News

A mother and daughter from Honduras wait at La Colaborativa in Chelsea, Mass., Sept. 30, 20

A mother and daughter from Honduras wait at La Colaborativa in Chelsea, Mass., Sept. 30, 2021, while getting help with free clothes and food as well as advice for their upcoming immigration hearing. (CNS photo/Brian Snyder, Reuters)



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Though immigration remains a polemic topic in political circles, just 44% of Americans recently surveyed by the Public Religion Research Institute said it was a "critical issue" in the U.S.

A majority favored a path to citizenship for those who are in the country without legal permission.

By and large, Americans had a positive view of immigrants, saying they strengthen the country, with a minority seeing immigrants as a burden to the U.S., the survey

found.

Those were among findings released Feb. 3 by PRRI from a survey examining American perspectives on immigration policy.

The survey, conducted online between Sept. 16 and 29, interviewed a representative sample of 2,508 adults (age 18 and up) living in all 50 states in the United States. It focused on welcoming views about immigration to the U.S. and whether it's a critical issue at all.

The survey looked at how political affiliation, the kind of media some respondents digested, race and sometimes age affected the answers given. It also asked questions about whether respondents viewed immigration favorably or otherwise.

While a majority of Americans "support offering immigrants living in the U.S. illegally a way to become citizens, provided they meet certain requirements" and nearly two-thirds support "allowing immigrants brought illegally to the U.S." as children to gain legal resident status, white evangelical Protestants and Republicans resoundingly do not support those policies, the survey found.

Among some of the key findings, PRRI pointed out that "individuals opposed to a pathway to citizenship are more likely to view immigration as a critical issue than those in favor" of such a pathway.

It also found that six in 10 Americans, or 62%, "support offering immigrants living in the U.S. illegally a way to become citizens, provided they meet certain requirements."

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And "only about one in five Americans, or 22%, say immigrants living in the U.S. illegally should be identified and deported."

Nearly two-thirds, or 64%, of Americans support allowing immigrants brought illegally to the U.S. as children to gain legal resident status, the survey found.

"Only white evangelical Protestants and Republicans do not reach majority support for this policy," PRRI said.

When it comes to political party, "Republicans have become much more likely to say immigration is a critical issue since 2013," the survey found, and Democrats have "generally become more supportive of allowing undocumented immigrants to become citizens."

When it comes to those with religious beliefs, the survey found that "with the exception of white evangelical Protestants, majorities of all religious groups support a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants."

That includes support for that policy from 70% of Hispanic Catholics and 54% of white Catholics. Support from white Catholics for a path toward citizenship has declined from 2013 when 62% said they favored it, even as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has been steady in its message about supporting the policy.

"A majority of Americans (56%) say that in general, newcomers strengthen American society, compared to four in 10 (40%) who say that newcomers threaten traditional American customs and values," the survey said.

And while those who view the introduction of new immigrants favorably, support has waned in the last decade and views that see newcomers as a threat have increased.

And, with the exception of white Christians, PRRI said that "majorities (61%) of all religious groups say that newcomers strengthen American society" because of their hard work and talents. A minority, 35%, said immigrants are a burden, taking away jobs, housing and health care.

The margin of error was plus or minus 2.1 percentage points.