

Region Weighs in on Immigration Issues

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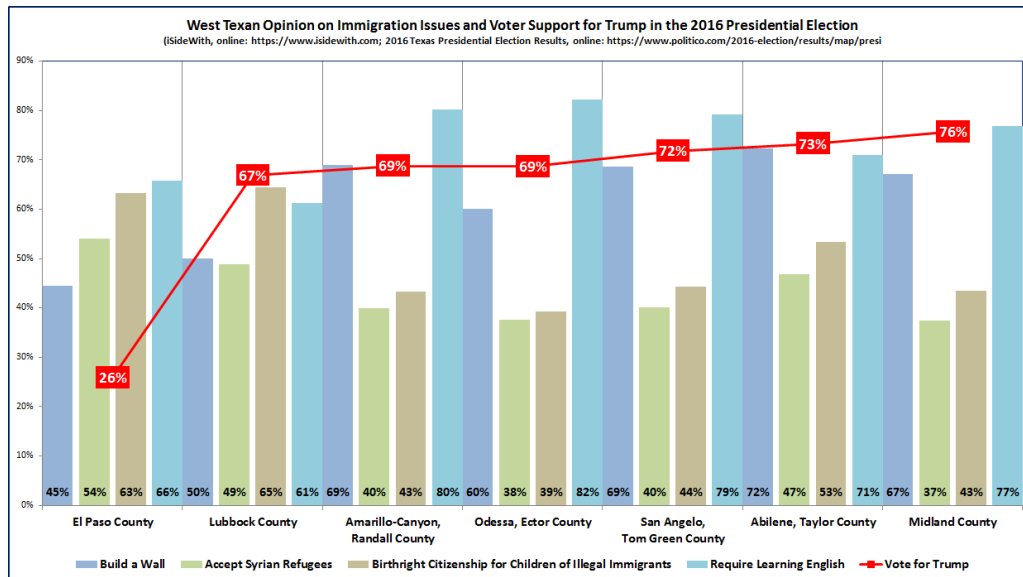
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Cloaked with fierce claims about the need to control immigration, President Donald Trump has ordered a series of extraordinary policies and actions since taking office. Polling centers have raced to gauge public response to the issues.

Leading opinion researchers regularly conduct surveys on immigration issues. However, the leading polls do not usually provide details about attitudes in local areas. Prompted by recent events triggered by Trump’s policy to separate children and families at the border, we reached out to find data on the opinions of Texans and West Texans.

iSideWith is an on-line survey site created by two friends with divergent views about politics. They created iSideWith “. . . to find and build new ways to boost voter engagement and education using information, data, and breaking technologies.” Each day the site receives over a million unique responses to issues. People who respond are self-selected and do not represent a random sample of residents or voters.

Since iSideWith polls are not conducted on set time schedules, they are able to initiate surveys dynamically as new issues pop-up. Recently, the site began polling on the issue of separating adults illegally attempting to enter the U.S. from their children.



So far, 80% of about 2,600 respondents nationwide have opposed the policy along with 81% of 225 Texas respondents. Unfortunately, the number of responses from West Texas counties is currently insufficient to gain insight into local or regional views.

Trump’s signature issue is his promise to build a wall along the southern border. Nationwide, 55% of iSideWith respondents support construction of the wall. While a near equal proportion of Texans agree with the idea.

In West Texas, respondents from Abilene and Taylor County are the greatest supporters (72.4%) of the wall. In addition, nearly seven in ten respondents from Randall (Amarillo-Canyon) and Tom Green (San Angelo) counties are supportive. Midland residents on iSideWith approve of the wall at a 67% rate.

Next to Midland in Odessa (Ector County), respondents are slightly less enthusiastic with 60% approval of the wall. Support wanes to 50% in Lubbock County and falls to 45% among El Paso residents.

Although the President has said the U.S. would accept Syrian refugees with extensive background checks and continuous monitoring to ensure no terrorist connections, data from the State Department's Refugee Processing Center shows only 49 of more than 16,000 refugees allowed between October, 2017 and June of this year were from Syria. Moreover, Syria is one of the 5 countries on the immigration ban list recently upheld by the Supreme Court.

In West Texas, the majority of El Paso respondents (54%) support having Syrian refugees, but four population centers, including the Amarillo-Canyon, Midland, Odessa, and San Angelo areas, had no more than 40% support. Abilene (Taylor County) and Lubbock area residents support the idea of Syrian refugees entering the nation by margins of 47% and 49% respectively. Overall, 48% of Texans on iSideWith favor accepting Syrian refugees.

During the second Republican primary debate in 2015, moderator Jake Tapper of CNN asked candidate Trump this question, "you say that babies born in the United States to undocumented immigrants should not any longer get automatic American citizenship. Ms. Fiorina says that you are pandering on this issue ... What's your message to Ms. Fiorina on birthright citizenship?"

In answer, Trump called the principle of birthright citizenship, enshrined in the 14th Constitutional Amendment, into question. His tagline, "A woman gets pregnant. She's nine months, she walks across the border, she has the baby in the United States, and we take care of the baby for 85 years. I don't think so."

Nationwide, 53% of iSideWith respondents support the principle of birthright citizenship, and the level of approval moves up to about 57% in Texas. The Lubbock area leads support for the principle in West Texas at 65%, with El Paso following at 63%.

Odessa and Ector County anchor the opposing end of the spectrum with about 61% saying "no" to birthright citizenship. San Angelo and Tom Green County respondents on iSideWith are also in opposition to the birthright principle by a margin of 56%.

A year ago Trump backed the Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment Act proposed by Republican Senators Tom Cotton and David Perdue. The proposal features changing the system for legal residency to give priority to highly-skilled, English-speaking immigrants.

Two-thirds of Texans on iSideWith support the idea of requiring immigrants to learn English, and support for the requirement was generally higher in most West Texas areas. Respondents from Odessa (Ector County), as well as the Amarillo-Canyon area (Randall County), favor requiring English by at least 80%. San Angelo and Tom Green County residents on iSideWith agree at a 79% rate, and residents from Abilene and Midland also voice this opinion by margins of more than 70%. El Paso and Lubbock are the only West Texas population centers where at

least a third of respondents align with the third of Texans who disagree that English learning should be required for immigrants.

iSideWith is not a scientific poll designed to represent area populations or eligible voters. Instead, anyone visiting the website is allowed to respond as a personal choice. A key function of self-selection polls is to provide opportunities for individuals with strong feelings about issues to voice their fervent opinions.

Combining opinions on iSideWith with voter support for Trump reveals connections between the President's immigration policies and passionately held views of West Texans. Regional population centers like Abilene, Amarillo and Canyon, Lubbock, Midland, Odessa, and San Angelo are stocked with people steadfastly aligned with the President on immigration. These areas also were solidly for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election at levels ranging from 67% (Lubbock County) to 76% (Midland County).

In contrast, most iSideWith participants from El Paso are animated in opposition to Trump's positions. They do agree with Trump supporters on requiring immigrants to learn English, but mutual feelings end there. El Paso iSideWith respondents oppose the border wall, favor accepting Syrian immigrants, and stand up for birthright citizenship. And only 26% of the county's voters went for Trump in 2016.

Our nation's policy history on immigration confirms that perceived threats to security continuously divide us. Ironically, the first meeting of the U.S. Congress in 1789 passed the Bill of Rights which were sent to the states for ratification. During its 2nd session in 1790, the same elected Congress produced the nation's initial Nationalization Act limiting the privilege of citizenship to free whites of "good moral character." The Congress explicitly excluded Native Americans, indentured servants, slaves, and free blacks.

Shortly afterward, the 5th Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. Signed by President John Adams, this legislation included provisions to restrict speech critical of the government and authorized the president to imprison or deport aliens considered "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States." Designed by the then dominant Federalist Party to weaken opposition, the reaction backfired to help Jefferson's rising Democratic-Republican Party to victory in 1800. Since our early history, immigration issues have proved powerful means of stoking fear and discord to use as political weapons against opponents.

The politically polarized 1880s was a trend making decade for fear and hostility toward immigrants. In the midst of the "great wave" of immigration to a rapidly industrializing U.S., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 began a 60 year era of exclusion and control of immigrants based on racial and cultural features deemed inferior by policy makers.

One of the the most shamefully discriminatory efforts to protect national security came near the end of the era of exclusion and control. The military, implementing FDR's Executive Order after the attack on Pearl Harbor, evicted 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry and held them in detention. Four decades later, Ronald Reagan signed the 1988 Civil Liberties Act to compensate detained Japanese families and apologize for the internment policy.

"We are all immigrants" can sound like an empty refrain against the backdrop of this history. Yet, the nation undeniably benefits from the energy immigrants bring. Despite the concern for security, for instance, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team of second-generation Japanese

soldiers fought primarily in Europe during WWII. The unit became one of the most decorated in American warfare. Some 14,000 served. Members earned 9,486 Purple Hearts, 8 Presidential Unit Citations, and 21 Medals of Honor.

During preparations for the 1988 signing ceremony of the Civil Liberties Act, President Reagan attested, “We admit a wrong; here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the law.” In these mean and divisive times, what regrettable policies and actions will we have to admit a wrong for?