

The Electoral Consequences of Granting Citizenship to Undocumented Immigrants

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The Senate's Gang of 8 Comprehensive Immigration Reform provides a pathway to citizenship for an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants currently residing in the United States. While there are many policy considerations being explored, the fate of this proposed legislation, or any compromise with the House of Representatives, may hinge on purely political grounds. Critics, particularly Republicans, worry about what these undocumented-immigrants-turned-new-voters could mean come Election Day.

This analysis examines the potential electoral implications of passing a comprehensive immigration reform—specifically, the impact of the additional 11 million undocumented immigrants on a Presidential election.

Review of Other Similar Analyses

Surprisingly, there has been a limited examination of how the Gang of 8's proposals could affect electoral outcomes. However, one such analysis gained significant press coverage following its release. On April 22, *Politico* published an article titled, "Immigration reform could be bonanza for Democrats," featuring an elementary examination of the reform's electoral effects.¹ Its author, Emily Schultheis, suggests that the immigration reform—assuming it had been passed and implemented in enough time to fully affect the 2012 Presidential election—would have led to a 7 point loss for Governor Romney over President Obama instead of his actual 3.7 point loss. As the author determines, "To support the measure virtually guarantees millions of new Democratic voters."

This analysis wrongly assumes all 11 million undocumented immigrants are Hispanic and that all would seek and gain citizenship. Using the breakdown of estimated undocumented immigrants by state compiled by the Pew Research Center, it assumes these new voters would vote in the same manner as their demographic counterparts in the 2012 election. This simplistic approach suggests even strong Republican states like Texas, Arizona, and Georgia would have been potential pick-up opportunities for Democrats in 2012. While acknowledging that this is a worst case scenario for Republicans, the analysis severely oversimplifies a complicated issue.

¹ Schultheis, Emily; "Immigration reform could be bonanza for Democrats;" *Politico*, 22 April 2013; <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/04/immigration-reform-could-upend-electoral-college-90478.html>



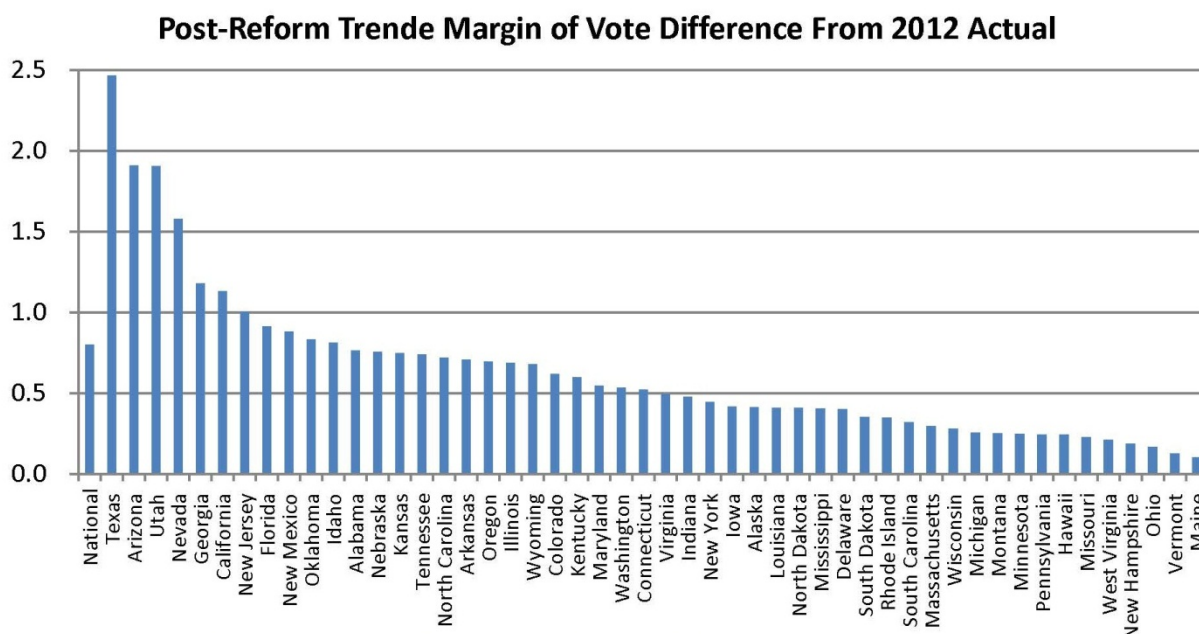
In response, Harry Enten—*The Guardian's* resident electoral statistician and forecaster—presented a counter-factual to *Politico's* analysis.² He rightly notes that not all undocumented immigrants are over the age of 18, not all of them are of Hispanic-origin, and most importantly, few will actually go through the citizenship process. Using these assumptions, he calculates that the appropriate new voter number shouldn't be 11 million, like *Politico* used, but rather 3.5 million, which based off 2008 turnout rates and 2012's partisan voting patterns, would shift Mitt Romney's loss from 3.7 points to just 4.4 points.

Sean Trende, of *RealClearPolitics*, then examined the issue in a follow-up article to Harry Enten's.³ Trende's analysis looked at whether immigration reform could have altered the 2012 Electoral College. Using the Pew Research Center's state breakdown of undocumented immigrants and making very basic assumptions—40% of eligible undocumented immigrants would seek and gain citizenship, 40% of the new citizens would vote, and 80% of the new voters would go Democratic—Trende determines that there would be essentially no effect on the Electoral College if the immigration reform had been implemented in time for the 2012 election. The chart below shows my replication of Sean Trende's margin differences—Obama's margin post-reform less Obama's pre-reform margin. Even in the Republican states that saw a shift of more than 1 point (Arizona, Georgia, Texas, and Utah), Romney still would have won by 7 points, 7 points, 14 points, and 47 points, respectively. Needless to say, while the shift isn't beneficial to Republicans, Trende confirms Enten's assertion that the reform would not be an electoral bonanza for Democrats.

² Enten, Harry; "Immigration reform won't deliver Latino voter 'bonanza' to Democrats;" *The Guardian*, 23 April 2013; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/apr/23/immigration-reform-latino-voter-bonanza-democrats>

³ Trende, Sean; "An immigration 'Bonanza' for Democrats?;" *RealClearPolitics*, 24 April 2013; http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/04/24/an_immigration_bonanza_for_democrats.html





Source: Sean Trende - http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/04/24/an_immigration_bonanza_for_democrats.html

Immigration Reform Electoral Analysis - Baseline

My analysis aims to take what Harry Enten and Sean Trende started, but to make it more robust followed by a series of realistic hypothetical scenarios. Considering the potential issues of forecasting forward elections, I've decided to follow the similar format as the *Politico* analysis and Enten's and Trende's analyses in assuming the immigration reform has been implemented in enough time (approximately 10-13 years) to fully affect the 2012 Presidential election. Nate Silver has created an election forecaster that allows users to change various components to propel forward what an election could look like post-immigration reform; however, considering how unpredictable the political dynamic can be only just a few years out, trying to predict that in conjunction with population changes would render any analysis merely just one "what-if" among plausible thousands.⁴ My analysis is driven by state-based calculations. As such, any national numbers are sums of the state totals.

State-by-state Undocumented Immigrant Breakdown: All three previous analyses used Pew Research Center's state breakdowns of the estimated undocumented immigrant population. These data, collected by Pew's Hispanic Center, provide estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population by state at various points in time as well as an estimated 90% confidence range. I am using their most recent estimates, 2010, which is derived from the CPS March Supplemental.⁵

⁴ Silver, Nate; "How Immigration Reform and Demographics Could Change Presidential Math;" FiveThirtyEight, 30 April 2013; <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/how-immigration-reform-and-demographics-could-change-presidential-math/?smid=tw-fivethirtyeight&seid=auto>

⁵ PewResearch Hispanic Center, Table A3 – Estimates of Unauthorized Immigrant Population by State, Selected Years 1990 to 2010; <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/02/01/appendix-a-additional-figures-and-tables/>



Estimated 18+ Undocumented Immigrant Population: In determining the effect of undocumented immigration population on the 2012 election, we first must exclude those under 18, who would be ineligible to vote. Based on estimates from Pew's Hispanic Center, roughly 1 million of the estimated 11 million (9%) undocumented immigrants are under the age of 18.⁶ Understanding that the age-break down may differ from state to state, while not substantially enough to alter the numbers dramatically, I assume the states' eligible voting age rate undocumented immigrant population is the same 91%.

Estimated Citizenship Rate/New Citizen Population: As Enten and Trende both point out, not all of the undocumented immigrants will apply for citizenship. Even today, according to Pew's Hispanic Center, only about 60% of legal immigrants decide to go through the citizenship process when they become eligible.⁷ Even following the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, often derided as "amnesty," approximately 53% of those eligible sought and gained citizenship.⁸ For the initial baseline analysis, I assumed the 60% and 53% rates were fairly sound, considering a recent Latino Decisions poll found 87% of undocumented immigrants were willing to seek citizenship if allowed.⁹ As such, I took the average of Pew's and DHS's rates to estimate the citizenship rate.

Estimated New Latino and New Asian Citizens: As Harry Enten accurately points out in dismissing *Politico's* analysis, not all of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants are of Latino descent. Actually, according to Pew's Hispanic Center, only 81% of the unauthorized immigrants are from Hispanic countries. Of the remaining 19%, 11% are from Asian countries with the remaining 8% split between Africa and Europe/Canada.¹⁰ Again, since the data aren't available by state, I'm assuming the state's undocumented immigrant population is the same as the national rates. I decided not to break it down into further categories or separate out the European/Canadian and African new citizens as the numbers become so small they do not affect the analysis.

Estimated New Latino and Asian Voters: As both Harry Enten and Sean Trende mention in their analyses, not all new citizens will actually turnout to vote. The real question, however, is whether new eligible voters turn out similarly to their demographic cohorts or differently. For the baseline, I assume the new Latino and new Asian voters would have turned out to vote as their Latino and Asian counterparts in the 2012 election. Using the Voting and Registration CPS Supplemental issued by the Census Bureau, I

⁶ PewResearch Hispanic Center, "A Nation of Immigrants Overview;" 29 January 2013; <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/01/29/a-nation-of-immigrants/>

⁷ Gonzalez-Barrera Ana, Mark Hugo Lopez, Jeffrey Passel, Paul Taylor; PewResearch Hispanic Center, "The Path Not Taken;" 4 February 2013; <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/02/04/the-path-not-taken/>

⁸ Baker, Bryan C., Department of Homeland Security, "Naturalization Rates among IRCA Immigrants: A 2009 Update;" October 2010, <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/irca-natz-fs-2009.pdf>

⁹ Latino Decisions, "Survey of Latino Undocumented Immigrants March 2013;" 25 April 2013; http://www.latinodecisions.com/files/6313/6598/6103/NALEO_AV_Undoc_Results.pdf

¹⁰ Cohn, D'Vera, Jeffrey Passel; PewResearch Hispanic Center, "Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010;" 1 February 2011; <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/02/01/unauthorized-immigrant-population-brnational-and-state-trends-2010/>

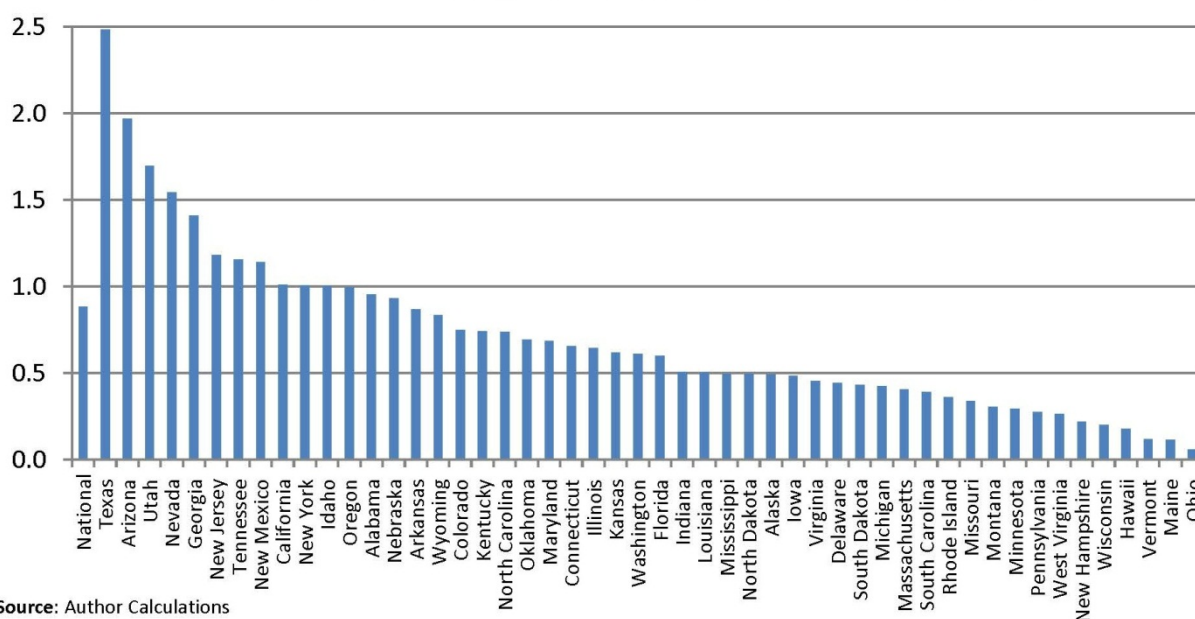


found the Latino and Asian turnout rates by state.¹¹ For the states where the information was not available (due to sample size), I substituted the national rates. Overall, the state turnout rates were fairly steady compared to the national rates. In only a few instances did the state rate diverge widely from the national average.

Additional Republican and Democratic Latino and Asian Voters: The last assumption is who these new voters would vote for on Election Day. Using exit poll results, I pulled the partisan voting for Latino and Asian voters for some states.¹² For states that didn't have exit poll data, I substituted the national partisan voting rates.

Margin of Vote Difference: To determine the effect of the additional voters, I had to add in the additional Latino and Asian voters into the 2012 totals. Using David Wasserman's state-by-state Romney and Obama vote totals, I added the 2012 totals to the additional voters to calculate a post-reform total for each state.¹³ Using Wasserman's data, I also added the actual Romney and Obama totals by state with their respective additional Latino and Asian voters, which allowed me to calculate new vote percentages for each state. I then found the difference in Obama's margin of victory. The baseline numbers are meant to represent a static approach. The margin differences are very close to Sean Trende's analysis. No state comes close to flipping its 2012 Electoral College votes.

Post-Reform Baseline Margin of Vote Difference From 2012 Actual



Source: Author Calculations

¹¹ Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2012 – Detailed Tables – Table 4B;" May 2013; <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/tables.html>

¹² New York Times, "Presidential Exit Polls;" <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/results/president/exit-polls>

¹³ Wasserman, David; "Overall Obama/Romney Vote Shares, 2012 (Includes Third Party Votes);" https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AjYj9mXEIO_QdHpla01oWE1jOFZRBnhJZkZpVFNKeVE#gid=19



Immigration Reform Electoral Analysis - Adjusted

The baseline analysis of the immigration reform's effect on the 2012 election shows that even under presumably favorable assumptions for Democrats (a relatively high citizenship rate and Obama's extremely favorable partisan voting trends among Latinos and Asians), the Democratic advantage isn't enough to alter the electoral landscape. Obama would have won by less than 1 additional point, which while not trivial, isn't a dynamic shift in the electorate.

However, the question remains as to whether the baseline assumptions are the best ones. There is reason to believe, for example, that the current undocumented immigrants may behave differently from those who received a pathway under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) or that once able, these new citizens will vote in different patterns than their current demographic counterparts. For this reason, the analysis presents a different set of assumptions.

Citizenship Rate: Based on research from both the Pew Research Center and the Department of Homeland Security, we have a good approximate of how many undocumented immigrants sought and gained citizenship following IRCA. As a whole, they naturalized at much lower rates than one would expect given legal immigrants' citizenship rates. This analysis isn't meant to examine this curiosity, but it is apparent that those immigrants who come to the United State legally appear to be different in some manner as those who do so illegally. As such, it is uncertain whether the current group of undocumented immigrants will behave similarly to the legal immigrants or the IRCA undocumented immigrants. While the Latino Decisions poll mentioned earlier shows massive interest in seeking citizenship, the poll's question left out the arduous path these immigrants would have to take in order to even be eligible for citizenship.

IRCA allowed undocumented immigrants who were in continuous residence in the US since before 1982 and had no criminal record to pay a \$185 fee to gain temporary residency. They then had to wait 18 months before becoming eligible for green cards at which point they had to show English-language proficiency and knowledge of American civics (both of which are required for any immigrant seeking naturalization).¹⁴ As a whole, the process was no harder than what legal immigrants encountered.

The current Gang of 8's Senate plan demands undocumented immigrants to go through an arduous path to even get to the legal permanent resident stage. It includes passing background checks, proving continuous residency prior to 2012, paying multiple \$500 fines plus any assessed back taxes and application processing fees, and waiting 10 years before applying for permanent resident status. At the point of permanent resident status, applicants would have to pay a \$1,000 fine and again prove they have maintained continuous residency, paid all taxes during the wait time, worked regularly, and showed a proficiency in the English-language and American civics. In addition, all green card holders at the time of the law's enactment must have become eligible for naturalization prior to any current undocumented immigrant being allowed citizenship and all steps are contingent to border security

¹⁴ Cooper, Betsy, Kevin O'Neil, Migration Policy Institute, "Lessons From The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986," August 2005; http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/PolicyBrief_No3_Aug05.pdf



triggers that could delay the process multiple years.¹⁵ Overall, the Gang of 8's process is much more complicated than IRCA's.

On the other hand, it is possible that Democratic operatives, seeing the potential electoral benefits of these new citizens, could engage in a coordinated operation to find and assist the undocumented immigrants on their pathway to citizenship. As such, it may be possible that the baseline citizenship rate slightly underestimates how many undocumented immigrants will seek and gain citizenship.

As such, I tested a **60%** citizenship rate (in line with Pew's legal immigrant rate) as well as **50%** and **40%** to simulate the arduous process without any political operative interference.

Voter Turnout: Given that these new citizens will have waited substantial amounts of time while working, paying taxes, and living within the United States, and considering the fact that the process will not be for the feint-hearted, it might not be fair to assume these new citizens will vote similarly to their demographic counterparts, which have shown lagging civic engagement. These citizens will have desperately wanted to become American citizens and will have experienced, in many cases more so than most American citizens, the effectiveness, or probably more likely, the ineffectiveness of the American government. It is possible these new citizens will be more engaged politically. These voters could turn out to vote at higher rates than their demographic counterparts.

There is, however, a case to be made that these voters will actually turnout less than the current demographic cohorts. Undocumented immigrants' income is significantly lower than the median income of current citizens. Low-income individuals are less inclined to vote and turn out less often. As such, even though the ten to thirteen year pathway process would be complete (suggesting the new citizens have had time to rise up the income ladder), they may still be in a lower income bracket than the average member of their demographic group.

As such, I tested turnout bumps of **5** and **10 points**, while also testing a turnout decrease of **5 points**.

Partisan Voting: President Obama managed to beat Governor Romney by a significant margin among Latino and Asian voters. However, this may be more of an anomaly than the norm. While Romney only managed 21% of the Latino vote and 26% of the Asian vote nationally in 2012, Romney's performance appears to be a low-point for Republicans. The chart below shows, courtesy of *The New York Times* exit polls, all Republican nominees except Bob Dole performed better among Latinos; even Dole did better among Asians than Romney. Granted, a few Republicans came close to Romney's performance with Latinos.¹⁶

¹⁵ Center for Immigration Studies, "Outline of the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013," http://cis.org/sites/cis.org/files/136230105-Outline-of-the-Border-Security-Economic-Opportunity-and-Immigration-Modernization-Act-of-2013_0.pdf

¹⁶ The New York Times, "Election Results 2008," 5 November 2008; <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/exit-polls.html>



Republican Share of the Latino and Asian Vote, Presidential Elections		
Candidate (Year)	Latino Share	Asian Share
Mitt Romney (2012)	21%	26%
John McCain (2008)	31%	35%
George W. Bush (2004)	43%	41%
George W. Bush (2000)	35%	41%
Bob Dole (1996)	21%	48%
George H.W. Bush (1992)	25%	55%
George H.W. Bush (1988)	30%	N/A
Ronald Reagan (1984)	37%	N/A
Ronald Reagan (1980)	35%	N/A

While Republicans have never won a plurality of the Latino vote, they did manage to do so with the Asian vote until George W. Bush's first election. It could be the case that Republicans are destined to only approximately 1/5th of the Hispanic and Asian voters, but historical trends and polling suggest otherwise.

A March 2013 Latino Decisions poll shows Republicans could considerably benefit from leading and supporting comprehensive immigration reform.¹⁷ After asking whether it would make them more or less likely to vote for a Republican if the Republican Party takes a leadership role in passing immigration reform, the Latino Decisions poll found 44% of Latino voters are more likely to vote Republican compared to just 8% who said it would make them less likely. This is a significant bump compared to a Latino Decision November 2012 poll that asked the same question, when only 31% said they would be more likely to vote Republican. In addition, the March poll showed 43% of Obama voters said they would be more likely to vote Republican, 49% of Independent Latinos would be more likely to do so, and 50% of 18-39 year olds would. In a head-to-head matchup between a pro-immigrant Republican and an immigration-neutral Democrat, the Republican won with 63% of the vote. Naturally, this head-to-head scenario isn't realistic for national elections, but it does illustrate that Republican candidates can boost their vote share among these immigrant populations.

Considering Marco Rubio, the Republican Senator from Florida, has become the leading figure for the Gang of 8's immigration reform push, the bill will become his centerpiece legislative victory (or defeat). If it passes in the Senate, it will likely be a general election boon to Rubio, and if he can help get it passed in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, it will lend itself to a likely Republican victory on the issue. While the Democrats will surely get their credit, it will be hard for voters to ignore the Republican Party's role in getting the reform passed.

Even despite the Republican Party's best efforts, these new citizens and voters could identify President Obama and his Democratic Party as the political group that provided them their American citizenship

¹⁷ Latino Decisions, "Comprehensive Immigration Reform and Winning the Latino Vote;" 5 March 2013; http://www.latinodecisions.com/files/2813/6250/5298/Immigration_reform_March5_Final.pdf



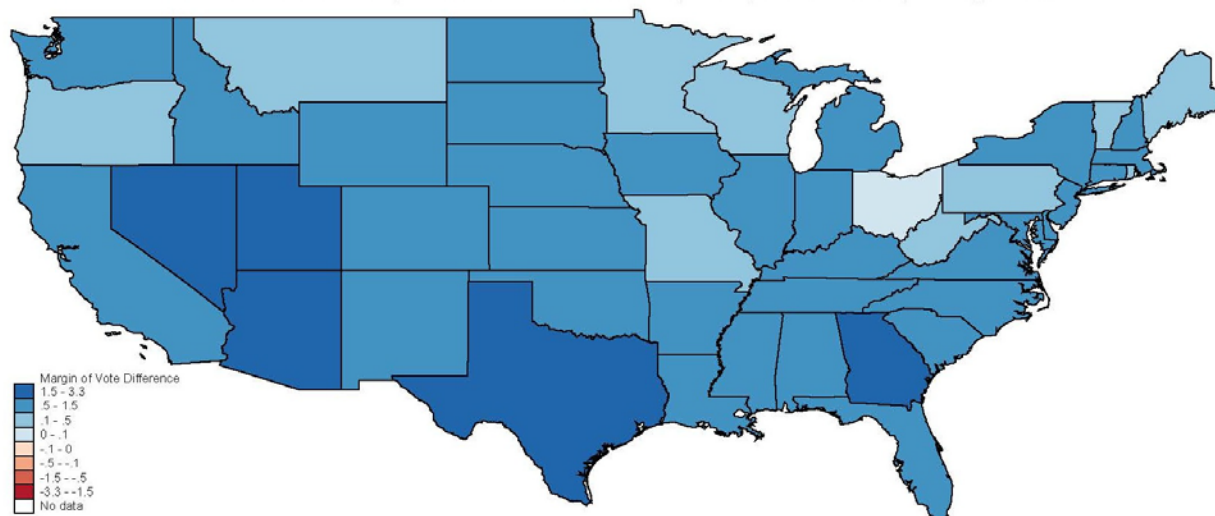
and as a result, have a political allegiance to the Democrats, which could maintain the President's 2012 enormous partisan advantage with these new voters.

For purposes of this analysis, I gave Republicans a **50%** and an **80%** bump putting their partisan voting rates in league with earlier elections. In addition, I tested a **0%** bump to signify continued partisanship levels as the 2012 actual election.

Scenario 1: Under scenario 1, I assumed the tides would break the best toward the Democrats. This would mean the citizenship rate would be highest (60%), the turnout bump would also be highest (10 points), and the partisanship change would be the lowest (0%). Nationally, this would shift the vote about 1.1 points toward President Obama, with Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, New Mexico, Tennessee, California, New Jersey, New York, Nebraska, Oregon, Idaho and Wyoming all shifting a point or more. Arizona and Utah would see a shift of more than 2 points and Texas would have about a 3.3 point shift. It would boost Obama's national vote by approximately 2.4 million and Romney's by just 821,000. In the 8 swing states (Colorado, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, Virginia, Ohio, Florida, North Carolina), Obama would gain about an 840,000 vote advantage, which is approximately just 0.6% of the post-reform total 2012 votes. Romney's slimmest margin of victory state—North Carolina—would shift about 0.9 points in Obama's favor, effectively making that race a tie. For Obama's slimmest margin of victory state—Florida—the shift would be about 0.7 points further toward Obama. However, the 1.1 point shift wouldn't be enough to move any states from the Republican column into the Democratic, but would have made the map even more prohibitive for the Republican ticket. The map below shows—by state, excluding Alaska and Hawaii for visual aesthetics—the difference in the margin of victory between the actual 2012 results and the post-reform electoral results. Red hues show a shift toward Romney, while blue tones are Democratic shifts.

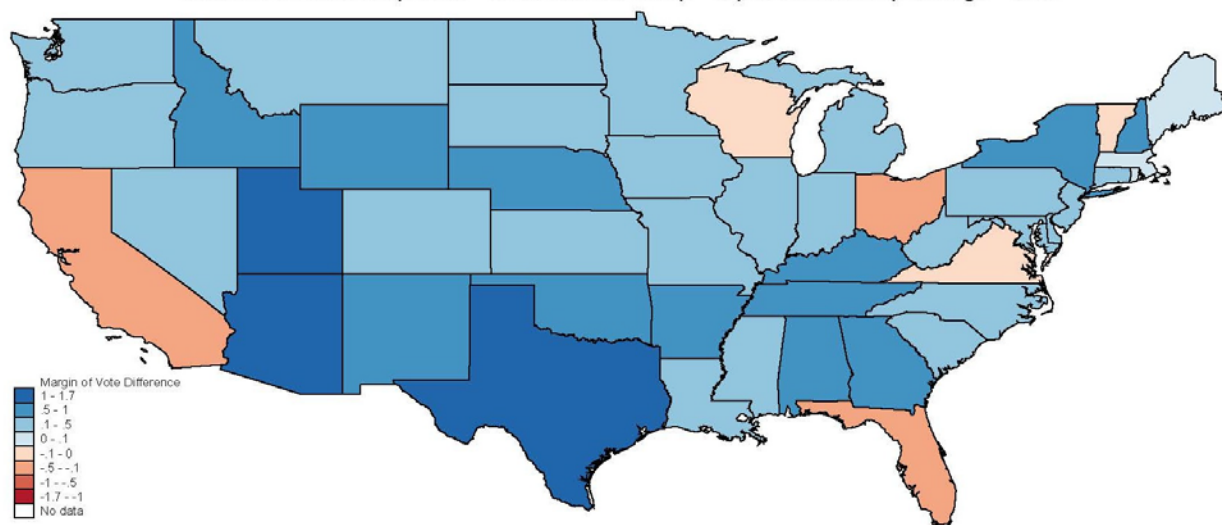
Changes in 2012 Presidential Election Margin of Victory with Immigration Reform

Scenario 1: Citizenship Rate = 60%, Turnout Bump = 10 pts, Partisanship Change = 0%



Scenario 2: This scenario examines the middling assumptions, i.e. the ones that don't give the Democrats full advantage, but also don't reduce the Republican's position as much. As such, scenario 2 uses the 50% citizenship rate, the 5 point turnout bump, and the 50% partisanship change. Nationally, this would shift the election 0.4 points toward the Democrats with only Arizona, Texas, and Utah shifting more than 1 point; however, even in those three states, Romney would have won by an average of 23 points (11 points, excluding Utah). It would boost Obama's national vote by approximately 1.5 million and Romney's by 939,000. In the 8 swing states, Obama would gain about a 625,000 vote advantage, which is approximately 0.5% of the post-reform total 2012 votes. Romney's slimmest margin of victory state—North Carolina—would move toward Obama by just 0.2 points and Obama's slimmest margin of victory state—Florida—shifts about 0.4 points in favor of Romney making it effectively a 2000-style toss-up again (49.3% vs. 49.8%).

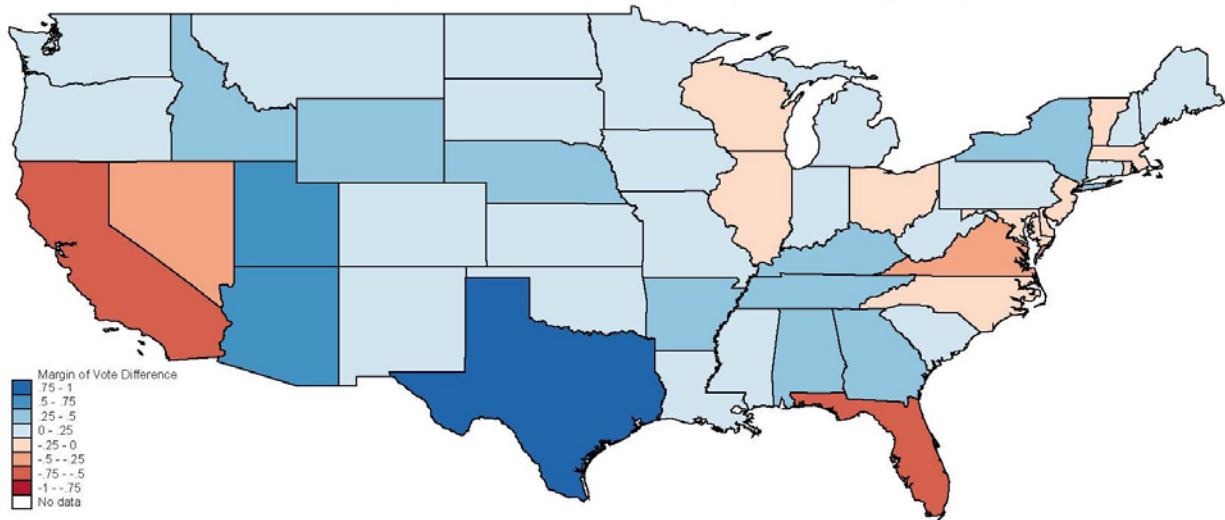
Changes in 2012 Presidential Election Margin of Victory with Immigration Reform
Scenario 2: Citizenship Rate = 50%, Turnout Bump = 5 pts, Partisanship Change = 50%



Scenario 3: The final adjustment scenario presents a plausible best case for the Republicans. It assumes the lowest citizenship rate (40%) and the lowest turnout bump (-5 points), but also assumes Republicans gain the most partisanship change (80%) from the immigration reform. This effectively negates the Democratic advantage (0.06 point shift toward Obama). It would boost Obama's national vote by approximately 878,000 and Romney's by 736,000. In the 8 swing states, Obama would gain about a 560,000 vote advantage, which is approximately just 0.4% of the post-reform total 2012 votes. North Carolina would move about 0.1 points toward Romney, strengthening his hold on the swing state and Florida would effectively become a tie (49.5% for Romney and 49.7% for Obama).



Changes in 2012 Presidential Election Margin of Victory with Immigration Reform
 Scenario 3: Citizenship Rate = 40%, Turnout Bump = -5 pts, Partisanship Change = 80%



Conclusion

Comprehensive immigration reform will undoubtedly change the political landscape. However, the effects of the undocumented immigrants entering the eligible voter pool will be quite minimal at best. There is no reason to believe these voters would be any less “up for grabs” than any other group for an aspiring politician or well-functioning political party. Making reasoned assumptions about how many undocumented immigrants will naturalize and how these new citizens will vote shows that the Democrats’ margin of victory would shift between a point and effectively, none at all. On the whole, the electoral effects are small and a weak excuse for Republicans to oppose comprehensive immigration reform with a pathway to citizenship.

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