



WAVE

POLLING AND RESEARCH

Public Opinion on Immigration in Fall 2026

Results from a national survey of 1,591 registered voters

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Survey overview

Wave Poll #2026-218

- 1,591 U.S. registered voters, fielded August 7–11, 2026
- Conducted by Wave Polling and Research
- Weighted to CPS benchmarks (age, race/ethnicity, sex, income, education, region, metro, white-by-college interaction)
- Also raked to a three-year rolling average of Pew NPORS partisanship, 2024 vote, and a local Trump-support quintile by zip (calibrated to certified 2020–2024 results)
- Margin of sampling error: ± 2.6 percentage points

Trump's approval on immigration enforcement remains deeply negative

—14

Net approval of Trump's handling of deportations and immigration enforcement

May 2026: —13

64%

Say the administration is too focused on deportations, not the economy

Feb 69% → May 68% → Aug 64%

+12

Net margin for the strongest-testing message, vs. Trump's own

Best of six frames tested;
independents: +16

Net approval of Trump's handling of deportations and immigration enforcement is —14, essentially unchanged from May. The share who say the administration is too focused on deportations has eased slightly since February. Message testing later in this deck finds one frame in particular outperforming the rest.

Independents are far more critical than the electorate overall

—31

Net approval of Trump on deportations,
among independents

vs. —14 overall

+60

Net agreement that Trump is “too focused
on deportations,” among independents

vs. +36 overall

Independents disapprove of Trump’s handling of deportations by a wider margin than the electorate overall, and are more likely to say the administration is too focused on deportations.

Agreement that the administration is “focusing too much on deportations”

“...and not focusing enough on fixing the economy”

Share agreeing, by group



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll #2026-218, Aug 7-11 2026, N=1,591 U.S. registered voters. Subgroup samples are smaller and carry wider margins of error.

Generic and specific questions about immigration point different directions

R +3

This survey, Aug 2026: which party's position on immigration do you support more? (43% R, 40% D)

R +13 → R +3

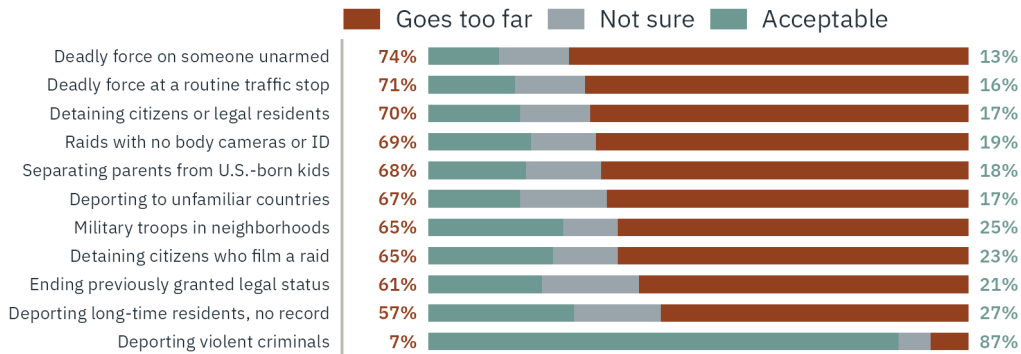
Republicans still lead nationally on which party's position on immigration voters prefer — but backlash to Trump's immigration policy has eroded that advantage sharply since May 2025, on both measures. That narrowing sits alongside broad disapproval of the specific enforcement tactics reported next.

Left: Wave Polling and Research poll #2026-218, Aug 2026. Right: Wave Polling and Research monthly party-trust tracker, U.S. adults.

ICE tactics are largely unacceptable to a majority

Acceptable part of enforcement, or goes too far?

Eleven actions, ranked by the share saying each goes too far

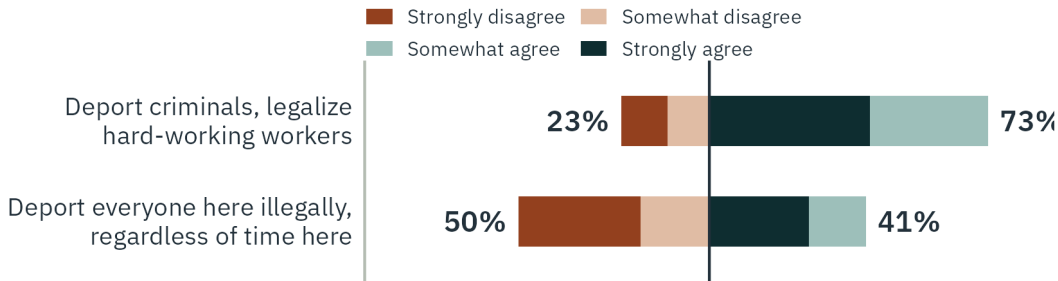


Source: Wave Polling and Research poll #2026-218, Aug 7-11 2026, N=1,591 U.S. registered voters.

Two statements, opposite verdicts

Voters prefer tailored deportations, not maximalist approach

“How much do you agree or disagree with each statement?”



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll #2026-218, Aug 7-11 2026, N=1,591 U.S. registered voters.

Part two

Updating the conventional wisdom about 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”

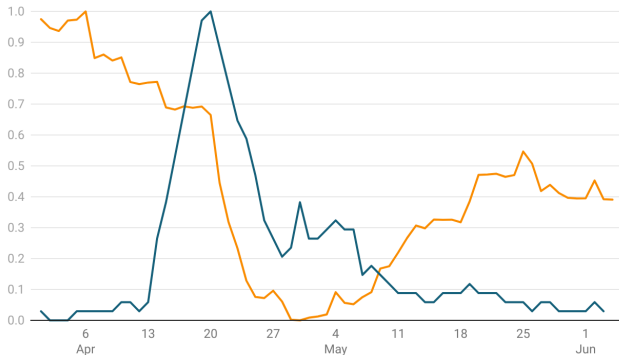
Hakeem Jeffries, April 2025 — pressed publicly for Abrego Garcia’s return, then waved House Democrats off the trips to El Salvador as having “run their course.”

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.

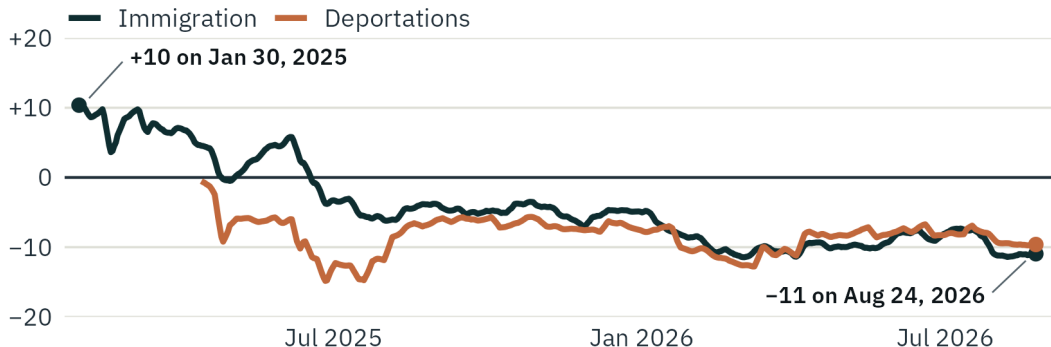
Their mechanism, running in reverse.

Weekly mentions of the case in headlines, scaled so 1 = the maximum; approval divided by his April 1 rating.

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

Net approval of Trump's handling of immigration: +10 to -15 since early 2025

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



Source: FiftyPlusOne poll average, Jan 30, 2025 to Aug 24, 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



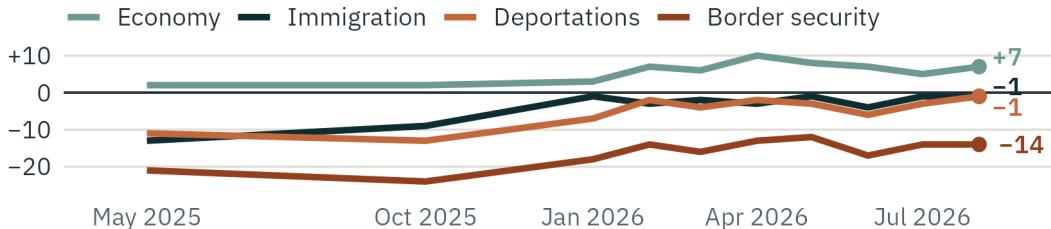
Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, July 2026, U.S. adults; independents exclude leaners.

- 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



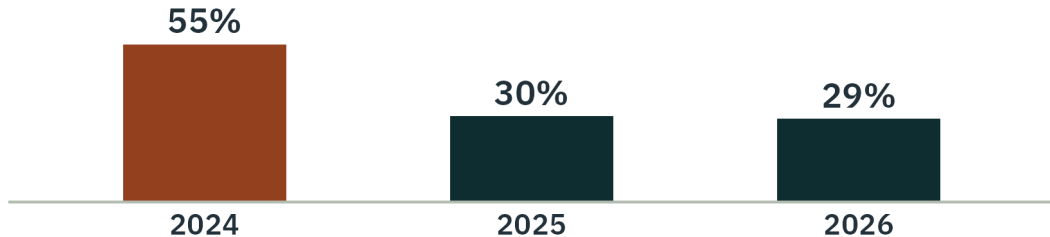
Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, monthly, May 2025 - July 2026. U.S. adults. Waves were quarterly before January 2026.

- 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 than 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



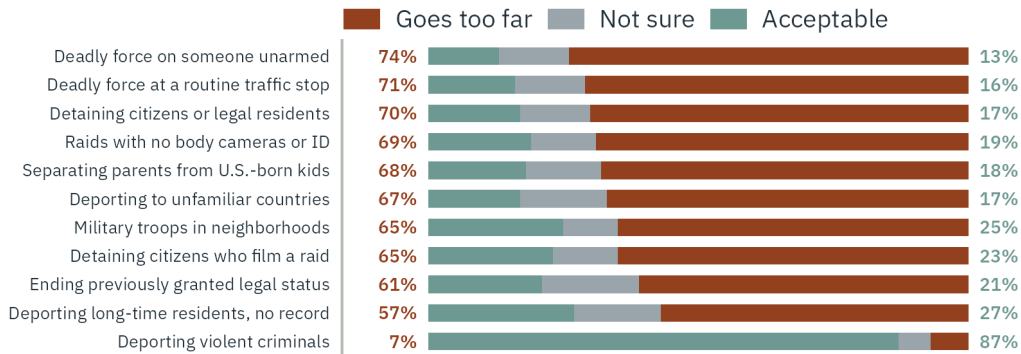
Source: Gallup, June waves. 2026: phone sample, N=1,001 adults, +/-4 (field Jun 1-15, 2026).

- “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.**

ICE tactics are largely unacceptable to a majority

Acceptable part of enforcement, or goes too far?

Eleven actions, ranked by the share saying each goes too far



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll #2026-218, Aug 7-11 2026, N=1,591 U.S. registered voters.

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



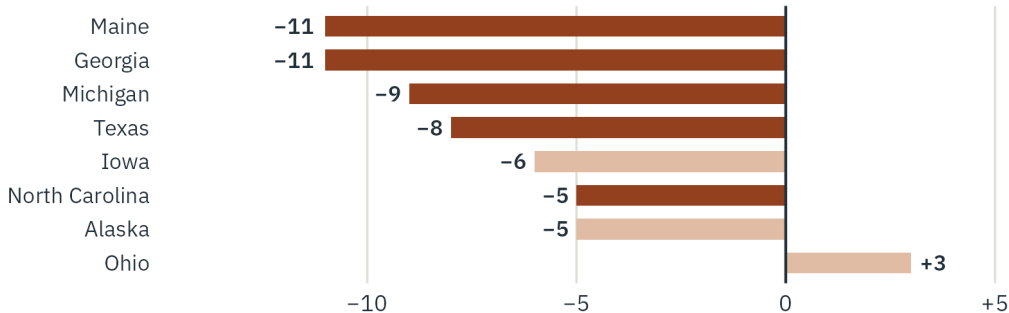
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of CBP data, Feb 2, 2026 (encounters count events, not individuals).

- 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).

Message testing experiments

What the data says voters want in 2026 and beyond

Testing rhetorical frames against Trump's own message

Net margin vs. Trump's "America First" line — forced choice, all six matchups seen by all respondents

Message	All voters	Independents
Citizenship after a background check — securing the border, deporting violent criminals	+12	+16
Deporting tax-paying, crime-free workers goes too far as prices and health costs rise	+9	+22
Separated families, deported farmworkers, raised grocery prices — agents killed U.S. citizens	+5	+23
Citizenship after a background check, so longtime residents can care for aging parents	+4	+10
Billions chase farmworkers and cooks while billionaires get a tax break, not lower costs	+2	+8
70% in detention have no criminal record — jailing farmworkers and grand-mothers	+1	+10

Source: Wave Polling and Research poll #2026-218, Aug 7-11 2026, N=1,591 U.S. registered voters.

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...”

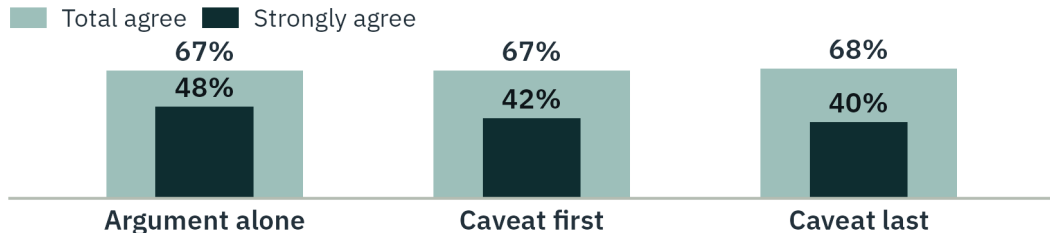
Last: “...we should focus on lowering costs and building an economy where hard-working Americans can get ahead — **while keeping our borders secure and deporting undocumented immigrants who commit violent crimes.**”

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



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

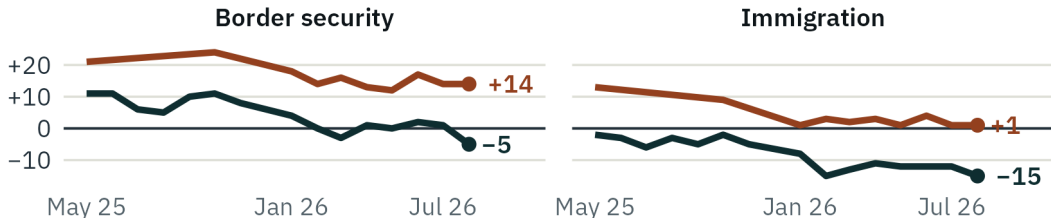
- The caveat **lifts Republicans 11–14 points**. But it **decreases strong approval** by marginalizing allies.

“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



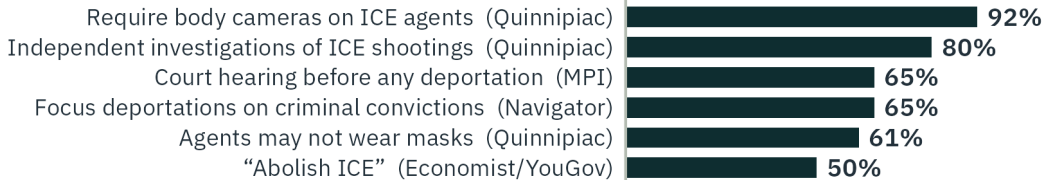
Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, monthly, May 2025 - July 2026. U.S. adults.

- **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.



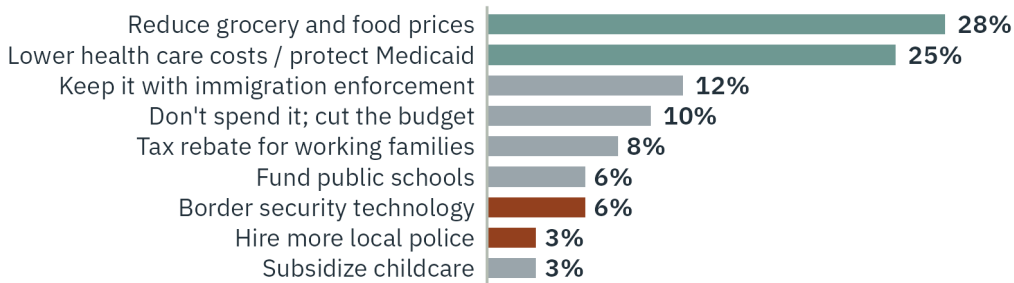
Sources: Quinnipiac Jan 29-Feb 2, 2026 (RV); Navigator Jan 29-Feb 1, 2026 (RV); Wave Polling and Research poll Feb 2026 (adults); Economist/YouGov Feb 27-Mar 2, 2026 (adults).

- **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

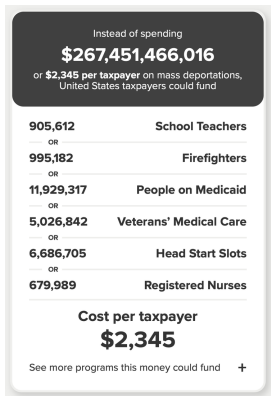
If funding were redirected away from immigration enforcement, what is the best use of it? Single choice.



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.



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Thank You

Questions?

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