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Poll: 52% back visa or path to legal status

By Peggy Fikac

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More Texas voters think unauthorized immigrants should be allowed to stay in the United States — through either a path to citizenship or work visas — than favor deporting them, according to a new Houston Chronicle/San Antonio Express-News poll.

The poll showed that 38 percent of respondents favoring deportation — drawing the most support of the three options offered. Twenty-nine percent favored a way for unauthorized immigrants to attain citizenship, while 23 percent supported work visas.

Pollster Mickey Blum attributed some of the outcome to the structure of the question: “Two of them involved staying; one seemed a little bit like a middle road. ... Some people could have grabbed that so they didn't have to say either deport them or give them a path to citizenship.”

Texas voters were polled on the issue, which is expected to be a driver in the November gubernatorial election — prior to the March 2 party primary elections. Early voting begins Tuesday for those primaries.

Results show a strong partisan split, with 45 percent of Republicans and 28.4 percent of Democrats supporting deportation. Age and race also seemed to factor into participants' responses.

“The young seem to see this as kind of, ‘Yes, just let them have the path to citizenship,’ ” Blum said. About 42 percent of those under 30 supported that option, compared to 27 percent of those over 30.

Blacks gave the most support to a pathway to citizenship — 39.6 percent compared to 32.1 percent of Latinos and 26.7 percent of whites.

“There have been times when people have thought that minorities would be in competition with each other or would not be supportive of each other,” Blum said.

African Americans “were clearly supportive of that (path to citizenship). They were not looking to say, ‘Oh, wait, that's competition for us and send 'em back.’ ... The groups that are in favor of deportation are whites and Republicans.”

Balancing the budget

Among white voters, 43.5 percent favor deportation.

In the Houston region, 37.3 percent favor deportation, 33.7 percent, a path to citizenship and 19.1 percent, work visas.

The question was among several asked on issues in advance of the party primary elections as part of a poll of Texas voters conducted Feb. 2-10 for a consortium of Texas newspapers by Blum & Weprin Associates Inc.

Among other findings:

Given a menu of options to balance the state budget, 41 percent picked cuts in highway funding; 20 percent chose higher state taxes and fees; 11 percent would cut health care for the poor; and 7 percent would cut education.

To pay for more needed highway construction, the most popular choice was to increase toll roads, at 21 percent, followed by borrowing money using state bonds, 17 percent; increasing the state gasoline tax, 16 percent; taking money from other programs, 15 percent; and allowing “local option” gas taxes in metro areas, 10 percent.

Three out of four respondents favored a term limit on the time someone can serve as governor. Likely GOP primary voters said state issues that the governor has to deal with are more important to their votes than sending a message to Washington, 71 percent to 25 percent.

Jobs and the economy were the most important issues to those who plan to vote in the GOP primary, followed by the budget and taxes.

The issue of immigration also was polled in Texas by the firm four years ago. Then, when asked whether those in the country illegally hurt or help the U.S. economy, 56 percent said hurt and 33 percent said help, while 47 percent opposed a proposal to build a 2,000-mile-long security fence along the U.S.-Mexico border and 44 percent favored the idea.

Different views in Texas

In the new poll, Rice University political science professor Mark Jones said, the results seem a bit high on deportation. He said, however, there's more support for deportation in Texas than in the country as a whole.

Nationally, he said, 67 percent generally support a path to citizenship, depending on how the question is posed and whether qualifiers are put on the idea, such as granting such status to those who don't have criminal records and who pay a fine. Jones also said the issue isn't as simple as a percentage.

“The intensity varies on those two sides,” he said. It's a “very intense and salient” issue for those who favor deportation, while those who favor a path to citizenship may not have the same strength of feeling.

The issue plays into a potential November matchup between GOP Gov. Rick Perry and former Houston Mayor Bill White, who is vying for the Democratic nod for governor, and into the future of the Republican Party overall, he said.

“The Republicans have had the luxury over the past dozen years of essentially not worrying about the Latino voters. George W. Bush did quite well with Latino voters, but since then you've seen a policy more by the Republican Party that, if anything, it alienates Latino voters here in Texas,” he said.

Political fallout

Lawmakers of opposing parties mentioned the political ramifications.

“Why would Democrats not want to give 20 million illegal aliens amnesty with a pathway to citizenship? Because if they do ... they will create 20 million instant voters with a tendency to vote for Democrats, because they will continue to need health care and free education in the United States, and the Democrats are more than willing to give it to them,” said Rep. Leo Berman, R-Tyler, who has pushed bills targeting unauthorized immigrants.

The Homeland Security Department has estimated that the number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States was 10.8 million in January 2009.

State Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, said, “From a Democratic standpoint, it behooves the Democratic Party to have Republicans like Leo Berman spew their hateful rhetoric. That's (creating) the next generation of Hispanics that will never vote Republican.”

The questions were asked by phone of a random sample of 1,508 registered voters. Of them, 464 were likely GOP primary voters. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.5 percent for registered voters and plus or minus 4.5 percent for likely GOP primary voters.