

Poll Shows Christian Support for Immigration Reform

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- ✖ A new poll released Tuesday finds broad Christian support for comprehensive immigration reform.

The national phone survey of 1,201 Americans showed that 56 percent of respondents believe the U.S. immigration system is completely or mostly broken. The percentage was relatively the same among Christians—56 percent of evangelicals, 52 percent of mainline Protestants and 60 percent of Catholics say the immigration system is broken.

Photo: The March for America rally drew 200,000 people, including thousands of Christians, to the National Mall March 21 in support of immigration reform

“Immigration reform, now we know, is supported by the majority of Americans,” said Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference. He was one of dozens of Christian leaders who participated in the March for American rally on the National Mall Sunday that drew 200,000 people in support of immigration reform legislation.

“This poll really gives validity to the idea that if President Obama pushed a health care reform package that the majority of Americans opposed, why wouldn’t he push immigration reform that the majority of Americans do support?” Rodriguez added.

The results of the poll, conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), ran counter to the findings of a Zogby poll released last December by the Center for Immigration Studies, which showed that most religious Americans want a decrease in immigration. The Zogby poll found

that 69 percent of Catholics, 72 percent of mainline Protestants, 78 percent of born-again Protestants believed current immigration levels are too high.

Rodriguez and other reform supporters discounted the Zogby results and challenged the methodology. Dr. Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI, said the earlier Zogby poll was conducted among a sample drawn from an online panel, which is less accurate than random sample telephone surveys such as the PRRI study.

The Zogby poll found that three-quarters of born-again Protestants and two-thirds of Catholics and mainline Protestants favored enforcement that would cause illegal immigrants to go home over time instead over a conditional pathway to citizenship. But more than 60 percent of those responding to the PRRI poll said illegal immigrants should be offered an earned path to citizenship that gives them “an opportunity to be responsible, contribute their fair share and become full members of society.”

The survey also found agreement around four cultural-religious values that respondents say should guide reform: enforcing the rule of law and promoting national security (88 percent), ensuring fairness to taxpayers (84 percent), protecting the dignity of every person (82 percent) and keeping families together (80 percent).

Republicans, however, tended to view promoting national security and ensuring fairness to taxpayers as extremely or very important, while Democratic voters rated protecting the dignity of every person and keeping families together as the most important values to guide immigration reform policies.

“On this issue, the public is out ahead of the politicians,” said the Rev. Rich Nathan, pastor of 10,000-member Vineyard Church in Columbus, Ohio, who also attended Sunday’s rally. “Our politicians need to exert some focused leadership; they’ll find they have the support if they exert that

leadership.”

Speaking to the crowd at Sunday’s rally by video, President Obama said he would do “everything in my power” to get a bipartisan deal within the year.

“You know as well as I do that this won’t be easy, and it won’t happen overnight,” Obama said. “But if we work together across ethnic, state and party lines, we can build a future worthy of our history as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws.”

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer of New York recently outlined an immigration reform plan that would create a “tough but fair” path to citizenship, a temporary worker program and tighter border controls. But Graham said Friday that immigration reform would be the “first casualty” if the health care bill passed, and his commitment to the issue is unclear.

“If Lindsay Graham drops the immigration reform advocacy, I believe that very well may be the death knell,” said Rodriguez, who met with the White House and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office on Monday to discuss comprehensive immigration reform.

Rodriguez said both the president and the House want the Senate to take the lead on the issue, and the Senate wants their efforts to be bipartisan despite their approach to the health reform legislation.

“I think right now the Republican Party is saying enough is enough,” Rodriguez told *Charisma*. “[Republicans are saying], ‘Why should we reward the Democratic Party and this Democratic president by supporting one of his domestic policy agendas when he just basically usurped any contribution that we may have and, in their idea, the will of the American people?’”

Lawmakers gave no timetables for immigration reform during meetings with religious leaders Monday. But Rodriguez said if there is no action on the issue soon, Latino voters will “punish via the ballot box whoever broke their promises.” He added that the 25,000 churches affiliated with his organization also are prepared to engage in civil disobedience to challenge lawmakers to take up the issue this year.

“We will revert to the strategy of Dr. [Martin Luther] King and the great civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s,” Rodriguez said. “We will march, we will rally, we will protest. Some of us may go to jail. But we will convey a message that it is morally reprehensible to have 12 million people living in a perpetual state of limbo.”