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AMERICANS NOW FAVOR GOP ON IMMIGRATION – WSJ/NBC POLL

By Laura Meckler
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WASHINGTON – Americans are now more likely to trust Republicans to handle immigration, and less likely to support legislation backed by most Democrats giving illegal immigrants a pathway to citizenship, a new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll finds.

These shifts in public opinion come in the wake of a spring and summer surge in Central American children illegally crossing the southwest border.

Republicans seized on the influx to argue that U.S. borders are too porous, and they blamed what they consider to be Democratic leniency toward illegal immigration for persuading children to make the journey.

The result: voters' trust in Democrats has fallen, as has their willingness to consider legalization for undocumented.

The new survey finds that 35 percent of people saying the Republican Party would do a better job on immigration, vs. 27 percent for Democrats. That represents a big swing from December, when 31 percent favored Democrats and 26 percent, Republicans.

The poll also finds support for immigration legislation that includes a pathway to citizenship way down since spring. In April, 64 percent favored such a proposal, with 35 percent opposed. This month, support dropped to 53 percent and opposition rose to 45 percent—a swing of more than 20 percentage points.

Immigration supporters may take some solace that when given more details about the proposal, support remains high. But the Democratic and Republican pollsters who run the poll agreed that most voters make political judgments off just a bit of information.

The survey underscores President Barack Obama's decision to put off his plans to unilaterally ease deportations of illegal immigrants. He had promised to act this month, but the White House grew concerned that voters are so angered by the border crisis that any further easing of immigration policy would be damaging to Democratic candidates in key Senate races. He's now promising to act by the end of the year.

"The Central American kids totally reopened the dialogue about whether our borders were secure," said Bill McInturff, a Republican who co-directs the Wall Street Journal-NBC News poll.

Most experts believe that the surge stemmed at least in part from a perception that kids who make it to the U.S. will be allowed to stay. That reality has less to do with porous borders and more to do with a bipartisan 2008 law that lets unaccompanied minors from

Central America stay in the U.S. while their deportation cases are processed slowly through backlogged immigration courts.

Further, the huge surge in migration dropped dramatically in June and August. But perceptions, fueled by GOP political attacks, had already taken hold.

The crisis may have inflicted lasting damage on the years-long drive to overhaul the immigration system, which Democrats and some Republicans say must include legalization for many of the 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. now.

Since spring, support for the pathway to citizenship fell across demographic groups, dropping sharply among African-Americans (from 75 percent support to 59 percent) and among those with less education – for instance, those with some college went from 65 percent support to 42 percent.

“I’m just not sure how much bounce back there will be with some of these groups,” he said Fred Yang, a Democratic pollster who also works on the poll.

There was some good news for immigration advocates. In a separate question, voters were given details about a legalization program – including that participants would have to pay a fine, any back taxes and pass a security background check – and asked if they support the plan.

In this case, support remained high – with 73 percent supporting the plan and 26 percent opposed. That’s just a little worse than when the same question was asked in April, when 76 percent supported it and 23 percent opposed.

But that sort of nuance is typically lost in the midst of political campaigns, said Mr. McInturff.

He said the immigration debate “has devolved down to one word, ‘amnesty,’” adding that the while the survey “can be useful in understanding attitudes, it may not replicate what will happen in the rough-and-tumble world of American campaigns.”

The new survey of 1,000 registered voters was conducted Sept. 3-7. It has a sampling margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points for the full sample.