



The Roots of Minority Popular Opposition to Immigration Reform

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The failure of the 113th Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform is typical of many contemporary challenges in American politics: an obstructionist minority willing to derail the political process to fight legislation that enjoys broad popular support. In considering the future of immigration policy and the likelihood of meaningful reform, we must understand the roots of the attitudes that drive such tenacious opposition and the institutional arrangements that facilitate obstruction.

According to recent public opinion research, the overwhelming majority of Americans, fully 94% of them, see the current immigration system as “broken” and favor immigration reform. What is more, more than three-fifths favor legislation that includes a pathway to citizenship. This finding is consistent with data from 2013, when comprehensive immigration reform legislation that included such a pathway to citizenship was passed by a bipartisan vote in the Senate. Polling on various dimensions of the reform package shows a majority of Americans support each of its constituent parts, not just a way for undocumented immigrants to earn citizenship but also increased resources for border security, a restructuring of visa policy, and other important reforms.

Clearly, the refusal of the House of Representatives to join the Senate in passing comprehensive reform is not due to lack of support from the American public as a whole. When popular attitudes are examined by party, however, the numbers reveal that Republican citizens are generally less supportive of immigration reform than Democrats. Furthermore, when asked about how to deal with those immigrants currently here illegally, only 37% of Americans who identify with the Tea Party support a path to citizenship – and, remarkably, an equal percentage of Tea Party supporters favor a policy of mass deportation for the eleven million undocumented immigrants currently living and working in the United States.

To be sure, only one-fifth of all Americans currently identify with the Tea Party. Nevertheless, the Republican-led House of Representatives regularly produces outcomes that coincide with Tea Party preferences on immigration reform, health care, budgets, taxation and other vital issues. Even if members of Congress were prepared to cooperate across party lines and look for compromise solutions, legislation on these issues would be challenging to achieve. Forward legislative progress becomes functionally impossible when legislators who block widely-supported initiatives on the basis of intensely held minority political views join forces with other legislators who aim to undermine anything that could be viewed as a policy victory for Barack Obama and the Democratic Party.

Ambitious immigration reform is bound to be complex, and few Representatives or Senators would ever be able to support every provision with equal enthusiasm. Public support for various provisions is sure to vary as well. Compromises are necessary all around, yet the one-fifth minority of Tea Party-oriented Americans who

occupy the fringe – and exercise disproportionate leverage in the Republican Party right now – are unwilling to countenance legislative compromises. Indeed, they also support alternatives such as mass deportation that are generally unpopular and extremely impractical.

How are ultraconservative Americans able to sustain such intense minority opinions? Our recent research reveals troubling tendencies in how individuals process information about complicated policy issues. In studies we conducted at the University of Maine, respondents were presented with basic narratives about hypothetical immigrants and then asked to indicate their support for specific immigration policies.

Our results offer worrisome clues to popular perceptions. We found that stereotypes about immigrants, often evoked by heated rhetoric, prevented recognition of critical nuances in descriptions of immigration realities. More than 60% of respondents who spent 45 seconds reading a short paragraph about a Mexican undocumented migrant holding a high-status job later mistakenly remembered that the migrant was holding a low-status position, which is of course consistent with widespread stereotypes about Mexican migrants. When people cannot even absorb basic facts that run counter to political charged stereotypes, we can conclude that, all too often, racial myths are at work blocking nuanced understandings and responses to the realities of immigration and immigrant situations in the United States today.

Our research also reveals that a significant portion of variability in support for specific immigration policies is explained by degrees of prejudice towards immigrants, even when we take people's political views into account. Regardless of overall political outlooks, in short, people who are prejudiced against immigrants tend to oppose many potential immigration reforms. Even when we exposed people with strong anti-immigrant reviews to stories about non-threatening immigrants, their opposition to reforms did not change. Taken together, our findings indicate that pre-existing stereotypes about immigrants are powerful predictors of citizens' policy preferences – and there may be little that can be done to change views with stories about immigrants who are doing well and making constructive contributions to American society.

Unfortunately, these data suggest why it is easy for politicians in Congress and beyond not only to cater to prejudice and fears about immigrants, but also to stoke such fears with overheated rhetoric that falsifies or simplifies complex issues. Confronting extreme anti-immigrant rhetoric and obstructionism will require active campaigns to make voters aware of the ways in which their political leaders are not effectively representing their interests or furthering good outcomes for American society and the U.S. economy as a whole. Furthermore, efforts to ease fears and angry opposition among some members of the public will require more than a few stories in the media. Sustained efforts to build social ties and foster understanding in communities across the United States will be needed to soften opposition and build broader support for comprehensive immigration reform.

Constructive efforts will, by necessity, involve not just political leaders but also advocacy groups, public intellectuals, the media, and everyday citizens willing to engage one another across lines of difference. Elevating the discourse requires educating potential voters about the layered complexity of immigration, and promoting meaningful intergroup contact – for example, between church congregations of immigrants and those born in the U.S. Knee-jerk reactions thrive among voters who often do not know facts and have had little contact with immigrant workers and families in their communities. Creative steps must be taken on the ground to fill the information deficit and promote social understandings that, over time, can erase incentives for politicians to demagogue the immigration issue