizations. In 2005, CNN named him one of "five political consultants to watch." Before joining GQR, Dr. Rosner served as Special Adviser to President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, with the responsibility of leading the administration's drive to add Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to the NATO Alliance. From 1993-1994, he was Special Assistant to President Clinton, serving as Counselor and Senior Director for Legislative Affairs on the staff of the National Security Council. As NSC Counselor, Dr. Rosner also designed communications strategies for the NSC and served as President Clinton's principal foreign policy speechwriter. From 1994 to 1997, as a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Dr. Rosner directed the Endowment's research on the role of public opinion, Congress, and other domestic factors on US foreign policy. He was a senior aide to US Senators Bob Kerrey (D-NE) and Gary Hart (D-CO), and earlier, Senior Speechwriter for the 1984 Mondale for President campaign. He served on both the staff and National Governing Board of Common Cause. From 1991-1993, Dr. Rosner served as Vice President for Domestic Affairs at the Washington-based Progressive Policy Institute, the think tank of the Democratic Leadership Council. He is the author of *The New Tug-of-War: Congress, the Executive Branch, and National Security* (Carnegie, 1995), as well as numerous other publications and media articles.

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