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## **POLICY BRIEF**

### **Playing Politics on Immigration: Congress Favors Image over Substance in Passing H.R. 4437**

by Rob Paral\*

*Congressional representatives who supported H.R. 4437—the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005—are most likely to represent districts with relatively few undocumented immigrants.*

In December 2005 the House of Representatives chose to ignore the need for comprehensive immigration reform, opting instead for legislation that makes a show of “getting tough” on undocumented immigrants while utterly ignoring the causes of undocumented immigration and the vital contributions that immigrant workers make to the U.S. economy. Despite the public’s demand for a sensible and straightforward response to the ongoing problem of undocumented immigration, the House passed H.R. 4437, the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act. This bill would, among other things, make felons of all undocumented immigrants as well as persons who assist them, a group that potentially includes religious workers, social workers, and librarians.

One explanation for why so many congressional representatives would choose to spend precious legislative time on a proposal that offers little hope of actually reducing undocumented immigration might be that the members of Congress with the *fewest* undocumented immigrants in their districts were the *most* likely to support the bill. Lawmakers whose constituents experience relatively little impact from

undocumented immigration have the luxury of playing politics on the issue rather than confronting it directly.

#### **Representatives from Districts with Few Undocumented Immigrants Were the Most Likely to Support the Bill**

There are 96 congressional districts that have fewer than 5,000 undocumented immigrants. Most of these districts are largely rural and located in sections of Appalachia, the Midwest, and the Mississippi Valley that are experiencing little economic growth and low levels of immigration in general. Constituents in many of these districts face tough economic times, but the cause is not immigration. Immigrants are attracted to regions of economic dynamism and job expansion. This is why greater numbers of undocumented immigrants are found in western states that have agricultural, livestock, fishing, and tourist economies that need the kinds of less-skilled labor that undocumented immigrants often provide.

Undocumented immigrants in the 96 lowest-immigration districts make up no more than 0.8 percent of the population (each of the 435 congressional districts has roughly the

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same total population: about 650,000 as of 2000<sup>1</sup>). The votes on H.R. 4437 in these districts tell you something about immigration politics in the United States today. The supposed threat from undocumented immigration is enough to rally voters and move levers of power even

in areas where the actual impact is miniscule. Among representatives from districts with the smallest populations of undocumented immigrants, 74 percent (71 out of 96) voted for the bill: 90 percent of Republicans (56 out of 62) and 44 percent of Democrats (15 out of 34) {see table 1}.

**Table 1:  
Share of Representatives Who Supported H.R. 4437  
by Number of Undocumented Immigrants in District**

<u>Number of Undocumented in District</u>	<u>Share of All Representatives Who Voted 'Yes'</u>	<u>Share of Republican Representatives Who Voted 'Yes'</u>	<u>Share of Democratic Representatives Who Voted 'Yes'</u>
75,000 or more	4%	25%	0%
50,000-74,999	6%	50%	0%
25,000-49,999	49%	88%	8%
15,000-24,999	65%	87%	18%
5,000-14,999	63%	90%	25%
5,000 or less	74%	90%	44%

**Representatives from Districts with Many Undocumented Immigrants Were the Most Likely to Oppose the Bill**

The voting pattern of the representatives from the 61 congressional districts with 50,000 or more undocumented immigrants tells a different story. These districts for the most part are located in densely populated urban areas such as New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and are relatively small in geographic size compared to rural districts that include many counties. In these high-immigration districts, the undocumented alone can account for as much as one-fifth of the total population. As a result, representatives who hail from these areas are familiar with undocumented immigrants and their impact on local communities. Among representatives from

districts with the largest populations of undocumented immigrants, a mere 5 percent (3 out of 61) supported the bill: none of the 53 Democrats and only 3 of the 8 Republicans.

The inverse relationship between support for H.R. 4437 and the actual presence of undocumented immigrants in a representative's district represents a widespread voting pattern. Among all Democrats, those who voted in favor of the bill had roughly 10,000 undocumented immigrants in their districts. Democrats who opposed the bill, on the other hand, had about 37,400. Among all Republicans, the same pattern holds: those voting for H.R. 4437 had an average of 14,500 undocumented immigrants in their districts, while those who voted against the bill had an average of 30,800 {see table 2}.

**Table 2:  
Average Number of Undocumented  
Immigrants per Congressional District  
by Vote on H.R. 4437**

	Yes	No
Democrats	10,000	37,400
Republicans	14,500	30,800

*There was an average of only 10,000 undocumented immigrants in the districts of Democratic representatives who voted for H.R. 4437, compared to 37,400 in the districts of Democratic representatives*

**Political Posturing on Immigration**

There is no denying that H.R. 4437 passed largely along party lines. Only 17 out of 232 Republicans voted against the bill (12 did not vote), while only 36 out of 203 Democrats supported the bill (2 did not vote). However, partisan affiliation alone does not explain this vote. Roughly three-fifths of the admittedly few Republicans who opposed H.R. 4437 represent districts with 15,000 or more undocumented immigrants, while four-fifths of the Democrats who supported the bill are from districts with fewer than 15,000 undocumented immigrants. More importantly, 67 percent of all representatives who supported the bill come from districts with an undocumented population of less than 15,000, while 62 percent of the representatives who

opposed the bill have 15,000 or more undocumented immigrants in their districts {see table 3 for a detailed breakdown}. As this pattern illustrates, the constituencies of most representatives who supported H.R. 4437 experience relatively little impact from undocumented immigration. As a result, these representatives are free to ignore the need for genuine immigration reform and focus instead on fostering a public image of being “tough” on undocumented immigrants. When the immigration debate shifts to the Senate in March, one can only hope that lawmakers there will adopt a more serious approach and rely less on political posturing than their colleagues in the House.

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*NOTE: A full version of the brief, including a breakdown of the votes on HR4437 and the number of undocumented in Congressional districts, is available on our website at [www.immigrationpolicy.org](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org).*

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Karen M. Mills, *Congressional Apportionment: Census 2000 Brief*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, July 2001.