Immigration Bill Provisions Gain Wide Support in Poll

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As opponents from the right and left challenge an immigration bill before Congress, there is broad support among Americans — Democrats, Republicans and independents alike — for the major provisions in the legislation, according to the latest New York Times/CBS News poll.

Taking a pragmatic view on a divisive issue, a large majority of Americans want to change the immigration laws to allow illegal immigrants to gain legal status and to create a new guest worker program to meet future labor demands, the poll found.

At the same time, Americans have mixed feelings about whether the recent wave of immigration has been beneficial to the country, the survey found, and they are sharply divided over how open the United States should be to future immigrants.

Half of Americans say they are ready to transform the process for selecting new immigrants as proposed in the bill, giving priority to job skills and education levels over family ties to the United States, which have been the foundation of the immigration system for four decades.

Point by point, large majorities expressed support for measures in the legislation that has been under debate since Monday in the Senate.

The nationwide telephone poll did not ask respondents about the immigration bill itself, but there were questions about its most significant provisions. It was conducted May 18 to 23 with 1,125 adults, and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points.

The bill, which is backed by President Bush and a bipartisan group of senators, would allow illegal immigrants who were in the United States before Jan. 1 of this year to obtain legal status by paying fines and passing background checks.

Two-thirds of those polled said illegal immigrants who had a good employment history and no criminal record should gain legal status as the bill proposes, which is by paying at least $5,000 in fines and fees and receiving a renewable four-year visa.

Many Republican lawmakers have rejected this plan, calling it amnesty that rewards immigrants who broke the law when they entered the United States. But the poll showed that differences are not great between Republicans and Democrats on this issue, with 66 percent of Republicans in the poll favoring the legalization proposal, as well as 72 percent of Democrats and 65 percent of independents.

Rick Nuñez, a 29-year-old quality control technician from Pennsauken, N. J., who identified himself as a Republican, said in a follow-up telephone call that he favored a legalization plan.

"Illegal immigrants are imbedded in our nation, so allowing them to apply for a work visa would be a good way to draw them in and set a path for them to become legal," said Mr. Nuñez, whose family came from Puerto Rico. "If they have been working here and are

law abiding and can contribute to our country, they should be allowed to stay and become citizens."

Most of those polled agreed that illegal immigrants should eventually be allowed to apply to become American citizens. But 59 percent said illegal immigrants should be considered for citizenship only after legal immigrants who have played by the rules.

Under the Senate bill, illegal immigrants would have to wait eight years before they could become permanent residents and at least 13 years to become citizens.

Two-thirds of Americans in the survey favored creating a guest-worker program for future immigrants. The bill would create a temporary-worker program in which immigrants would come for three stints of two years each, going home for one year between each stint and returning home for good after the third.

More than half of those who favored the guest-worker program said the workers should be allowed to apply to become permanent immigrants and eventually American citizens, if they maintain a strong work history and commit no crimes. About a third of those who favored the program disagreed, saying guest workers should be required to return home after their temporary period.

The bill does not include a path to citizenship for guest workers. In the debate, Democrat senators have sharply criticized the temporary-worker plan, saying it would create an underclass of easily exploited low-skilled workers. On Wednesday, senators voted to cut back the number of guest workers to 200,000 from the 400,000 proposed in the bill.

The bill also calls for reinforcing the country's borders, cracking down on employers who hire illegal immigrants and eliminating the backlog of visa applications from aspiring legal immigrants. In the poll, 75 percent of those who responded favored tougher penalties for employers of illegal workers, and 82 percent said the federal government should do more to reinforce the border. But only 15 percent favored fences as the main method to reduce illegal border crossings.

The poll showed that Americans are uncertain about the benefits of the most recent wave of immigration, and divided over how many immigrants should come in the future. Fifty-seven percent said recent immigrants had made a contribution to the United States. But 35 percent said that in the long run, the new immigrants would make American society worse, while only 28 percent said they would make it better.

A plurality of 48 percent favored imposing some controls on immigration. But large minorities on either side disagreed, with a quarter of respondents saying the United States should open its borders to all immigrants, and a quarter saying that the borders should be completely closed. These polarized positions may help explain the acrimony of the immigration debate across the nation.

By large margins, people in the poll are aware that the majority of the immigrants who have arrived in recent years are illegal, and 61 percent said that illegal immigration was a very serious problem. A large majority, 70 percent of respondents, said they believed that illegal immigrants weaken the American economy because they use public services but do not pay corresponding taxes.

"This has nothing to do with any particular person or group of people, but housing and schooling are going to illegal immigrants," said Barbara Jackson, 55, a visiting nurse

from the Bronx who identified herself as a Democrat. "You build affordable housing and then put someone in it who hasn't paid their dues. Do Americans' tax dollars pay for us to be second?"

Economists have found that many undocumented workers have Social Security and other taxes deducted from their paychecks, and have contributed as much as $7 billion to the Social Security Administration while claiming no benefits because of their illegal status. But Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative group, has reported that low-skilled illegal immigrant families cause an overall fiscal drain.

Among those polled, a majority of 51 percent favored overhauling the American immigration system to make it more attuned to economic demands, giving priority to job skills and educational accomplishment. Only 34 percent said that immigrants with family ties in the United States should take precedence.

Family reunification has been the cornerstone of the immigration system since 1965. The bill proposes to move to a merit system in which points would be assigned for work skills and education.

"I think this country would benefit from having people relocate here who have an educational background that would be an asset to the country," said Delores Mitchell, 66, a retired social worker from Highland Hills, Ohio, who identified herself as an independent.

"I just don't feel it should be based on whether family is here or not. We need people who have more job skills," Ms. Mitchell said in a follow-up interview to the poll.

Most Americans in the poll said they believed the country will be served if immigrants can work legally. "When immigrants do take jobs, they're hard workers," said Anna Cooper, 55, a homemaker in Venice, Fla., who identified herself as an independent. "They just want to work, that's the bottom line. They need a paycheck to take care of their families."

Megan Thee, Marina Stefan and Dalia Sussman contributed reporting