

US - Immigrants and the 2006 Elections: Exit Polls in 3 Cities Reveal Immigrant Voting Patterns (by the New York Immigration Coalition)

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[The New York Immigration Coalition](#) - Immigration was as a major issue for both immigrant and native-born voters this year, and the handling of the issue likely contributed to Democratic gains in this year's elections, exit poll findings released today suggest.

A majority of voters followed this year's immigration rallies closely and felt that Democrats did a better job on the immigration issue, according to the New Americans Exit Poll, which was conducted in New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle by researchers at Barnard College of Columbia University, the City University of New York, Loyola Marymount University, and the University of Washington.

"The immigration issue was clearly on the minds of most voters, and it made a difference at the polls," said Chung-Wha Hong , executive director of The New York Immigration Coalition, which coordinated the three-city effort in partnership with community-based organizations in Los Angeles and Seattle . "The aftermath of the elections has created the perfect political moment for immigration reform: the anti-immigrant extremists have been discredited, there is broad national support for immigration reform, and the 12 million undocumented immigrants aren't going anywhere. President Bush is right to identify immigration reform as a key issue on which Republicans can find common ground with Democrats. We urge both parties to take up President Bush's invitation and deliver immigration reform to the American people," said Hong.

By a wide margin, voters felt that Democrats did a better job of handling the immigration issue during the last year. In New York , 57 percent of foreign-born voters and 50 percent of native-born voters said the Democrats did a better job on immigration, whereas only 15 percent of foreign-born voters and 10 percent of native-born voters sided with Republicans on the issue. Similar findings emerged from Los Angeles , where 60 percent of foreign-born and 48 percent of native-born voters preferred the Democrats approach, while 14 percent and 13 percent of foreign- and native-born voters, respectively, sided with Republicans. In Seattle , 30 percent favored the Democratic approach, while 12 percent opted for the Republicans.

In New York, among those who voted for President Bush in 2004, about a quarter now say that over the last year, the Democratic party handled immigration issues better than the Republican party, with immigrants more likely than the native-born to think this way (29 percent of foreign-born Bush voters favor the Democratic party on the immigration issue today, compared with 10 percent of the native-born).

"Voting patterns show that immigrant voters will shift loyalties if they are unfairly criminalized and attacked. The message here for both parties is you better pay attention to the fastest-growing segment of the electorate - immigrant voters," added Hong.

The surveys found that two out of three voters in New York and Seattle , and three out of four voters in Los Angeles , followed news of the immigration rallies closely or somewhat closely. The high level of interest in the immigration debate was just as prominent, if not more, among native-born voters as among foreign-born voters. Ten percent of New York voters indicated that they or a family member took part in the immigration rallies, while in Los Angeles , a stunning 33 percent of foreign-born voters and 16 percent of native-born voters participated in the rallies.

“Does this tell us that grassroots power translated into voting power? The answer is yes! The findings also clearly show that the immigration issue has exploded into the American public arena and into American voters’ consciousness in a big way this election year. It is no longer just an immigrant constituency issue but a major social problem that our nation must solve,” said Eun-Sook Lee, executive director of the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium, which sponsored the New Americans Exit Poll in Los Angeles , along with Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles and the Central American Resource Center.

Immigrants continued to be the driving force behind the expansion of new voters. They were much more likely to have cast a ballot for the first time in these elections than their native-born counterparts. Eight percent of foreign-born voters in New York (12 percent in Los Angeles) reported they were first-time voters, compared with two percent of the native-born (5 percent in Los Angeles). Consistent with past findings, about two-thirds of all first-time voters in this election said they were foreign-born.

Immigrant community groups also stepped-up their voter registration and mobilization efforts following the spring’s immigration rallies, and there was more coordination nationally. In New York , immigrant groups contacted over 46,000 immigrant voters, including registering nearly 10,000 new voters just during the last six months. Immigrant groups also did intensive outreach to recently naturalized immigrant voters, who are less likely to be contacted by political parties or other get-out-the-vote efforts, according to past exit poll results. These activities were coordinated under The New York Immigration Coalition’s Democracy in Action! campaign, the goal of which is to empower and mobilize immigrant communities through citizenship and civic participation, grassroots action, and public education.

“This was the year that immigrant groups across the nation conducted unprecedented voter education and mobilization campaigns. A new kind of immigrant voting block is forming. We have the beginnings of an immigrant electoral machine that will continue to build and flex its muscle in 2008 and beyond,” said Pramila Jayapal, executive director of Hate Free Zone, an immigrant and civil rights group based in Washington state.

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