

Sources of Variation in Attitudes Toward Illegal Immigration

Report from the Mason Immigration Survey of Virginia Residents

Steven P. Vallas, Ph.D.
Emily Zimmerman, Ph.D.

Center for Social Science Research
George Mason University

www.cssr.gmu.edu

703/993-2127 or 993-2993

For some time now, the issue of immigration has gripped the nation's communities, with demonstrations, harsh legislation at the local level, and an ordeal of congressional wrangling over how best to secure the nation's borders while maintaining an open society. As immigration has reached into states and localities like Georgia or Virginia, where ethnic relations were long shaped along only white/black lines, conflicts have seemed especially intense. In order to understand how the immigration debate is taking shape at the local and county level, researchers at George Mason's Center for Social Science Research conducted a state-wide survey, the goal of which was to explore the social factors that drive attitudes toward illegal immigration. This report provides a first look at the results of the study. More analysis is to come, as these data are further analyzed by researchers at the Center and at the Center-sponsored Mason Project on Immigration (MPI). For more information on the Center and the MPI, go to www.cssr.gmu.edu.

This survey is based on telephone interviews of 1,072 English-speaking adult Virginia residents who were contacted during the three week period ending June 8, 2007. Respondents were selected at random; cases were weighted by age, sex, and ethnicity to ensure proportional representation of all groups. All regions of the Virginia commonwealth were included, enabling the study to capture attitudes in the state in all their diversity. The margin of error for responses is plus or minus 3%.

Below we provide a set of annotated tables showing responses to key items on attitudes toward immigration found among Virginia residents. The tables help readers appreciate two aspects of the study's findings: First, to understand responses within the sample overall (which can be seen by exploring the distribution of responses at the right hand side of each table). Second, the tables enable the reader to understand how key social and demographic factors generate variations in respondents' attitudes. The tables are organized in terms of several social factors: race and ethnicity, income, education, region of the state, and political ideology. All associations shown in this brief are significant at the .05 level.

The data provide a telling but complex picture of Virginians' attitudes on this crucial social and economic issue. Although political leaders have been widely reviled for their inability to reach consensus on the immigration question, the electorate itself seems riven by sharp conflicts. Although racial and ethnic differences have not received much attention in the public debate, African Americans seem especially hesitant about the economic consequences of undocumented immigration, largely because they fear an erosion of their labor market conditions. Indeed, socio-economic position generally shapes Virginians' perceptions, with less permissive policies finding their greatest support among poorer and less educated respondents. Different regions within the state, too, see the question of immigration in very different terms. While the most urbanized and culturally diverse region (Northern Virginia) holds relatively accommodating views on immigration

policy, regions that are less urbanized and less affluent (such as the southern, southwestern, and Piedmont regions) adopt significantly harsher views.

A final point may be most important of all: The single strongest determinant of Virginians' views on illegal immigration is the ideological position (liberal/conservative) which respondents bring to bear on this issue. This point, which awaits close and careful analysis, suggests that it is not merely objective conditions that drive the immigration debate: the cultural "lens" which Virginians invoke leads them to perceive the issue in decidedly different terms. In this respect, the immigration debate may provide another expression of the ongoing "culture war" that has gripped the American polity. Given the depth of the attitudinal disparities this study reports, the immigration debate is not likely to wane any time soon. Even if some version of legislative reforms are adopted at the national level, the fall elections in Virginia are likely to provide an important arena for the continuation of this debate.

1. ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCES BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

Not surprisingly, Latinos are consistently supportive of measures that would provide greater support to immigrant populations; Asian Americans seem somewhat less supportive. Most important here, however: African Americans emerge as the most cautious ethnic group, and often express fear that undocumented immigration will undermine their positions within the economy and society.

The issue of government funding for day labor centers serving immigrant workers (many of whom are undocumented) has roiled many Virginia communities for much of the last year. These data suggest that a majority of Virginians (58%) oppose such government support. The data also reveal ethnic differences on this question: African Americans are most opposed (68%), while roughly the same proportion of Latinos (65%) favor such initiatives.

			ETHNICITY					Total
			NON HISP WHITE	AF-AMERICAN	LATINO	ASIAN/PACIF ISLANDER	OTHER	
Do you favor or oppose the creation of government-sponsored hiring centers for day laborers, which may include undocumented immigrants?	Favor	Count	289	49	33	14	11	396
		% within ETHNICITY	44.1%	31.8%	64.7%	33.3%	30.6%	42.2%
	Oppose	Count	367	105	18	28	25	543
		% within ETHNICITY	55.9%	68.2%	35.3%	66.7%	69.4%	57.8%
Total	Count	656	154	51	42	36	939	
	% within ETHNICITY	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

The idea of having local police check run immigration status checks on people they encounter during routine activities has divided many law enforcement officials. Although many analysts fear that such a policy would erode needed trust in law enforcement officers, others feel that immigration law must be enforced at the local level. Our data suggest that a clear majority of Virginians (73%) favor giving such an active role to local police officers. The data also suggest that ethnic divisions again obtain. Non-hispanic whites and African Americans favor giving police such authority, while Latinos and Asians do not.

Minuteman-like groups have emerged, often in protest at day labor centers. Virginians seem supportive of such activities (55%). Again, Latinos are strongly opposed to the activities of such groups.

			ETHNICITY					Total
			NON HISP WHITE	AF-AMERICAN	LATINO	ASIAN/PACIF ISLANDER	OTHER	
There are some groups of people known as Minutemen who look for undocumented immigrants along the Mexican border and in communities in order to report them to the authorities. Do you approve or disapprove of what these groups are doing?	Approve	Count	364	71	14	21	20	490
		% within ETHNICITY	58.1%	49.7%	26.9%	61.8%	57.1%	55.0%
	Disapprove	Count	263	72	38	13	15	401
		% within ETHNICITY	41.9%	50.3%	73.1%	38.2%	42.9%	45.0%
Total		Count	627	143	52	34	35	891
		% within ETHNICITY	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

On the question of a path toward legal residency, only 21% of Virginians think that undocumented immigrants should be simply required to go home. Forty-one percent think that undocumented immigrants should be granted permanent residency, and a similar proportion (39%) favor a temporary worker arrangement. Ethnic divisions emerge here again, with whites and Asians tilting toward a guest worker program, and the largest proportion of Latinos and blacks opting toward permanent residency.

			ETHNICITY					Total
			NON HISP WHITE	AF-AMERICAN	LATINO	ASIAN/PACIF ISLANDER	OTHER	
Attitude toward legal residency	Grant permanent residency	Count	246	67	26	8	13	360
		% within ETHNICITY	39.3%	45.3%	56.5%	25.0%	37.1%	40.6%
	Grant temporary residency	Count	259	41	15	13	14	342
		% within ETHNICITY	41.4%	27.7%	32.6%	40.6%	40.0%	38.6%
	Require illegals to return home	Count	121	40	5	11	8	185
		% within ETHNICITY	19.3%	27.0%	10.9%	34.4%	22.9%	20.9%
Total		Count	626	148	46	32	35	887
		% within ETHNICITY	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

On several additional items, African Americans show the highest level of concern about the consequences of illegal immigration. Thus blacks more frequently believe that illegal immigration will undercut the labor market position of American workers and hurt American wages and salaries. African Americans also believe that illegal immigration may endanger national security.

			EDUCATION					Total
			LESS THAN HS	HS GRAD	SOME COLL OR VOC SCHOOL	COLLEGE	SOME GRAD OR PROF'L ED	
Do you favor or oppose the creation of government-sponsored hiring centers for day laborers, which may include undocumented immigrants?	Favor	Count	25	64	105	75	132	401
		% within EDUCRECODE	51.0%	32.7%	38.2%	38.5%	54.1%	41.8%
	Oppose	Count	24	132	170	120	112	558
		% within EDUCRECODE	49.0%	67.3%	61.8%	61.5%	45.9%	58.2%
Total	Count	49	196	275	195	244	959	
	% within EDUCRECODE	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Note too that economic conditions in respondents' counties of residence also impinge on attitudes. Specifically, Virginians living in counties with higher rates of unemployment or poverty express lower levels of tolerance toward illegal immigration.

			UNEMPLOYMENT RATE				Total
			< 2.5%	2.5 - <3%	3 - < 4%	4% +	
Do you favor or oppose the creation of government-sponsored hiring centers for day laborers, which may include undocumented immigrants?	Favor	Count	187	94	72	53	406
		% within UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	53.0%	34.4%	39.8%	32.5%	41.9%
	Oppose	Count	166	179	109	110	564
		% within UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	47.0%	65.6%	60.2%	67.5%	58.1%
Total	Count	353	273	181	163	970	
	% within UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

3. REGION OF THE STATE.

Virginia's 8 million residents live in regions that are highly diverse culturally, economically, and ecologically. The most affluent and urbanized region of the state is Northern Virginia, which has experienced the largest influx of newcomers. Other urban concentrations are in Richmond and Hampton Roads. More rural, less affluent parts of the state include the Southwest, South Piedmont, and Roanoke regions in the south, as well as the Shenandoah region adjoining West Virginia. Many of the latter regions have experienced economic hardship in recent years.

Our data indicate that different regions show highly divergent views of immigration policy and illegal immigration. The most tolerant and accommodating views are found in Northern Virginia; the least accepting attitudes are in the strip that reaches from the Southwest, the South Piedmont and Roanoke area, up through the edge of Northern Virginia (the Rapahannock-Fauquier-Warren region, coded as "NOVA2" in the tables) and the Shenandoah region. Further analysis (not shown) indicates that counties that have higher rates of unemployment and poverty also tend to be less tolerant of illegal immigration.

			Region										Total	
			Central VA	Eastern VA	Hampton Roads	NOVA	NOVA2	Richmond Area	Roanoke Area	Shenandoah	South Piedmont	Southside		Southwest
Attitude toward legal residency	Grant permanent residency	Count	21	9	72	129	8	66	25	14	14	11	13	382
		% within Region	45.7%	47.4%	37.3%	48.5%	22.9%	45.8%	35.2%	27.5%	28.6%	47.8%	37.1%	41.0%
	Grant temporary residency	Count	17	9	77	94	15	51	30	27	19	6	12	357
		% within Region	37.0%	47.4%	39.9%	35.3%	42.9%	35.4%	42.3%	52.9%	38.8%	26.1%	34.3%	38.3%
	Require illegals to return home	Count	8	1	44	43	12	27	16	10	16	6	10	193
		% within Region	17.4%	5.3%	22.8%	16.2%	34.3%	18.8%	22.5%	19.6%	32.7%	26.1%	28.6%	20.7%
Total		Count	46	19	193	266	35	144	71	51	49	23	35	932
		% within Region	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

4. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY.

A final source of variation in immigration attitudes stems from the political convictions that respondents hold. Our data suggest that this is in fact among the strongest determinants of attitudes toward immigration, affecting attitudes toward legal residency policy, views of labor market consequences, and the social impact of undocumented populations more generally. The general pattern is shown in the three tables given below.

			Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?					Total
			Strongly liberal	Somewhat liberal	Neither liberal nor conservative	Somewhat conservative	Strongly conservative	
Attitude toward legal residency	Grant permanent residency	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	61 66.3%	118 51.5%	70 38.3%	66 28.4%	31 23.0%	346 39.7%
	Grant temporary residency	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	22 23.9%	70 30.6%	86 47.0%	111 47.8%	55 40.7%	344 39.5%
	Require illegals to return home	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	9 9.8%	41 17.9%	27 14.8%	55 23.7%	49 36.3%	181 20.8%
Total		Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	92 100.0%	229 100.0%	183 100.0%	232 100.0%	135 100.0%	871 100.0%

			Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?					Total
			Strongly liberal	Somewhat liberal	Neither liberal nor conservative	Somewhat conservative	Strongly conservative	
Do you agree or disagree that UNDOCUMENTED immigrant workers in the labor market tend to lower the wages and salaries of American workers?	Agree strongly	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	22 22.2%	64 25.1%	53 25.6%	104 40.2%	75 52.4%	318 33.0%
	Agree somewhat	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	11 11.1%	75 29.4%	69 33.3%	70 27.0%	33 23.1%	258 26.8%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	4 4.0%	20 7.8%	18 8.7%	9 3.5%	6 4.2%	57 5.9%
	Disagree somewhat	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	26 26.3%	58 22.7%	39 18.8%	51 19.7%	14 9.8%	188 19.5%
	Disagree strongly	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	36 36.4%	38 14.9%	28 13.5%	25 9.7%	15 10.5%	142 14.7%
	Total	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	99 100.0%	255 100.0%	207 100.0%	259 100.0%	143 100.0%	963 100.0%

			Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?					Total
			Strongly liberal	Somewhat liberal	Neither liberal nor conservative	Somewhat conservative	Strongly conservative	
Thinking about ILLEGAL or UNDOCUMENTED immigrants, would you agree or disagree that UNDOCUMENTED immigration:Hurts American customs and way of life?	Agree strongly	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	13 12.7%	76 29.8%	53 26.2%	99 38.7%	82 54.7%	323 33.5%
	Agree somewhat	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	10 9.8%	54 21.2%	51 25.2%	71 27.7%	32 21.3%	218 22.6%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	8 7.8%	17 6.7%	20 9.9%	14 5.5%	6 4.0%	65 6.7%
	Disagree somewhat	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	21 20.6%	64 25.1%	52 25.7%	49 19.1%	17 11.3%	203 21.0%
	Disagree strongly	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	50 49.0%	44 17.3%	26 12.9%	23 9.0%	13 8.7%	156 16.2%
Total	Count % within Do you consider yourself to be strongly liberal, somewhat liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, somewhat conservative, or strongly conservative?	102 100.0%	255 100.0%	202 100.0%	256 100.0%	150 100.0%	965 100.0%	