



WAVE

POLLING AND RESEARCH

Updating Conventional Wisdom About Immigration

It's not 2024 anymore

Prepared for a conference hosted by America's Voice

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wavepolling.com

Part one

The conventional wisdom on immigration

The conventional wisdom is outdated

Matthew Yglesias, April 2025:

“...should be mindful of downside to making immigration more salient.” ; “bad groups create bad (electoral) incentives”

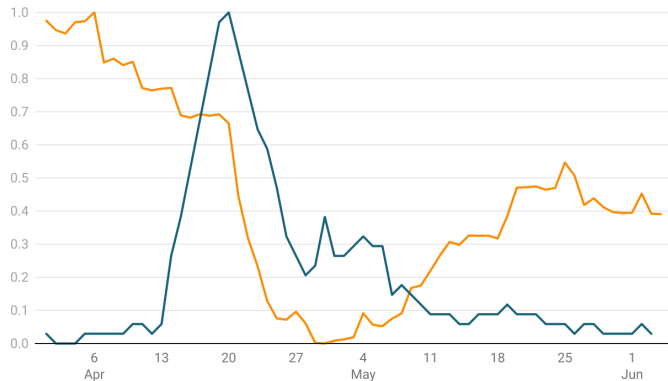
Hakeem Jeffries, April 2025 — pressed publicly for Abrego Garcia’s return, then waved House Democrats off the trips to El Salvador as having “run their course.”

And the general idea that "immigration favors Republicans"



WelcomeFest, June 2025: the Abrego Garcia coverage, on screen as Exhibit A.

News coverage of Kilmar Abrego Garcia drove down Trump's immigration approval



Media attention to the case

His approval on immigration

Coverage peaked **April 20**. Approval bottomed about **ten days later**, and recovered only as the story faded.

Weekly mentions of the case in headlines, scaled so 1 = the maximum;

approval divided by his April 1 rating. April 1 – June 4, 2025.

Wave Polling and Research

Their mechanism, running in reverse.

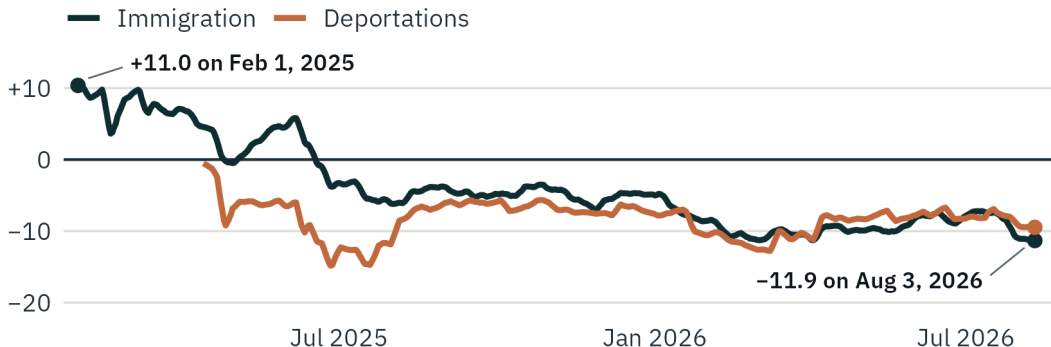
Part two

Where opinion is today

The short version: Trump's best issue became a liability

Net approval of Trump's handling of immigration: +11 to -12 in eighteen months

Bayesian average of all public pollsters (mixes adult and registered-voter samples; labeled)



Source: Morris polltracker poll average, Jan 30, 2025 - Aug 3, 2026. Deportations series begins June 2025.

Independent voters are anti-Trump on deportations, less so on border security

Net Trump approval among pure independents, July 2026

Even border security is underwater with the middle — and the concrete stuff is 25 points under



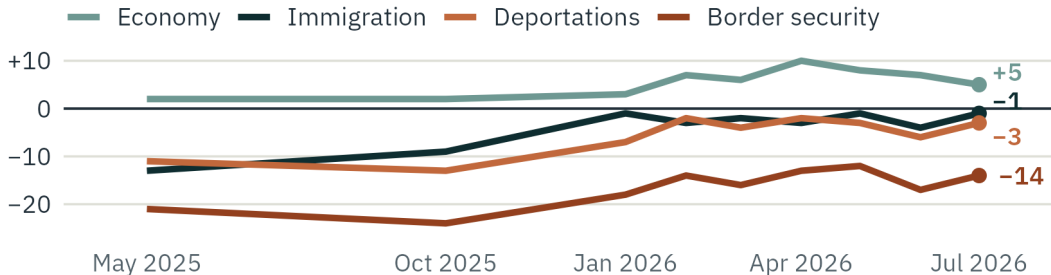
Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, July 2026, U.S. adults; independents exclude leaners.

- Fox: **59% call ICE “too aggressive”** — up **+22 among independents**. Party trust: **R+13 to R+1**.
- Republicans’ “don’t know” **doubled** after the January shootings.

Republicans' edge is eroding — everywhere but the border

Democrats gained on all four — the border is the last holdout

Net party advantage: share saying Democrats would do a better job, minus Republicans



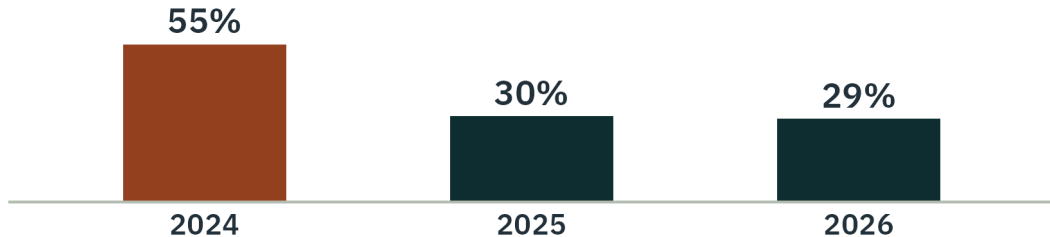
Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, monthly, May 2025 - July 2026. U.S. adults. Waves were quarterly before January 2026.

- Immigration **-13 to -1**; deportations **-11 to -3**. The economy was never theirs and is now **+5** for Democrats.
- Fox's independent read agrees: **R+6 to D+1**, their first Democratic lead since 2019.

Public much more pro-immigrant in 2024

“Immigration should be decreased”: collapsed in 2025 – and stayed down

Share of U.S. adults who say immigration to the U.S. should be decreased



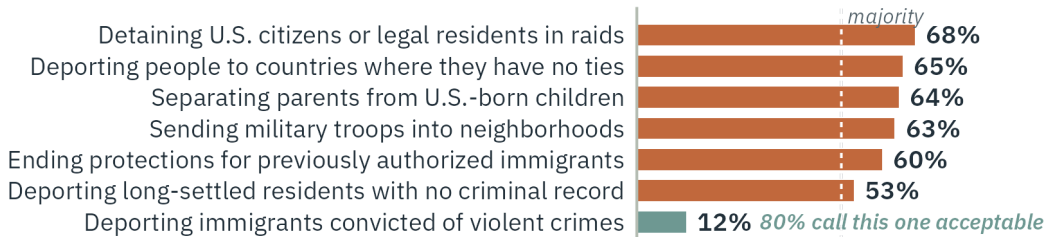
Source: Gallup, June waves. 2026: phone sample, N=1,001 adults, +/-4 (field Jun 1-15, 2026).

- “A good thing”: 79% to **73%** – still above the 25-year average. The dip is Republicans re-sorting.
- Not “moving left” – **moved left, and stayed.**

The Trump administration's immigration overreach

Percent saying each enforcement action “goes too far”

The objection is framing-proof: 66% say the agenda goes too far — identical in all three randomized frames



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, May 18-20, 2026, N=2,000 U.S. adults, +/-2.7.

- **70.6% of ICE detainees have no criminal conviction** (TRAC, Jul 11) — and 64% of voters already know it.
- ICE ranks **last of eight agencies** on trust; 46% “not at all.

Trump shows voters “border security” and “immigration enforcement” are separate issues

Southwest Border Patrol encounters, by fiscal year

Every single month since February 2025 has been under 10,000 — the lowest stretch in 25+ years of monthly data



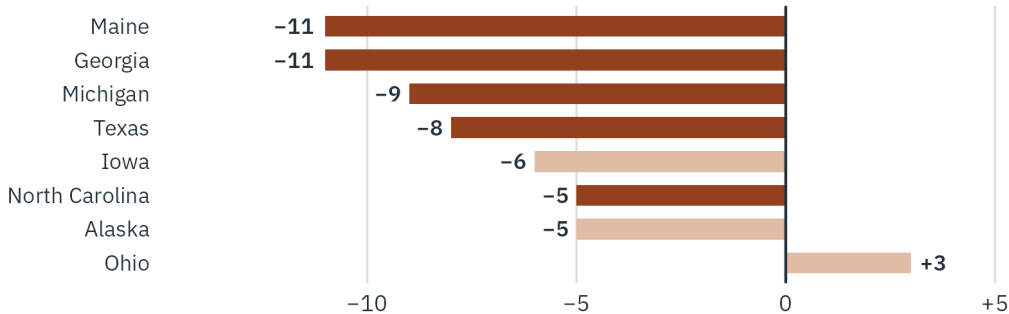
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of CBP data, Feb 2, 2026 (encounters count events, not individuals).

- The thermostat: opinion turns against *visible* policy — and the visible thing is no longer the border, it's violent enforcement.
- Operation Metro Surge · two citizens killed · 100 people detained per day · hundreds of billions of dollars ·

Three months out: battleground opinion

Underwater in seven of the eight 2026 Senate battlegrounds

Net approval of deportation policy — two-way margin among registered voters with an opinion, MRP estimates



Source: Wave Polling and Research MRP, published Aug 2, 2026, on pooled poll waves. Pale bars: the 95% interval crosses zero. National range: +20 (OK) to -37 (HI).

Part three

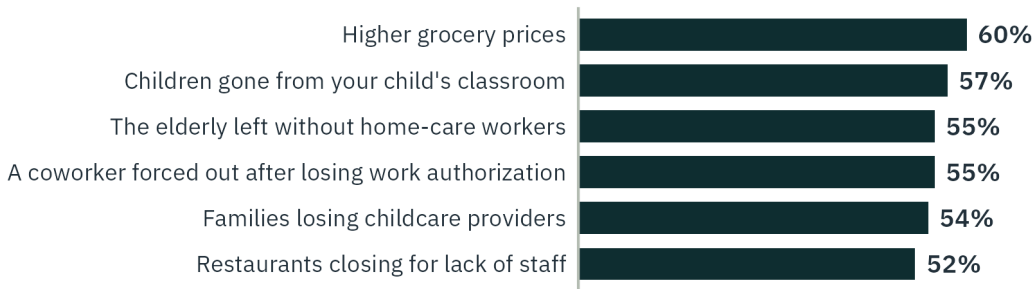
Message testing experiments

What the data says voters want in 2026 and beyond

Point out everyday impacts of deportations

Majorities call the everyday consequences “going too far”

The strongest items are occupational and relational: the aide, the coworker, the classroom



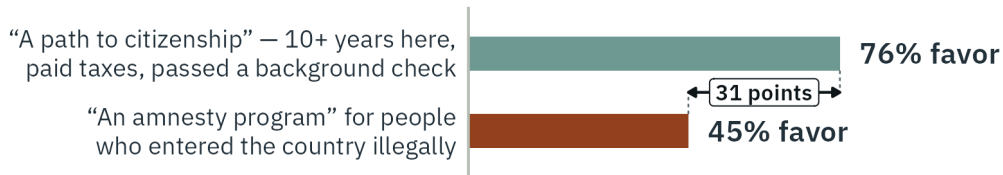
Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, May 18-20, 2026, N=2,000 U.S. adults, +/-2.7.

- **67% agreed** — and that held in all three versions we tested.
- **30% of direct-care workers are immigrants** (KFF, Jul 2026).

Brand “path to citizenship” now before GOP framing in 2028

The same policy, 31 points apart — and 29% of adults flipped on the label alone

“Amnesty”: 45 favor / 47 oppose. “Path to citizenship with conditions”: 76 / 18. Same survey, same people.



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, Feb 25-26, 2026, N=1,035 U.S. adults, +/-3.1. The path wording carries conditions - that's the finding: conditions are the price of a supermajority.

- **51% give contradictory answers** across question pairs — equally in both parties. Opinion here is constructed, not retrieved.
- One July poll, same voters: **R+1 on “immigration,” R+14 on “border security.”**

Stop pre-negotiating

Message tested. “Attacks on immigrant workers go too far. We’re deporting immigrant workers who pay taxes and haven’t committed a crime. Meanwhile, grocery prices are skyrocketing, chaotic tariffs are raising prices on hard-working Americans, and people are losing their Medicaid coverage.”

Same argument, plus the caveat — randomized to run either before or after it.

First: “**We need secure borders, and we should deport undocumented immigrants who have committed a violent crime.** But Trump goes too far...”

Last: “...we should focus on lowering costs and building an economy where hard-working Americans can get ahead — **while keeping our borders secure and deporting undocumented immigrants who commit violent crimes.**”

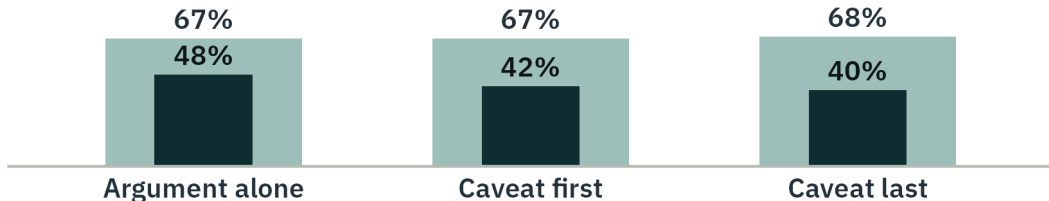
The two caveat arms also reword the body slightly, so the clean placement test is caveat-first versus caveat-last.

Stop pre-negotiating

The “secure borders first” caveat bought zero agreement — and cost 8 points of intensity

Same affordability argument, randomized caveat placement

■ Total agree ■ Strongly agree



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, May 18-20, 2026, N=2,000 U.S. adults; arms n=659/662/679.

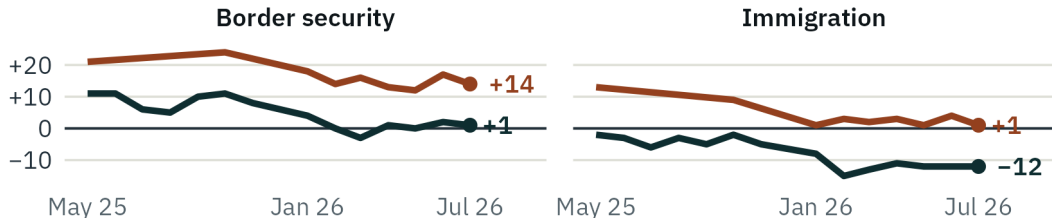
- The caveat **lifts Republicans 11–14 points**. But it **decreases strong approval** by marginalizing allies.

“But voters want border security”

Both measures eroded – but the border stayed on their side of zero

Trump's net approval, and the Republican advantage on party trust

— Republican advantage — Trump net approval



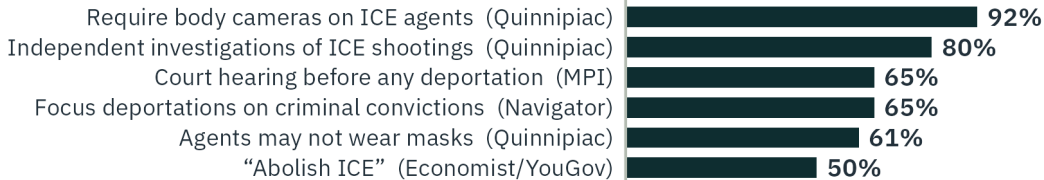
Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, monthly, May 2025 - July 2026. U.S. adults.

- **Concede it:** border security is his one non-negative issue (+1), and Republicans still lead party trust on it **48–34**.
- **Then pivot:** on *immigration* the same voters are at **-12** and the party gap is **+1**. Same people, different noun.

“But crime and policing”

The public favors reform and rolling back ICE — not more funding

Support for each proposal. Every one of them, including abolition, now commands a majority.



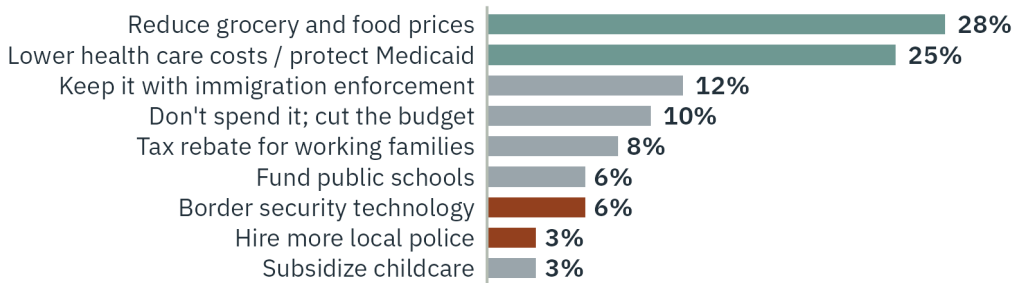
Sources: Quinnipiac Jan 29-Feb 2, 2026 (RV); Navigator Jan 29-Feb 1, 2026 (RV); Wave Polling and Research poll Feb 2026 (adults); Economist/YouGov Feb 27-Mar 2, 2026 (adults).

- **Abolition is now a majority position** — 50–39, its highest ever (Economist/YouGov).
- Nor does the public want ICE *funded*: **60% oppose increasing it; 51% want it cut.**
- **Concede first:** 80% back deporting violent criminals — but 70.6% of detainees have no conviction.

“But crime and policing”

Given the money back, voters spend it on groceries and health care

If funding were redirected away from immigration enforcement, what is the best use of it? Single choice.



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, May 18-20, 2026, N=2,000 U.S. adults, +/-2.7.

- Border technology **6%** and more police **3%** finish below *don't spend it at all*.
- Among working-class adults the tilt is stronger still — groceries **38%**.

What else that money could buy



The Economic Policy Institute's calculator puts the mass-deportation bill at **\$267 billion — \$2,345 per taxpayer** — and shows what the same money would otherwise fund.

680,000 registered nurses

906,000 school teachers

11.9 million people on Medicaid

6.7 million Head Start slots

Source: Economic Policy Institute. Figures as reported by the tool.

What to take away

- **It isn't 2024 anymore.** Raising the salience of Abrego Garcia moved net support for mass deportation **20 points against it** — the opposite of what we were told.
- **They turned against *this* scale/type of enforcement** The GOP is losing edge as domestic enforcement takes precedence in voters' minds. **Keep emphasizing this new frame.**
- **Pre-negotiating with crime language doesn't help.** In our experiment, it cost **8 points of intensity** in agreement with our economics-first immigration language.
- **Voters don't support more funding for enforcement.** They say 5:1 they want the government to focus on affordability, and see deportations as a threat to growth and their communities

It's time to update the conventional wisdom about immigration.