

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

Immigration and Integration in the 2012 U.S. Presidential Race – Transatlantic Perspectives

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- Both President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney—and their respective parties—have staked out strong philosophical positions on immigration reform, but provide starkly different visions for immigrants’ future in the United States.
- The Obama administration favors a comprehensive approach to immigration reform, which emphasizes both enforcement and a pathway to legalization for undocumented workers already in the country, and has aggressively moved to enforce federal preeminence in the immigration arena.
- Governor Romney’s focus is primarily on the enforcement side, including building a fence along the entire U.S.-Mexico border, and he has implied that he would give much more latitude to the states on the enforcement of immigration laws.
- The candidates’ different approaches to immigration track with the growing values divide between the Democratic and Republican parties over the past few decades, with the values gap now being larger than those relating to race, age, class, or gender.
- While European immigration challenges are different than those in the United States in many ways, there are numerous similarities regarding how the policy debate on this issue divides European electorates, providing opportunities for greater transatlantic understanding and future collaboration.

While this year's presidential race has largely focused on the state of the U.S. economy and differing visions for the federal government's role in economic recovery, another set of issues—immigration and integration in 21st century America—could wind up having as great an impact on the future of the United States in the coming years.

Despite frequently being viewed as distinct from other domestic policy matters, the immigration debate and the demographic implications of America's changing face are intertwined with just about every major issue we face. U.S. competitiveness, public education, health care, and the role of federal government are all directly impacted by how state and federal governments shape immigration and integration policy. If managed poorly, clear warning signs loom for both the U.S. economy and social cohesion in every region of the country.

The various policy options for how to manage the influx of would-be U.S. citizens—and how best to incorporate documented and undocumented immigrants who are already present—tell us a great deal about how we Americans view ourselves today. They also provide a window into competing visions for the future of the country. Intriguingly, while the European immigration challenges are different in many ways, there are numerous similarities regarding how the policy debate on this issue divides European electorates. These commonalities, in turn, provide an opening for future transatlantic collaboration among public, private, and non-profit sector stakeholders working to find long-term policy solutions in line with public concerns.

The Presidential Candidates' Positions on Immigration Reform

Both President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney, and their respective parties, have staked out strong philosophical positions on the direction of immigration reform, with varying degrees of detail on the future implementation of policy proposals. Both sides acknowledge that the current immigration system is in need of significant repair. Their philosophies and approaches, however, are starkly different, with the presidential election offering a clear choice to American voters on the future course of U.S. immigration and integration.

President Obama

The Obama administration favors a comprehensive approach to immigration reform, which emphasizes both enforcement and a pathway to legalization for the nearly 11 million undocumented workers already in the country (who do not have criminal records), and that »upholds America's proud tradition as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants.«¹ At the same time, the administration has moved aggressively to enforce federal preeminence in the immigration arena, with the Justice Department bringing law suits against Arizona, South Carolina, Utah, and Alabama for state-based immigration enforcement laws, which are considered by many to be draconian. While the Supreme Court ultimately handed down a split decision in the Arizona case in June—upholding part of the law, but striking down other provisions—it re-affirmed that the federal government has broad power to set immigration policy and, to a large extent, preempt state laws that infringe on that power.

In the May 2011 »blueprint,« *Building a 21st Century Immigration System*, the administration details the measures it is taking to secure the border, including doubling the number of border control agents on the southern border, increasing the investigative resources of Immigration and Customs Enforcement of the Department of Homeland Security, and improving intelligence collection through the use of unmanned drones. It also notes stepped-up efforts to collaborate with both Canada and Mexico to enhance law enforcement efforts and improve cross-border security operations, as well as an emphasis on the removal of undocumented immigrants who pose a threat to public safety and national security.

President Obama advocates phasing in the mandatory use of the now largely voluntary E-Verify system of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Department of Homeland Security, which allows employers to more easily determine the citizenship status of potential employees. He also supports greater penalties on employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers.

Regarding a pathway to legalization, President Obama has sought passage of the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act, which would grant

1. »Building a 21st Century Immigration System,« The White House, May 2011, p. 3.

citizenship to children of undocumented immigrants who entered the military or attended college. Despite Republican congressional opposition, the Obama administration announced in June that the Department of Homeland Security would no longer seek to deport most young illegal immigrants. Under the new policy (the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program), undocumented immigrants will not be subject to deportation if they were brought to the United States before the age of 16 and are currently under age of 30; have been in the country for at least five continuous years; graduated from a U.S. high school (or earned a General Equivalency Diploma instead), or served in the military; and have no criminal record. These immigrants can now apply for a work permit that will be valid for two years, with no limits on the number of times it can be renewed.

Governor Romney

In contrast to President Obama's dual track approach of enforcement and a pathway to citizenship for those immigrants residing in the United States, Governor Romney's focus is primarily on the enforcement side. He advocates a fence along the full-length of the 2,000 mile U.S.-Mexico border, has been vocal about his aversion to allowing illegal immigrants to »cut in line« in the path to legal citizenship, and has vowed to veto the DREAM Act.

Governor Romney has implied that he would give much more latitude to the states on the enforcement of immigration laws, given what he considers to be a failure of immigration policy on the federal level. Romney has called Arizona's controversial immigration law—which allows police to check a person's immigration status while enforcing other laws if reasonable suspicion exists that the individual is in the country illegally—a »model« law for the rest of the country, despite criticism by many that it will lead to racial profiling.²

Like Obama, Governor Romney supports the mandatory use of the E-verify system for employers. Unlike the administration, however, he has called on individuals who lack proper work documents to »self-deport to a place

where they can get work.«³ Governor Romney has been critical of the President's DACA decision, labeling it a short-term decision because it was enacted through an executive order. Governor Romney has not, however, stated what he would do with perhaps 1.7 million young people affected by the decision⁴ or stated whether he would seek to reverse the decision if elected.

During the course of the campaign, Romney has self-identified as »pro-immigrant« and stated that he believes in the benefits of legal immigration. In particular, he supports more visas for foreign-born students in the fields of science, math, engineering, and technology to encourage entrepreneurship in the United States. He asserts that his immigration solution would include measures to make legal immigration more transparent and simple, and would also be geared toward keeping families intact, exempting the spouses and minor children of documented immigrants from caps on immigration, and reallocating green cards.⁵

Democratic and Republican Convention Platform Positions on Immigration

The official Democratic and Republican platforms—or list of policy positions the respective parties support—were on display in North Carolina and Florida in August and September. They magnify the many differences between the candidates on immigration policy and reform. While the party platforms do not necessarily indicate how a candidate would govern in the White House (or even represent the presidential candidate's personal view), they do represent the mainstream view of the most dedicated Democratic and Republican party members, and are thus important policy markers for each side. And President Obama, for one, has fully embraced the Democratic platform.

Like the president's »blueprint,« the Democratic platform emphasizes the progress that has been made in securing the Southwest border (noting that unlawful crossings are

2. See http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/mitt-romneys-immigration-headache-becomes-a-full-on-migraine/2012/06/25/gJQAI0tv1V_blog.html

3. January 2012 Republican primary debate, <http://www.cfr.org/us-election-2012/republican-debate-transcript-tampa-florida-january-2012/p27180>

4. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/08/14/up-to-1-7-million-unauthorized-immigrant-youth-may-benefit-from-new-deportation-rules/>

5. »The Candidates on Immigration,« Council on Foreign Relations. <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/candidates-immigration/p26803>

at a 20-year low), prioritizing the deportation of criminals over the deportation of law-abiding undocumented immigrants who pose no threat, and holding employers accountable for whom they hire. It also critiques state government attempts to interfere with federal immigration law and highlights Democratic efforts to pass the DREAM Act over Republican opposition.

The Republican platform on the other hand, embraces strict immigration laws—like those in Arizona and Alabama—and is highly critical of the Obama administration's attempts to block those measures. The platform notes that »[S]tate efforts to reduce immigration must be encouraged, not attacked.« The platform also advocates withholding federal funds from cities that are lax on immigration enforcement and universities that give in-state tuition rates to undocumented students, and embraces the concept of forcing every employer in the country to electronically verify the immigration status of job applicants. It opposes any form of amnesty for those in the United States illegally, and makes veiled critical references to the DACA program, chastising the administration for creating a »backdoor amnesty program unrecognized in law.«

How the Presidential Candidates' Stances Tie into the Broader Democratic-Republican Divide

The stated positions of the candidates and parties on immigration reform provide the needed information for voters with policy and philosophical preferences in this area to make informed choices. They also provide, however, a useful lens through which to see the American electorate's divergent views on how the country should evolve demographically and culturally. In many ways, the candidates' divide on immigration tracks with the growing values divide between the Democratic and Republican parties over the past few decades, with the values gap now being larger than those relating to race, age, class, or gender.⁶

On the surface, there is a significant amount of agreement among the American people on immigration.

According to recent Pew polling⁷, 69 % of Americans agree with the statement »we should restrict and control people coming to live in our country more than we do now,« 28 % disagree. But there is a distinct difference between Democrats and Republicans. Approximately 58 % of Democrats favor greater restrictions on immigration, compared to 84 % of Republicans. While there has been little movement in these numbers among Republicans over the past decade, the numbers of Democrats and Independents agreeing with this statement has declined. When the question was first asked 20 years ago, there was virtually no difference between the views of the three groups.

Views on the effect immigration has on the nation are also sharply divided. Pew polling indicates that almost as many Americans agree that »the growing number of newcomers from other countries threaten traditional American customs and values« (46 %) as disagree (48 %). But again, we see a significant difference between those who identify as Republicans and Democrats. Sixty percent of Republicans say that newcomers threaten traditional American values, whereas only 39 % of Democrats believe so. (Independents are closer to Democrats at 44 %.) As with the numbers on the greater restrictions question, the divide has grown substantially over the past several years. Ten years ago, Republicans and Democrats were closely aligned on this issue.

The German Marshall Fund's 2011 edition of *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* also noted similar divides among Democrats and Republicans. While only 48 % of Democrats considered themselves worried about illegal immigration, 72 % of Republicans did. On the question of whether undocumented immigrants should be legalized or forced to return home, 58 % of Democrats preferred legalization compared with 33 % of Republicans.

The overall Democratic-Republican values divide on the role of federal government also relates to the immigration debate and court clashes over immigration law, with Republicans far more supportive of individual state (over federal) action in taking on immigration enforcement. Republicans are more likely to have minimalist views on the role of federal government and to assume that it causes more problems than it solves. Democrats, in contrast, are

6. See <http://www.people-press.org/2012/06/04/partisan-polarization-surges-in-bush-obama-years/>

7. »Wide Partisan Divide Over Immigration Restrictions,« <http://www.people-press.org/2012/06/04/section-8-values-about-immigration-and-race/>

less distrustful of federal government and more skeptical of states asserting control in this area.⁸

Despite these partisan divides, most Americans support a pathway to citizenship for law abiding, undocumented individuals and are against mass deportations. There are, however, differences among the parties, with Republicans more in favor of mass deportations than Democrats.⁹

Similarities in American and European Attitudes Regarding Immigration

While there are significant differences between the immigration challenges facing the United States and Europe—in terms of the countries of origin of the immigrants, history, and the specific legal and social inclusion challenges they face once they arrive—there are also a number of striking similarities in American and European attitudes and dividing lines within the respective populations.

According to the 2011 *Transatlantic Trends* data, slight majorities of both Americans and Europeans (53 % and 52 %, respectively) see immigration as more of a problem than opportunity. Americans and European also have similar attitudes towards forced migration, with 64 % of U.S. respondents being sympathetic to those fleeing poor economic conditions compared to 58 % of Europeans. There is also a convergence when it comes to where the dividing lines exist regarding the types of immigrants Americans and Europeans support. Majorities on both sides of the Atlantic support increasing the numbers of highly educated immigrants, with American and European respondents approving 63 % and 62 %, respectively. Low numbers in both the United States (18 %) and Europe (19 %) believe that having a similar cultural background to be a very important precondition for entry, and majorities in Americans (56 %) and Europeans (52 %) were optimistic about the success of immigrant integration. Additional similarities exist regarding views of government management of immigration and the importance of respecting national laws and institutions.

There are certainly some distinct differences in American and European immigration views—in particular, over how to reduce illegal immigration (with Europeans more focused on increasing development aid to poorer countries) and legalization vs. deportation (with Americans much more in favor of legalization).¹⁰ However, the similar electoral splits on some of the toughest immigration and integration values issues show that despite our different histories and routes to becoming countries of immigration, we clearly have a great deal in common and tremendous potential for working together and sharing best practices. European leaders and other stakeholders in the immigration and integration realm would do well to watch the final stretch of the American campaign closely and take note of how the immigration debate unfolds over the coming months. They might just glean some useful insights as they grapple with their own political and social challenges.

8. See Gallup polling on Democratic-Republican divide regarding trust in the federal government to handle domestic problems. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/157673/americans-trust-government-handling-problems.aspx>.

9. »The Public's View of Immigration,« Center for American Progress, December 15, 2011.

10. See *Transatlantic Trends Immigration 2011*.



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