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Latino Policy iReport

Latino Opinion Leaders on Immigration Reform

By Angelo Falcón (October 12, 2013)

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A month ago, 50 people were arrested on the capitol grounds calling a vote in the House. Then a couple weeks ago, 100 women were arrested calling for a vote in the House.

Today we will be 200. And the next time we will be more and more and more until the Congress acts to give us reform that stops the deportations;

Reform that does not militarize the border or criminalize immigrants;

Reform that respects the family and honors hard work by reestablishing the rule of law.

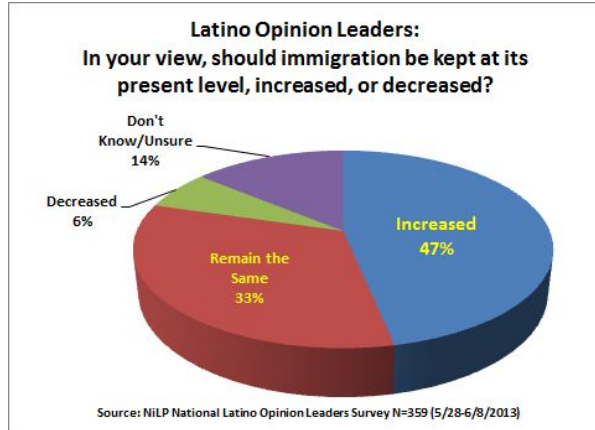
And reform that does not only benefit the DREAMers or the high-tech workers or the engineers without also providing justice to the parents of those DREAMers, the woman who cleans the high-tech worker's office or home; and the construction workers who build the building that the engineer imagines.

---Congressman Luis V. Gutierrez, speaking at the October 5th *Camino Americano: Rally and March for Immigrant Dignity and Respect* on the National Mall

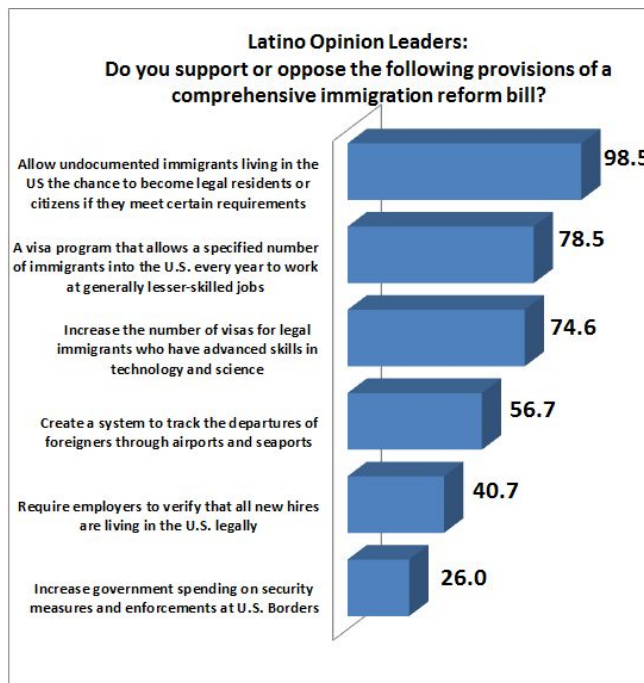
With the brinkmanship in Washington, DC continuing over the government shutdown, Obamacare and the debt ceiling, the fate of comprehensive immigration reform remains uncertain. Last week, immigrant rights advocates marched and engaged in civil disobedience to keep the issue alive. But the current federal political stalemate keeps overshadowing immigration reform.

As the recent demonstrations have attempted to do, there is nonetheless the need to continue to advance the national discussion on immigration reform. As part of a national survey conducted by the National Institute for Latino Policy (NiLP), Latino opinion leaders presented their views on immigration issues. The National Latino Opinion Leaders Survey is conducted from time to time to measure the policy and political opinions of this influential sector in the Latino community. The current survey was conducted from May 28-June 8, 2013 and is based on 359 respondents. This is not presented as a scientific poll but as a vehicle for promoting discussion on key issues facing the Latino community in the United States. A [previous NiLP Latino iReport](#) was released on Latino opinion leaders' support of Obamacare.

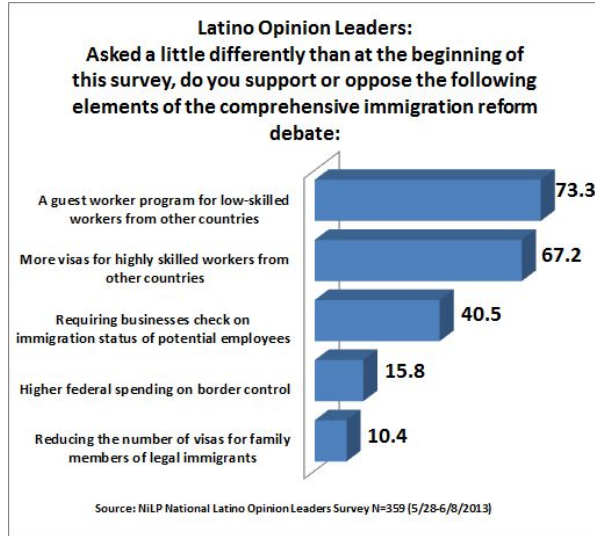
Latino opinion leaders are solidly pro-immigration. Close to half (47 percent) believe that immigration should be increased, and another 33 percent that it should remain the same. Only 6 percent believed it should be decreased. This is consistent with majorities of the American public who support current or increased levels of legal immigration.



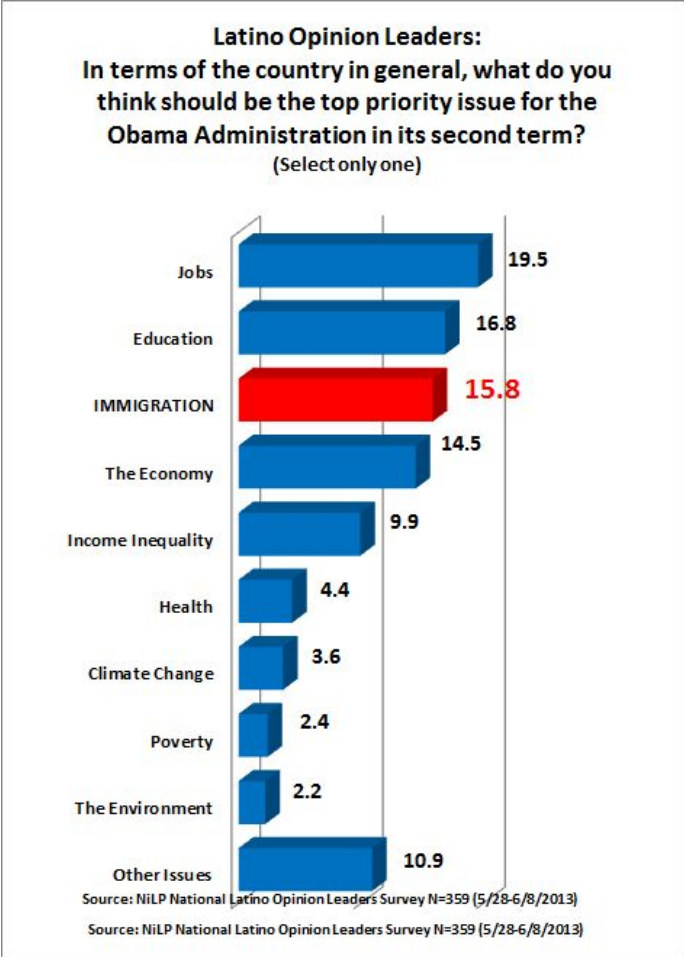
The Latino opinion leaders were also asked their support or opposition to various provisions of comprehensive immigration reform proposals. In the first round of questions, most (98 percent) supported a path to legalization and citizenship. About three quarters each supported programs to allow the undocumented work in the United States at both high and low skilled jobs. There was less but still majority support for a program to keep track of foreigners and visitors at airports and seaports. On the other hand, there was opposition to provisions to increase government spending on border security and for the verification of the immigration status of new hires.



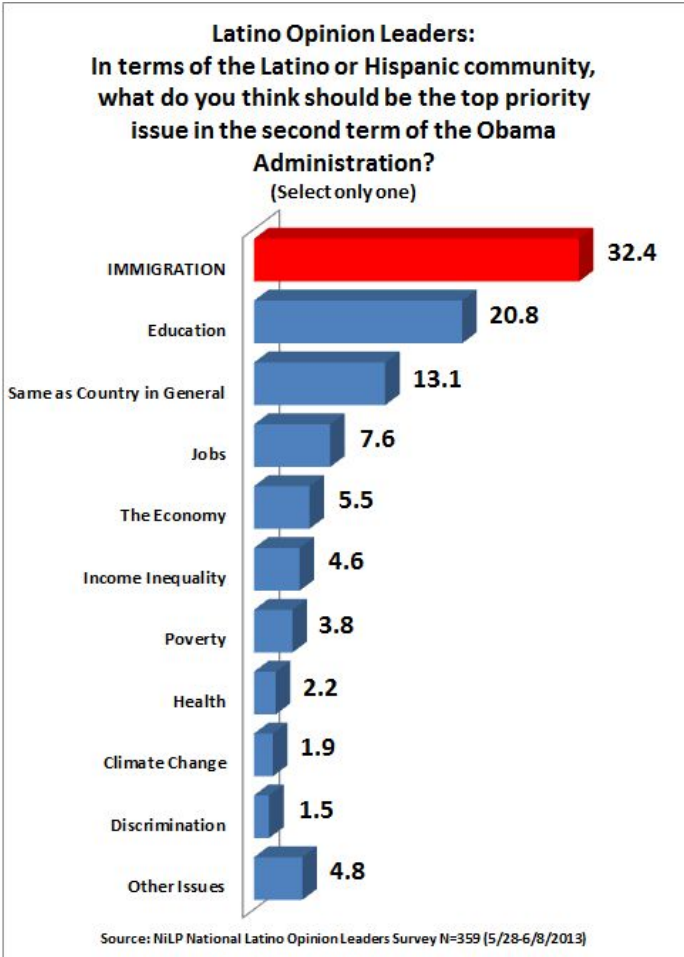
Asked a little differently, Latino opinion leaders reaffirmed their support for a guest worker program for low skilled workers and the increasing of visas for highly skilled foreign workers. There was opposition to provisions to increase government spending on border control, requiring verification of the immigration status of potential employees, and reducing the number of visas for family members of legal immigrants.



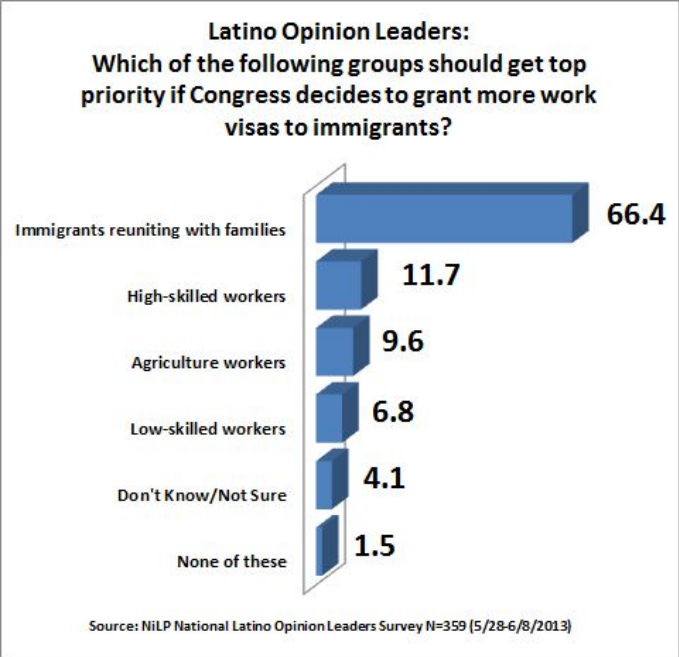
When asked what should be the top priority for the Obama Administration in its second term for the nation as a whole, the Latino opinion leaders placed immigration third, behind jobs and education.



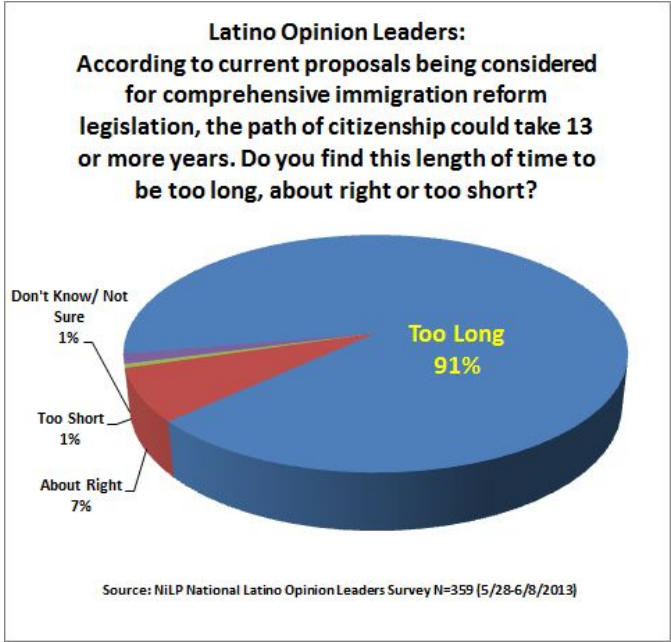
However, when asked about the nation's priorities specifically in terms of the Hispanic community, immigration was seen by the Latino opinion leaders as the top priority followed by education and issues the "same as the country in general."



Asked which group should receive top priority with the issuing of work visas, the Latino opinion leaders overwhelmingly (66 percent) indicated immigrants reuniting with family members. They gave more specific categories of immigrants much less support: high skilled workers, agricultural workers, and low-skilled workers. Rather than using an economic or labor assessment, Latino opinion leaders seem to see immigration reform from a more holistic family perspective, preferring a family rather than employment based immigration policy..

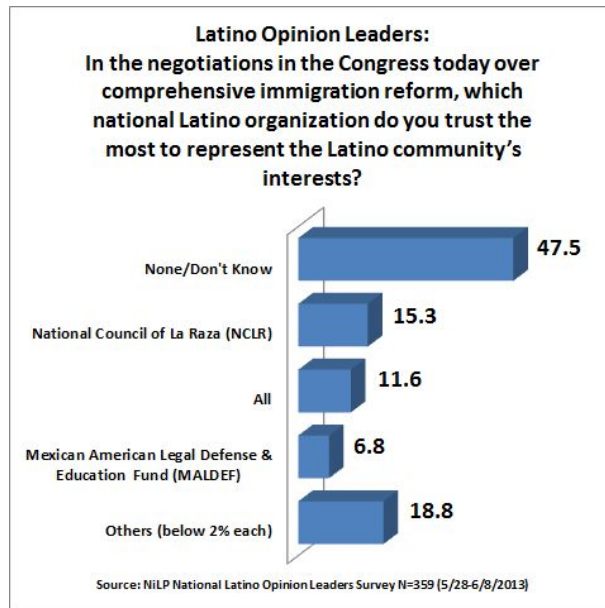


On the proposed path to citizenship proposed in the US Senate comprehensive immigration reform bill, the Latino opinion leaders were asked what they thought of the length of this process, which would take 13 or more years to complete. Most (91 percent) felt this was too long.



As the negotiations resume within the Congress on immigration reform, the Latino opinion leaders were asked to identify which they consider to be the key Latino civic organizational brokers are in this process. The two organizations that emerged as the most trusted in this regard were the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) (by 15 percent) and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) (7 percent). Another 12 percent thought all Latino

organizations could be trusted, but almost half (48 percent) could not identify any or did not know.



Discussion

The views of the Latin opinion leaders presented in this report generally appear to be critical of most of the provisions of the US Senate comprehensive immigration reform bill. This is a problem since it is being presented as the best bi-partisan solution to the immigration issue available, given the hyper-polarized state of national politics as immigration reform proposals now fall under consideration by the House of Representatives.

While the mantra supporting something called "comprehensive immigration reform" intensifies in Latino communities, as the details of what is being proposed and adopted by the different branches of government become known, the long-term consequences of these provisions for Latinos and other immigrants raise troubling questions. This is all the more problematic given that these concerns derive from what many see as the more progressive Senate version of the reform proposals, while the expectations for the House version or versions are seen with much trepidation.

The current Senate version is based on the politically possible without much reference to its policy-based efficacy. Its path to citizenship is overly long, convoluted and punitive, while its border security provisions are out of proportion to the problem. The result is what could be termed a *punitive* comprehensive immigration reform proposal likely to take on more punitive features coming out of the House of Representatives. In contrast, as the views of the Latino opinion leaders indicate, these come together in a version of a *humane* comprehensive immigration reform significantly different than what is on the Congressional table today.

Although the consensus of most immigrant rights advocates is for a pragmatic approach to get the best deal possible from the Congress, the gridlock and toxicity of the current politics in Washington are generating an alternative

narrative. As the politicians and policy wonks tinker and continually triangulate with the details of this legislation, others are wondering whether it is time for the Latino community to adopt an exit strategy from the process. There is a growing feeling that the current set of proposals will saddle the Latino community with a terrible set of policies that will not only result in few undocumented Latinos being legalized, but will create a bloated border and immigration security bureaucracy that will result in a dramatic increase in the death of Latinos on the borders and a massive increase in the number of Latinos in federal detention.

Some are thinking that the best timing for the consideration of comprehensive immigration reform would be following the 2014 midterm elections, when the focus becomes the 2016 Presidential election. If the current political implosion of the Republican Party and its Tea Party faction continues, the thinking goes that this could eventually result in a political environment more conducive to a humane approach to immigration reform.

There are also other Latino community advocates who are beginning to question the current approach from other angles. Some are wondering whether the call for "comprehensive" immigration reform is achievable or desirable given the trade-off it seems to generate between massive border security spending and a path to citizenship. There are others who argue that undocumented Latinos are not all that interested in achieving US citizenship as much as simply becoming legalized in some form that would allow them to work in this country and travel back home safely, even if only temporarily.

In the meantime, following what some call an "incremental" approach, it is possible through legislation or executive action by the President, to temporarily legalize the status of those immigrants already in the federal immigration system, such as those with visas and agricultural workers. This could be done following the model that President Obama created with his Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) order for the DREAMers that could result in millions achieving temporary legalized status. This would allow them to work in this country and travel back home.

The current debate on immigration reform within the Latino community has been largely defined by politicians like Senators Schumer and McCain, with Latinos increasingly on the sidelines working on the defensive to minimize the more punitive aspects of this reform. The fact is that beyond the general call for what some generically call "comprehensive immigration reform," most Latinos have no idea what is in the legislation currently being promoted in the Congress, and politicians like the President and others have been conveying much inaccurate information about what the legislation will accomplish. As our advocates are hard at work in Washington, DC fighting the good fight for comprehensive immigration reform, the current gridlock in the federal government perhaps affords us the opportunity to more critically debate whether this current reform debate would be taking us in a more humane direction or not.

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