

Poll Finds Immigration on Voters' Minds; Issue Rapidly Rises to Prominence, With Three-Fourths Calling It Important in Election

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Body

After years of simmering in the background, illegal immigration has quickly emerged as one of the key issues in Virginia's Nov. 6 election, particularly in Northern Virginia, where voters say they are seeking candidates who will address it, according to a new Washington Post poll.

Three-quarters of likely voters in Virginia said immigration is important to their votes in the election for state and local offices, while just a year ago, immigration ranked seventh of 10 listed issues in a Post poll before the U.S. Senate race. Since then, the percentage of Virginia voters calling immigration "extremely" or "very" important to their vote has jumped 15 points.

"That's heartening," said Corey A. Stewart (R-At Large), chairman of the Prince William Board of County Supervisors, who spearheaded efforts to crack down on illegal immigrants. "For many people, this has really become a serious threat to their quality of life."

There is a widespread sense that illegal immigration is a local problem, particularly after Congress's failure to approve an immigration overhaul this summer. That has vaulted the issue into prominence.

It has also gained attention because of what people in both parties say is a predominantly Republican tactic to turn attention away from President Bush's sagging approval ratings, an unpopular war and the state's costly new abusive-driver fees.

"It's a conscious political strategy by Virginia Republicans," said Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, an immigrant advocacy group in Washington. "What happens in Virginia in the legislative races will be a pretty good test of whether this works or not."

Republicans across the state -- and a few Democrats in conservative districts -- have seized the issue, unveiling countless proposals to curb illegal immigration and talking it up on the campaign trail.

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In the past two statewide **elections**, the unsuccessful Republican candidates for U.S. Senate and governor tried to make **immigration** an **issue**, but it did not resonate as deeply with **voters** as such problems as traffic congestion. Transportation and the state's economy are still the biggest **issues** facing Virginia today, according to the Post **poll**, but **immigration** has made a surge in **voter** interest this fall. Among likely **voters**, 61 percent **called** illegal **immigration** a problem where they live.

A majority of likely **voters** who said **immigration** is extremely **important** would like to see Republicans maintain control of the General Assembly, and those who **call** the **issue** the state's top problem generally prefer the GOP approach. But overall, Virginians give Democrats a narrow edge on handling **immigration**, and more **voters** would like to see the Democrats take over the state legislature.

"I think Democrats would have a better solution," said Barbara Humphreys, 57, of Buena Vista, who ranks **immigration** as a top **issue**, along with the economy and the war in Iraq.

Political analysts say Democrats could make gains in the Republican-led legislature Nov. 6, when all 140 House and Senate seats are up for grabs. Democrats could take control of the Senate for the first time since 1999 and pick up a half-dozen or so seats in the House of Delegates, analysts say.

A majority of Virginians, 53 percent, said they want state and local governments to do "a lot" to deal with illegal **immigration**; an additional third said they want "some" action.

Although state and local governments can do little to resolve **immigration** concerns, in part because federal and state laws provide many protections for illegal immigrants, six in 10 likely Virginia **voters** said they would be more inclined to support an office seeker who advocated aggressive state and local action against illegal immigrants.

"I think we need to strengthen our borders," said Lori Robinson, 45, of Norfolk, who plans to vote for Republicans next month, partly because she thinks they would be stronger on **immigration**. "I'm looking for someone to stand up and say, 'This is what this country needs.' You want to help everyone, but you can't."

"Clearly there's a lot of frustration with the broken **immigration** system," said Tim Freilich, legal director for the Virginia Justice Center for Farm and Immigrant Workers. "What we're seeing are state and local **elected** officials trying to do something. What we need now is comprehensive **immigration** reform. We don't need mean-spirited, shortsighted results."

In recent months, Prince William and Loudoun counties have voted to curtail government services to illegal immigrants, and Herndon voted to close a controversial day-laborer center frequented by many illegal immigrants. Last week, the Prince William board also unanimously passed a proposal that will allow police to check the **immigration** status of anyone who breaks the law. Fairfax officials are trying to determine which county services can be denied to illegal immigrants, although they haven't decided to do that.

Republicans dispute the notion that they are exploiting the **immigration issue** to gain political advantage, saying they are responding to complaints from **voters**. "If you're hyping a nonissue, you wouldn't get these results," Stewart said.

Gerald E. Connolly (D), who is running for reelection as chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, said many politicians are making false claims about what they can do.

"Some politicians have declared open season on a particular group of immigrants who are here that goes way beyond unpalatable. It puts people at risk. I can tell you I've spoken to a lot of immigrant communities. This has made them very anxious. We have a sad history in Virginia that we don't want to repeat," Connolly said.

Nearly seven in 10 Virginians **polled** said the federal government has not done enough to deal with the **issue**. But many also see illegal **immigration** as a state and local **issue** -- and not one that the federal government alone should address.

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About one in eight Virginians **call immigration** the most or second-most **important** problem in the state. Fifty-one percent of those surveyed said illegal **immigration** is a problem where they live, including 20 percent who said it is a "very serious problem."

Steve Fowler, 57, a consultant who lives in Manassas, describes **immigration** and transportation as his top **issues** after abortion. "To me, the **issue** is . . . whether they broke the law to come here," he said.

But Bill Maxwell, 70, a retiree who has lived in Alexandria for four decades, said **immigration** is not a top priority. "I think Republicans are making a big deal out of it," said Maxwell, who has voted for both parties in the past but plans to vote Democratic in November.

On most questions about **immigration**, there are wide differences by party and region.

Although 58 percent of Republicans and 55 percent of independents want much more local action on illegal **immigration**, fewer Democrats, 43 percent, do. And almost three-quarters of Republicans are more likely to support a candidate who wants strong action against illegal immigrants, nearly double the percentage among Democrats.

"Republicans would do a better job," said Pat Holub, 42, who is in the Navy and lives in Springfield. "Liberals have a tendency to want to do everything for everybody."

Nearly a third of likely **voters** who live north of the Rappahannock River said **immigration** was one of the top two **issues** in the state, and 77 percent said illegal **immigration** was a problem in their communities; 37 percent **called** it a very serious problem.

Those numbers surged higher in Prince William, where half of all residents **called immigration** the most or second-most **important issue** facing the state and a majority classified illegal **immigration** as a very serious local problem.

Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, a group that advocates limits on **immigration** and penalties for illegal immigrants, **called** the **poll** results surprising because **immigration** has not been an **issue** taken on by a statewide leader in Virginia as it has in some states.

Beck attributed some of the interest to increased attention to **immigration** by the media and to the enormous alterations in the state's landscape.

"People across Virginia, especially in Northern Virginia, they are witnessing a rapid change," he said.

The **poll** was conducted by telephone Oct. 4 through 8 among a random sample of 1,144 Virginia adults, including additional interviews with randomly selected residents of Loudoun and Prince William counties. The results from the full **poll** have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points; it is larger among subgroups.

Polling analyst Jennifer Agiesta and staff writer Bill Turque contributed to this report.

Graphic

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Classification

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