Nation splits 4 ways on illegals; Compromise could alienate half of USA

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Body

WASHINGTON -- Americans hold strong and conflicting views about immigration that underscore the difficulties Congress will face in reaching a final legislative deal on the issue, an analysis of **_USA_** TODAY polling data shows.

The public **_splits_** into separate camps over whether illegal immigrants should be able to work toward citizenship, whether they help or hurt the economy -- even whether immigration is an urgent problem that must be addressed.

Those disagreements are reflected in the Senate immigration bill that passed Thursday and the House bill, passed in December, which takes a tougher approach. A conference committee will try to resolve conflicts between the two measures on the issue, President Bush's top domestic priority before Congress.

A **_USA_** TODAY breakdown of public opinion, based on Gallup polls taken in April and May, finds Americans falling into four clusters that are roughly equal in size but vary dramatically in point of view. The groups can be characterized as "hard-liners," "unconcerned," "ambivalent" and "welcoming."

"You're talking about irreconcilable groups that represent substantial parts of the population," says Roberto Suro, director of the non-partisan Pew Hispanic Center. "A **_compromise_** that 50% of the population can go for leaves **_half_** the public feeling unhappy, and very unhappy."

Among the findings in the **_USA_** TODAY analysis:

*Traditional partisanship doesn't drive views on immigration. Gender, education and family history seem to do as much to shape attitudes as political party or ideology. Significant numbers of liberals and conservatives are divided among three of the four groups. Moderates spread across all four.

In Congress, too, partisanship doesn't rule on this issue. Republicans are particularly divided: 23 Senate Republicans voted for the immigration bill, 32 voted against it.

*Those who want to take the toughest steps against illegal immigration also feel the most urgency about the subject. Two-thirds of the "hard-liners" call the issue "extremely important." No one in the most lenient group, the "unconcerned," feels that **_way_**.

The intensity of their views magnifies the clout of those most opposed to citizenship programs. "They project a loud voice," says Frank Sharry of the pro-immigrant National Immigration Forum.

"The people whose political decisions are based on a candidate's immigration stance are mainly pro-control, pro-enforcement people," says Mark Kirkorian of the Center for Immigration Studies, which supports tougher enforcement.

The "hard-liners" are also the most Republican group -- one reason many House Republicans, especially those considered at risk in November's elections, may be reluctant to ***compromise***.

*The four groups are starkly at odds on basic issues, making it difficult to see common ground. No one in the "hard-liner" group supports a proposal to allow illegal immigrants to work toward citizenship, but more than three-fourths of those in the other three groups do. The Senate bill includes such a provision; the House bill doesn't.

In two of the four groups, overwhelming majorities say removing illegal immigrants would hurt the economy. In the other two groups, solid majorities say it would help.

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