



MANY AMERICANS SAY IMMIGRANTS CONTRIBUTE TO ECONOMY BUT THERE'S WORRY OVER RISKS, AP-NORC POLL FINDS - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on March 30, 2024 by REBECCA SANTANA and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX |

Associated Press



Photo: Cars and trucks line up to enter the U.S. from Mexico at a border crossing in El Paso, Texas, March 29, 2019

Americans are more worried about legal immigrants committing crimes in the U.S. than they were a few years ago, a change driven largely by increased concern among Republicans, while Democrats continue to see a broad range of benefits from immigration, a new poll shows.

The poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that substantial shares of U.S. adults believe that immigrants contribute to the country's economic growth, and offer important contributions to American culture. But when it comes to legal immigrants, U.S. adults see fewer major benefits than they did in the past, and more major risks.

About 4 in 10 Americans say that when immigrants come to the U.S. legally, it's a major benefit for American companies to get the expertise of skilled workers in fields like science and technology. A similar share (38%) also say that legal immigrants contribute a major benefit by enriching American culture and values.

Both those figures were down compared with 2017, when 59% of Americans said skilled immigrant workers who enter the country legally were a major benefit, and half said legal immigrants contribute a major benefit by enriching American culture.

Meanwhile, the share of Americans who say that there's a major risk that legal immigrants will commit crimes in the U.S. has increased, going from 19% in 2017 to 32% in the new poll.

Republicans were more likely than Democrats to say that immigration is an important issue for them personally, and 41% now say it's a major risk that legal immigrants will commit crimes in the U.S., up from 20% in 2017. Overall, Republicans are more likely to see major risks — and fewer benefits — from immigrants who enter the country legally and illegally, although they tend to be most concerned about people who come to the country illegally.

Bob Saunders is a 64-year-old independent from Voorhees, New Jersey. He disapproves of President Joe Biden's performance when it comes to immigration and border security and is particularly worried about the number of immigrants coming to the southern border who are eventually released into the country. He stressed that there's a difference between legal and illegal immigration. Saunders said it's important to know the background of the immigrants coming to the U.S. and said legal immigration contributes to the economy. He also noted the immigrants in his own family.

"It's not anti-immigration," Saunders said. "It's anti-illegal immigration."

Many Republicans, 71%, say there's a risk of people in the country illegally coming to the U.S. and committing crimes, although many studies have found immigrants are less drawn to violent crime than native-born citizens. Even more, 80%, think there's a major risk that people in the country without permission will burden public service programs, while about 6 in 10 Republicans are concerned that there's a major risk of them taking American jobs, that their population growth will weaken American identity or that they will vote illegally — although only a small number of noncitizen voters have been uncovered.

Amber Pierce, a 43-year-old Republican from Milam, Texas, says she understands that a lot of migrants are seeking a better life for their children, but she's also concerned migrants will become a drain on government services.

"I believe that a lot of them come over here and get free health care and take away from the people who have worked here and are citizens," Pierce said. "They get a free ride. I don't think that's fair."

Democrats, on the other hand, are more likely to see benefits from immigration, although the poll did find that only half of Democrats now think that legal immigrants are making important contributions to American companies, a decrease of more than 20 percentage points from 2017. But they're more likely than Republicans to say that the ability of people to come from other places in the world to escape violence or find economic opportunities is extremely or very important to the U.S.'s identity as a nation.

"People who are coming, are coming for good reason. It's how many of us got here," said Amy Wozniak, a Democrat from Greenwood, Indiana. Wozniak said previous waves of immigrants came from European countries. Now immigrants are coming from different countries but that doesn't mean they're not fleeing for justifiable reasons, she said: "They're not all drugs and thugs."

There's also a divide among partisans about the value of diversity, with 83% of Democrats saying that the country's diverse population makes it at least moderately stronger, compared with 43% of Republicans and Independents. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that a shared American culture and set of values is extremely or very important to the United States' identity as a nation, although about half of Democrats also see this as important.

U.S. adults — and especially Republicans — are more likely to say that the country has been significantly changed by immigrants in the past five years than they are to say that immigrants have changed their own community or their state. About 3 in 10 U.S. adults say immigrants have had a major impact on their local community while about 6 in 10 say they've had a major impact on the country as a whole. The gap between perceptions of community impact and effects on the country as a whole is particularly wide among Republicans.

There is some bipartisan agreement about how immigration at the border between the U.S. and Mexico should be addressed. The most popular option asked about is hiring more Border Patrol agents, which is supported by about 8 in 10 Republicans and about half of Democrats. Hiring more immigration judges and court personnel is also favored among majorities of both parties.

About half of Americans support reducing the number of immigrants who are allowed to seek asylum in the U.S. when they arrive at the border, but there's a much bigger partisan divide there, with more Republicans than Democrats favoring this strategy. Building a wall — former President Donald Trump's signature policy goal — is the least popular and most polarizing option of the four asked about. About 4

in 10 favor building a wall, including 77% of Republicans but just 12% of Democrats.

Donna Lyon is a Democratic-leaning independent from Cortland, New York. She believes a border wall would do little to stop migrants. But she supports hiring more Border Patrol agents and more immigration court judges to deal with the growing backlog of immigration court cases: "That would stop all the backup that we have."

Congress just recently approved money to hire about 2,000 more Border Patrol agents but so far this year, there's been no significant boost for funding for more immigration judges. Many on both sides of the aisle have said it takes much too long to decide asylum cases, meaning migrants stay in the country for years waiting for a decision, but the parties have failed to find consensus on how to address the issue.

The poll of 1,282 adults was conducted March 21-25, 2024, using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.8 percentage points.