The New Middle on Immigration

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The Bipartisan Policy Center’s survey of national voter’s views about immigration found that Americans describe our current immigration system as:

- “Broken”
- “Out of control”
- “Antiquated”

- The survey also found that Americans are more concerned about:
  - Competition for “benefits” than for “jobs.”
  - The “type of immigrants” than the “number of immigrants.”

- And that overall Americans want a system that is:
  - “Strongly enforced”
  - “Fair”
  - “Consistent”
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BPC’s survey found that Americans largely agree on:
- The benefits of immigration;
- The types of reforms they would like to see in the country’s immigration system; and
- The political actors whom they trust to carry out these reforms.

• However, the survey did find that the respondents’ views about these issues could vary significantly by partisan affiliation, demographic groups, and regional locations.

• Nevertheless, the survey suggests that American’s views on immigration revolve around a “New Middle” that sits further to the right than previously assumed by many lawmakers, advocates, and researchers.
The survey was conducted from March 28 to April 5, 2018 (before child separation went into effect).

It comprised 1,004 likely voters across the United States; 39 percent of voters were Democrats, 37 percent Republican, and 24 percent Independent.

The survey’s 75 questions were not focused on testing particular messages around specific policies, but further examining views and preferences of the current and a future immigration system.

The survey emphasized rank order multiple choice questions to gain the greatest possible understanding of how voters chose between different policy options and descriptors.
Findings
Over half of respondents said that immigration either “somewhat” or “completely” helps the United States

• **Age matters:** 62 percent of individuals under age 40 said immigration “helps America” compared to 47 percent of respondents over age 65.

• **Income matters as well:** the higher the income, the more likely respondents were to say that immigration “helps America.” Having some higher education had a similar effect.

• **Region played a role:** people living in the Pacific or the East were more likely to say immigration “helps America,” and urban voters were more positive than rural voters by a 25 percent spread.
Voters want immigration reform to prioritize “national security,” resolving the status of the undocumented (or “legalization”), and “stricter immigration enforcement”

- **Age variations emerged in these responses:** voters under age 40 ranked “legalization” higher than “national security,” as did college graduates.

- **Religious differences were also notable:** Protestants ranked “stricter immigration enforcement” higher than “national security” while Evangelicals ranked “legalization” lowest in their list of preferences.

- **Regional differences appeared as well:** those living in the Pacific or in urban areas ranked “legalization” above “national security.” However, respondents in the Pacific also ranked “stricter immigration enforcement” higher than “national security.”
Voters stated that the immigration system should be “strongly enforced,” “fair,” and “consistent”

• **Partisan differences were strong:** Republicans overwhelmingly picked “strongly enforced” as the most important descriptor while Democrats evenly picked “fair,” “consistent,” and “compassionate” as the top three descriptors.

• **Religious differences were notable:** Evangelicals ranked “values-based” third, the highest of any religious affiliation, after “strictly enforced” and “consistent.” Protestants ranked “compassionate” only seventh out of 15 options.

• **Geographic differences appeared as well:** Urban voters ranked “strict” higher than suburban or rural voters did, coming in third for urban voters behind “fair” and “strongly enforced.”
  – “Strongly enforced” was the top descriptor in all geographic regions, but it was highest in the West and Midwest and lowest in the Pacific.
Respondents said the most important benefits the United States can gain from an effective immigration system are “diversity,” “attracting the best and brightest,” and “safety from terrorist and criminal threats”

- **Partisan groups varied in their responses:** Republicans chose “safety from terrorism and criminal threats” first while Democrats overwhelmingly chose “diversity” first.

- **Demographics and regions also shaped these views:** voters under age 40 placed “diversity” first, as did women, those who identified with no religion or a non-Christian religion, those living in the Pacific, and those in urban areas.
Voters said the immigration system should prioritize immigrants who are “law abiding,” “actively integrating and learning English,” and “hardworking”

- Partisan differences were key: Republican voters ranked “integration” over “law abiding” and ranked “self-reliance” above the other choices.
  - Democrats also rated “law abiding” first but ranked “hardworking” second, with “integration” still coming in third.

- Demographic differences were important: “Law abiding” ranked highest among voters ages 40 to 64, while those under age 40 ranked “hardworking” slightly higher.
  - Those earning less still emphasized “law abiding” and “integration” over “hardworking” or “highly skilled.”

- Regional divides appeared as well: Rural voters were slightly more likely to choose “self-reliant” over “hardworking.”
Two-thirds of voters said it is “extremely important” or “very important” that immigrants can hold a basic conversation in English before they come to the United States

- **Partisanship impacts the intensity for supporting this option:** 82 percent of Republicans said conversational English is either “extremely important” or “very important” while only 49 percent of Democrats agreed.

- **Responses also varied by religious affiliation:** Catholics were most likely to support the English requirement out of other religious affiliations.

- **Regional differences appeared as well:** Voters living in the South and in rural areas were most supportive of English.
The voters surveyed said they were most concerned about “terrorism” and “drugs” coming through the border, with “illegal immigration” third.

- **Partisan differences were strong:** Republicans ranked “illegal immigration” as their key priority and Democrats rated “human trafficking” higher.

- **Geographic differences were notable:** voters in the West, Midwest, and Pacific ranked “drug trafficking” highest. Suburban voters ranked “drug trafficking” and “human trafficking” above “terrorism” or “illegal immigration.”
Voters said “surveillance technology” and “physical barriers” are more effective on the border than “stronger penalties” for illegal immigrants or “more border patrol officers”

- **Partisan differences emerged in the respondents’ responses to this question:** GOP voters ranked “physical barriers” highest while Democratic voters overwhelmingly said “surveillance technology.”

- **Demographic and regional differences were other points of division:** there was more support for “physical barriers” in the South and among rural voters and voters over age 65.
Almost half of all voters approved of president trump’s proposed border wall (48 percent)

- **Party mattered most in how people answered:** 84 percent of Republicans “completely” or “somewhat” approved of the wall. Democrats either “completely” or “somewhat” disapproved of the wall, at 73 percent.

- **Voters views about the wall varied by region as well:** voters living in the South or in rural areas were most supportive of the wall.
Americans were split on who they trust to offer the best immigration solutions: the combined responses were split equally among “federal immigration authorities,” “immigration and human rights groups,” and “the president”

- **Partisanship impacted this choice:** Republicans chose “the president” at 43 percent, while Democrats chose “congressional Democrats.”

However, nearly three-quarters of surveyed Americans said that the “federal government” should take the lead on immigration reform, not “state and local governments”

- **Demographics shaped this preference:** the younger the respondent, the more support for leadership from “state and local governments” increased. 36 percent of those under age 40 thought states should take the lead.