

Young People and Immigration Reform: Evidence from a Post-Election Survey

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Immigration has risen to the top of the national agenda. The President won reelection with a coalition that generally favored reform and that included a large number of young people, many of whom came from immigrant families or expressed support for reforming immigration laws.

CIRCLE finds that only a relatively small proportion of young adults chose immigration as their top issue in 2012, but those young people overwhelmingly favored creating paths to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. As the Senate begins to debate a Comprehensive Immigration Reform bill, one potential element is the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act, which President Barack Obama endorsed and which has drawn support from young activists. Most of the youth who chose immigration as their top issue knew that President Obama was generally more favorable to immigrants than Mitt Romney was, but most did not know where the candidates stood on the DREAM Act. In fact, a plurality of young people with recent immigrant backgrounds said that President Obama would veto the DREAM Act and that Mitt Romney would not.

We derive these and other findings from our post-election survey of 4,483 young Americans (ages 18-24). The telephone survey, conducted in Spanish and English, began the day after the election and included oversamples of African American and Latino youth.

In this analysis, we define youth of recent immigrant origin as those who were born in another country (first generation) or who have at least one parent who was foreign-born (second generation). Almost one fifth (19.1%) of our whole sample were youth of first or second generation status, which is consistent with Census data. Since less than one percent of these youth in our sample said that they were ineligible to vote, this should be treated as a study of voting-eligible citizens. A majority (57.5%) of the first and second generation youth had two parents born in other countries, and 44.3% identified as Latino/a.

Voter Turnout and Vote Choice

First- and second-generation youth voted for President Obama over Governor Romney by 76.4% to 20%, compared to a 59.2%-34.6% split for other youth. In several key states, if all youth had evenly split their votes between Romney and Obama, Romney would have won the 2012 election. That implies that these youth votes were important to the President's reelection. First and second generation youth also favored Democratic congressional candidates over Republicans by 59.1%-17.7%, compared to a somewhat narrower 44.5%-29.6% split among other youth.

Young people of recent immigrant origins voted at a somewhat lower rate than other youth. Using official vote counts, exit poll data, and demographic information, CIRCLE estimates that national turnout for all citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 was 48.3%. Our post-election survey yielded a somewhat higher rate of self-reported turnout: 59.9% said they had voted. In general, voters are more likely to participate in surveys than non-voters, and some people claim they voted when they did not. More significant for this analysis is the four-point gap in self-reported turnout (in our survey) between first and second generation youth (56.2%) and other youth (60.8%).

Young People's Views on Immigration

We asked all respondents in our post-election survey to choose one issue that they considered most important. Given a choice of six options (unemployment, the federal deficit, immigration, gay rights, health care, and abortion), 7.8% of the whole sample chose immigration. Since they were forced to pick just one issue, this response may understate young adults' interest in immigration.

The respondents who had chosen immigration were then asked to express their own opinion on the issue and to answer two factual questions about where President Obama and Governor Romney stood on that issue. Most young people who were especially concerned about immigration in 2012 were motivated to liberalize immigration laws. Three quarters (75.3%) favored "a law that would allow illegal immigrants brought to the US as children to gain legal resident status if they join the military or go to college" (often referred to as the DREAM act). Twenty percent opposed such a law, and the rest were unsure.

These young adults were then asked, "Which 2012 presidential candidate supported allowing many illegal or undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children to remain in the country?" Almost 63% said that only Barack Obama took that view, 3.2% said only Mitt Romney did, and the rest were not sure (20.2%) or believed that the candidates held the same position. This question suggests an accurate understanding of one difference in the candidates' positions.

However, we also asked a second question about the candidates' stances: "Which 2012 presidential candidate argued that The DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act rewards criminal activity by undocumented residents and that he will veto it should the DREAM Act pass?" The biggest group (32.8%) said that only Obama would veto the DREAM Act; 26% correctly said that only Mitt Romney would veto it; and the rest were unsure (28.9%) or thought the candidates held the same views. Youth may have been unaware of the acronym, of the substance of the Act, or of the President's position on it.

First and Second Generation Young People's Views on Immigration Reform

In 2006, when large demonstrations were held in support of immigration reform, 25% of young Latinos [said](#) they had participated in a protest. Compared to the rates of protest for other young people in 2006 and historically, this was an extraordinary statistic that suggested widespread activism among young Latinos. Although the wave of demonstrations has since subsided, organizing has continued.

In our 2012 post-election poll, a much higher proportion (16.8%) of young adults from recent immigrant backgrounds chose immigration as their top issue. (For youth who are not immigrants and do not have a parent who is the rate was just 5.7%.) Among the immigrants of Latino background, 29.0% said that immigration reform was the most important issue--close behind unemployment (31.4%)--underscoring how important this topic is to Latino youth. For all first and second generation youth, immigration was the #3 issue, behind employment and the deficit. But for non-recent-immigrant youth, it was tied with "none of the above" at #5, behind gay rights and health care reform. The issue priorities of youth with recent immigrant backgrounds and other youth were substantially the same, with the difference occurring mostly in strength of interest in immigration and the budget deficit.

As might be expected, first and second generation youth favored liberalization. Among those who chose immigration as their top issue, 85.5% supported policy creating a path to citizenship. That rate was significantly lower among non-recent-immigrant youth who picked immigration as their main issue; in fact fewer of that group (68%) supported a path to citizenship and 8.1% of that group *opposed* a new path to citizenship, suggesting that they may have emphasized immigration because they wanted to block the kinds of reforms now being considered in Congress.

Two thirds of respondents from recent immigrant backgrounds recognized that President Obama was more likely to allow immigrants to remain in the country, and a vast majority (81.6%) felt that President Obama was in touch with people like themselves. This suggests that immigrant youth generally felt that President Obama shared their collective vision, which was to create a path to citizenship.

Interestingly, however, 42% of the first and second generation respondents thought that only Obama would veto the DREAM Act compared to 26.4% among non-recent-immigrant respondents. When combined with the respondents who thought that both candidates would veto the DREAM act, nearly half believed that Obama was against the DREAM Act. About the same portions of recent immigrant youth (23.1%) and other youth (27.9%) correctly stated that only Mitt Romney said he would veto the DREAM act. Yet 70.6% of first and second generation youth thought that only Obama, not Mitt Romney, was in touch with them. Of those who thought Obama would veto the DREAM Act and yet supported it themselves, 81.6% thought the president was in touch with them.

It would appear that first and second generation youth formed a significant part of the constituency for immigration reform, and they supported President Obama for reelection. They did not indicate that they knew the President had endorsed the DREAM Act. It is possible that they misunderstood this question or did not know the “DREAM” acronym, but it is also possible that the President’s support for the Act is relatively unknown among young people of recent immigrant backgrounds.