



Elected Officials of Color Mostly Favor Immigrant-Friendly Policies

In 2006 alone, almost six hundred bills and resolutions were introduced in state legislatures across the country. Most dealt with immigrant-related education, employment, identification and driver’s licenses, public benefits, and voting.¹ More are sure to come.

As opinion leaders and policymakers, elected officials of color are important players in the immigration debates. Many represent minority communities with a stake in the issue. They are likely to represent areas where immigrants reside. They may also represent areas where competition for limited resources engenders difficult relations across racial and ethnic groups, involving citizens and immigrants alike.

The Gender and Multicultural Leadership (GMCL) Project surveyed a nationwide sample of elected officials of color in state and local office to gauge their support for four proposals aimed at integrating immigrants into local communities. Survey results show a substantial majority of all respondents support two of the four proposals. Seventy-eight percent “agree” or “strongly agree” that “government agencies should provide services in a variety of languages to help non-English speaking clients.” Sixty-eight percent favor or strongly favor “a law mandating public schools to provide instruction in other languages for students not proficient in English.” Drawing less support, however, were drivers’ licenses for immigrants regardless of their legal status and voting rights for non-citizen parents in local (i.e. school board) elections. But with minority support in the range of forty to almost fifty percent of the total sample, such unconventional proposals may not be easily dismissed.

Racial Differences

Differences across racial groups occur on specific proposals. Black officials do not support drivers’ licenses, whereas a majority of Latino, Asian, and American Indian officials do. Only 1 out of 2 Asian officials supports public school instruction in languages other than English, while clear majorities of all other racial groups agree with that policy. This is especially interesting given the immigrant background of the Asian respondents themselves (45% foreign-born and 27% second generation). The Latino respondents, who are overwhelmingly U.S.-born but also share immigrant backgrounds (10% foreign born; 52% either second or third generation in U.S.), are the most in favor of such instruction with Black elected officials close behind (69%).

| Support by Race for Immigration Policies, Elected Officials who “Strongly agreed” or “Agreed,” by Race (%) | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-------|--------|-------|--------------|--|
| Policy | All | Black | Latino | Asian | Amer. Indian | |
| As a matter of public safety, drivers’ licenses should be made available to immigrants, regardless of their legal status in the U.S.* | 41 | 27 | 57 | 55 | 55 | |
| Government agencies should provide services in a variety of languages to help non-English speaking clients. | 78 | 76 | 81 | 82 | 79 | |
| Non-citizen legal immigrants should be allowed to vote in school board elections if they have children in the public schools. | 47 | 46 | 47 | 48 | 38 | |
| A law mandating public schools to provide instruction in other languages for students not proficient in English.* | 68 | 69 | 70 | 50 | 66 | |

* Group difference is significant at $p < .05$ or less.
Source: Gender & Multicultural Project Survey, 2006-07.

Gender Differences on Non-Citizen Voting and Other Immigrant Policies

With some variation in the intensity of their positions, women and men of color essentially show no differences in their level of support for multilingual services (79% for both) and public education in languages other than English (68%). Similarly, an equal percentage of women and men oppose drivers’ licenses for immigrants, regardless of their legal status (59%). However, a gender gap does appear on the issue of non-citizen voting, with women more likely to support the proposal as opposed to men (53% to 42%, respectively). Preliminary analysis suggests that Black women are the most likely to support this proposal than all other women of color as well as their Black male counterparts.²

| Support for Immigration Policies, by Gender (%) | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------------------|------|-----------------------|------|--------------------|------|----------------------|------|
| Level of Agreement | Drivers' Licenses | | Multilingual Services | | Noncitizen Voting* | | Bilingual Education† | |
| | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male |
| Strongly disagree | 15 | 15 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 13 | 5 | 6 |
| Disagree | 44 | 44 | 19 | 18 | 40 | 45 | 27 | 26 |
| Agree | 32 | 32 | 61 | 65 | 44 | 37 | 50 | 46 |
| Strongly agree | 9 | 9 | 18 | 14 | 9 | 5 | 18 | 22 |

*Group difference is significant at $p < .05$ or less. †Instruction in languages other than English may include a variety of programs, such as ESL, bilingual education, and/or dual language instruction.
Source: Gender & Multicultural Project Survey, 2006-2007.

Favoring Integration

In general, respondents to the GMCL Survey favor a more inclusive orientation toward immigrants rather than one that excludes or marginalizes them. A substantial percentage is even willing to consider expanding the rights of immigrants in the electoral arena. Given strong currents of opinion in the public arena opposing immigrant integration, elected officials of color offer a distinctive point of view that should be taken seriously in the formation of public policy for our states and local communities.

Notes

¹ Ann Morse, Adam Blott, Leya Speasmaker, and Laura Dwyer. "2006 State Legislation Related to Immigration: Enacted and Vetoed." Washington, DC: Immigrant Policy Project, National Conference of State Legislatures, October 31, 2006.

² See Christine Marie Sierra, Pei-te Lien, Carol Hardy-Fanta, and Dianne M. Pinderhughes, "Cleavage or Convergence: Elected Officials of Color and the Politics of Immigration." Paper presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, March 8-10, 2007, Las Vegas, Nevada.

About the Gender & Multicultural Leadership (GMCL) Project

The GMCL Survey is to date the nation's most comprehensive multiracial, multi-office national survey of Black, Latino, Asian, and American Indian elected officials holding positions at the state and local levels. A total of 1,354 elected officials of color were included in this report of the telephone survey conducted between June 5, 2006 and March 21, 2007, by the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) at the University of New Mexico. Seventy-two percent of those public officials who were successfully contacted agreed to participate in the survey. The margin of error for the entire sample is $\pm 3\%$.

Besides the survey, other components of the GMCL Project include a **national database** of elected officials of color, by race and gender (as of spring 2006); an annotated **bibliography** and **analytical framework** on the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and class; and a project **website** for public education.

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This project was funded by a generous grant from the Ford Foundation. For more information on the project and findings from the survey, or to contact the Principal Investigators, visit our website: www.gmcl.org.

