

Australian and American Attitudes to Illegal Immigration

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This study was jointly commissioned by Stanford University and the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney. The survey was administered by YouGov/Polimetrix, a survey research firm with headquarters in Palo Alto, California. The American survey was fielded in February 2010 and the Australian polling occurred during the week of July 14-22, 2010. The bulk of this report deals with the Australian data and unless stated otherwise, the reported results are summaries of the Australian data.

Methodology: Respondents were sampled from large national online panels maintained by YouGov/Polimetrix in the US and Research Now in Australia. A proprietary two-stage sample matching algorithm, developed by YouGov/Polimetrix, was applied in both countries. The methodology uses RDD sampling to establish a sampling frame and then selects online panelists who match the RDD sample on education, gender, age, and region.³ The end result is an opt-in online sample that is statistically indistinguishable from a conventional telephone RDD sample (for details concerning the sampling methodology and evidence on the predictive validity of the PMX online samples during the 2006 and 2008 American elections, see Rivers and Bailey, 2009). An additional round of post-stratification (via rim-weighting) helps correct for any remaining differences between the survey respondents and the respective populations with respect to education, gender, age and region. Because the sample is initially constructed using a matching procedure, the post-stratification weights are quite small in magnitude (ranging from .86 to 1.39 in the Australian data).

Sample Size and Statistical Precision: The sample size for this study was 1250 in the US and 1000 in Australia. Unbiased or “representative” random samples of this size have a “maximum margin of error” of about plus or minus 3.1 percentage points; that is, if many representative surveys of this size were to be conducted, 95% of the survey-based estimates will lie within 3.1 percentage points of the corresponding quantity in the population. The matching and post-stratification procedures help ensure that our samples are representative of the population.

Survey Content: The survey instrument included questions assessing individuals’ opinions about immigration policy, major immigrant groups in each country (Hispanics and Middle Easterners in the US, South Asians and Middle Easterners in Australia) and attitudes about a wide range of political attitudes (e.g., vote intention, evaluations of the

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³ In the US, the first-stage sample used by Polimetrix is the American Community Survey, a probability-based survey conducted by the United States Census.

state of the economy, assessments of the most important problems facing each country, respectively).

Both surveys also included an experimental component in which respondents were given information about two hypothetical individuals who sought to enter the country as temporary workers. In the US Study, the individuals were described as either Mexican or Kuwaiti. In the Australian study, the target individuals were described as Indian or Kuwaiti. Because the survey is administered online, respondents were also presented with images of the hypothetical individuals (taken from online photographic databases). The individuals in question were described as either having a skilled or unskilled occupation. Some respondents were told that the prospective immigrant was single, others that he had a wife and two children. After reading the vignette describing each immigrant, respondents indicated whether they should be granted a temporary work visa, the length of time covered by the visa, and whether they would approve or disapprove if the individual applied for citizenship following the expiration of the work visa.

Sample composition: Background information on the composition of the two samples is provided in the following table.

	US Sample	Australian Sample	
Median Age	46	45	
Percent Female	52	51	
Percent Married	56	50	
Percent White	71	95 ⁴	
- Black	11	0	
- Hispanic	13	0	
- Other	5	5	
High School education or less	46	43	
Some College	28	36	
College Graduate	25	20	
Median Family Income (annual)	\$51-60,000	\$31-78,000	
Region of Residence:			
Northeast	20	33	NSW
South	32	25	Victoria
Midwest	24	20	Queensland
West	22	22	Other
Political Party Affiliation:			
Democrat	34		

⁴ This is an extrapolation, based on the respondent's country of birth.

Republican	25	
Independent	35	
Working full or part-time	46	57
Retired	16	18
Unemployed	10	4
Catholic	20	17
Protestant	41	28
Other	10	18
Atheist, No Religion	28	37

Immigration: Respondents were asked a battery of questions concerning immigration and then specifically illegal immigration, defined as “illegal immigration” in the US and “asylum seekers” in Australia. After being asked how important illegal immigration is as a problem, respondents were then asked to agree or disagree with the following statements (1) “Australia (the US) is taking in too many immigrants” (2) “Our laws make it too difficult for foreign nationals to acquire Australian (American) citizenship” (3) “Immigrants have a favorable effect on the country” (4) One of the reasons immigrants come is to take advantage of government benefits.”

Q1. “Compared to other problems facing the country, how important is the increasing number of asylum seekers (illegal immigration)?”

		US	AUST
One of the most important problems	Count	395	317
	% within Country	31.60%	31.70%
An important problem	Count	494	438
	% within Country	39.60%	43.80%
Not all that important compared with other problems	Count	300	187
	% within Country	24.00%	18.70%
Not at all important	Count	25	46
	% within Country	2.00%	4.60%
Can't say	Count	35	12
	% within Country	2.80%	1.20%

Q2. “Right now, Australia (the US) is taking in too many immigrants”

		US	AUST
Agree strongly	Count	442	329
	% within Country	35.40%	32.90%
Agree	Count	337	362
	% within Country	27.00%	36.20%
Disagree	Count	262	196
	% within Country	21.00%	19.70%
Disagree strongly	Count	63	51
	% within Country	5.00%	5.10%
Can't say	Count	146	61
	% within Country	11.70%	6.10%

Q3 “Our laws make it too difficult for foreign nationals to acquire Australian (American) citizenship.”

		US	AUST
Agree strongly	Count	82	41
	% within Country	6.60%	4.10%
Agree	Count	188	149
	% within Country	15.00%	14.90%
Disagree	Count	411	440
	% within Country	32.90%	44.00%
Disagree strongly	Count	401	251
	% within Country	32.10%	25.10%
Can't say	Count	168	118
	% within Country	13.40%	11.80%

Q4. “Immigrants have a very favorable effect on Australia (the US).”

		US	AUST
Agree strongly	Count	103	90
	% within Country	8.2%	9%
Agree	Count	490	485
	% within Country	39.2%	48.6%
Disagree	Count	280	246
	% within Country	22.5%	24.6%
Disagree strongly	Count	184	92
	% within Country	14.8%	9.2%
Can't say	Count	186	86
	% within Country	14.9%	8.6%

Q5. “One of the reasons immigrants come to Australia (America) is to take advantage of government benefits”

		US	AUS
Agree strongly	Count	347	215
	% within Country	27.80%	21.50%
Agree	Count	326	380
	% within Country	26.20%	38.00%
Disagree	Count	275	239
	% within Country	22.10%	23.90%
Disagree strongly	Count	176	74
	% within Country	14.10%	7.40%
Can't say	Count	124	91
	% within Country	9.90%	9.10%

Australian respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with the following statements. “Immigrants need to work their way up on their own, without favoured treatment”; ‘If immigrants would try harder, they could be just as well off as others’; “Discrimination against immigrants makes it difficult for them to succeed.”

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Can't say
Immigrants need to work their way up on their own, without favoured treatment	50	42	4	1	3
If immigrants would try harder, they could be just as well off as others	22	43	19	4	13
Discrimination against immigrants makes it difficult for them to succeed.	8	40	30	12	10

Vote Intentions: Among Australian respondents, assessments of the importance of the asylum seeker issue are strongly related to vote intentions ($\chi^2 = 99.1$, $df = 16$, $p < .01$). Columns in the following table give the distribution of voter support conditional on reported assessment of the importance of the asylum seeker issue.

	One of the most important problems	An important problem	Not all that important compared with other problems	Not at all important	Can't say	All Responses
Liberal	42	36	23	9	19	34
Labor	37	40	48	45	9	40
National	5	3	2	4	0	3
Green	8	12	17	40	16	13
Other	9	9	10	2	56	10
All voters:	32	44	19	5	1	

Among respondents reporting that the asylum seeker is “one of the most important problems”, Liberal vote share is 42%, some 8 points higher than in the sample at large, and 5 percentage points ahead of Labor. Labor has 40% support among our respondents; this rises to 48% among those who state that the asylum seeker issue is “not all that important compared with other problems”. Green support rises from a baseline of 13% to 40% among the 5% of respondents who say that the asylum seeker issue is “not at all important”.

Vote intentions are also associated with assessments about levels of immigration ($\chi^2 = 24.9$, $df = 12$, $p = .02$). Columns in the following table give the distribution of voter support conditional on assessments about levels of immigration.

	Too high	About right	Too low	Don't know	All Responses
Liberal	37	32	19	32	34
Labor	40	40	52	37	40
National	4	4	0	1	3
Green	10	15	24	16	13
Other	10	8	5	14	10
All voters:	59	27	5	10	

Fifty-nine percent of respondents said that immigration levels are too high; only five percent said that Australia's immigration levels are too low. The Labor-Liberal vote difference is 3 percentage points among the "too high" group of respondents, but 8 percentage points among respondents reporting that immigration levels are "about right".

Resentment: Resentment of immigrants is strongly related to the importance attached to the asylum seeker issue. The following table reports the proportions of respondents who consider the asylum seeker issue "one of the most important problems" or "an important problem", conditional on answers to questions tapping "resentment" towards of immigrants. As "resentment" increases (e.g., the belief that immigrants face no discrimination, that immigrants could be as well off as others if only would try harder), the salience of the asylum seeker issue increases markedly. The differences in salience are large, and these resentment measures are among the most powerful predictors of the salience of the asylum seeker issue we find in our data.

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
Recent immigrants need to work way up on own without favoured treatment	86	66	46	72
If immigrants would try harder they could be just as well off as others	87	78	67	40
Discrimination against immigrants makes it difficult for them to succeed	57	69	83	91

The economy: The salience of the asylum seeker issue is strongly associated with views about the performance of the Australian economy over the preceding twelve months ($\chi^2 = 89.6$, $df = 20$, $p < .01$). Columns in the following table show the distribution of reports about the "importance" of the asylum seeker issues (percentages), conditional on assessments of the performance of the economy.

	Gotten much better	Gotten better	Stayed about the same	Gotten worse	Gotten much worse	Not sure	All Responses
One of the most important problems	21	22	29	33	62	36	32
An important problem	38	43	42	50	26	55	44
Not all that important compared with other problems	29	26	22	13	10	0	19
Not at all important	12	9	5	3	1	0	5
Can't say	0	1	1	1	0	9	1
All voters:	1	19	38	32	8	2	

Only 20% of respondents thought the economy had gotten better (19%) or much better (1%) over the previous 12 months. 40% report that the economy has gotten worse (32%) or much worse (8%). The salience of the asylum seeker issue is generally high for all respondents, but increases as evaluations of the economy grow less favourable. Among respondents with a negative view of the economy, 84% rate the asylum seeker issue one of the most important problems or “an important problem”; this drops to 65% among respondents reporting that the economy has gotten better or much better.

We see a similar pattern of association between evaluations of the economy and opinions about the current level of immigration ($\chi^2 = 94.5$, $df = 15$, $p < .01$). Columns in the table below give the distribution of views about immigration levels (percentages), conditional on evaluations of the economy.

	Gotten much better	Gotten better	Stayed about the same	Gotten worse	Gotten much worse	Not sure	All Responses
Too high	43	51	53	65	82	45	58
About right	36	30	35	23	8	5	27
Too low	21	8	5	2	5	0	5
Don't know	0	10	8	10	4	49	10
All voters:	1	19	38	32	8	2	

Fifty-eight percent of respondents think the current level of immigration into Australia is too high, but this figure increases to 65% among the 32% of respondents who think the economy has “gotten worse” and to 82% among the 8% of respondents who report that the economy has gotten “much worse”.

Leadership: Respondents were asked to rate Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott, Kevin Rudd, John Howard, the Labor Party and the Liberal Party on the asylum seeker issue. Specifically, respondents were asked “how confident” they were that the particular politician or party could handle the asylum seeker issue. Responses were on a five point rating scale, ranging from 1 (“no confidence at all”) to 5 (“a lot of confidence”). The

table below presents the average rating scores, for all respondents (left column) and then conditional on vote intention.

	Vote Intention				
	All	Liberal	Labor	National	Green
ALP	2.5	1.7	3.1	1.8	2.5
Julia Gillard	2.6	1.9	3.2	1.8	2.6
Liberal Party	2.7	3.6	2.1	3.1	2.0
Tony Abbott	2.5	3.4	1.9	2.7	1.9
Kevin Rudd	2.3	1.6	2.9	1.9	2.6
John Howard	2.9	4.0	2.3	3.6	2.1

John Howard is given the highest average ratings of the parties and politicians presented to our respondents, with an average rating score of 2.9. Conversely, Kevin Rudd has the lowest average score (2.3). The Liberal Party is given an average rating of 2.7, higher than the 2.5 mean rating for the ALP (statistically significant at $p < .01$, via a paired t -test). Gillard and Abbott have extremely similar ratings of 2.6 and 2.5 respectively (not a statistically significant difference). Even Labor voters rate Howard 2.3, versus their average 1.9 rating of Tony Abbott ($p < .01$). Labor voters also prefer Gillard to Rudd on this score (3.2 to 2.9, $p < .01$); this preference for Gillard over Rudd on the asylum seeker issue is replicated in the entire sample (2.6 to 2.3, $p < .01$).

The following table provides an alternate look at the same data. Respondents are classified by which party they gave a higher confidence rating when considering the asylum seeker issue. 34% of respondents rate the Liberals ahead of the ALP; 30% rate the ALP ahead of the Liberals and 36% saw no difference between the parties or gave no confidence ratings to one or both parties. Columns in the following table show the distribution of vote intentions conditional on the ratings of the parties.

	Liberal > ALP	No Difference	ALP > Liberal	All responses
Liberal	78	18	4	34
Labor	8	43	73	40
National	6	3	1	3
Green	3	18	17	13
Other	5	18	4	10
All Voters	34	36	30	

There is considerable symmetry in the responses. Among respondents rating the Liberals over Labor on the asylum seeker issue, the Coalition leads the ALP 84% to 8%. But in the reverse condition, among respondents who rate the ALP over the Liberal Party, Coalition support falls to 5%, while Labor has 73% support with the Greens picking up an additional 17%. Interestingly, among respondents not rating one party over the other on the asylum seeker issue break heavily for Labor (43%); 18% of these respondents also say they are voting for the Greens and just 21% report voting for the Coalition.