



A Pathway to Citizenship for Immigrants is a Priority for Voters, and Attacks Calling Programs “Amnesty” Change Few Minds

To: Interested parties
 From: G. Elliott Morris, Wave Polling and Research
 Date: October 6, 2026

Many polls conducted over the last 18 months have asked about Americans’ support for mass deportations and other components of the Trump administration’s immigration policies. But few have dealt with two questions that will soon be pertinent to a new Congress, which is likely to be helmed by Democrats in the House and possibly the Senate: First, which immigration policies do voters think Congress should focus its energy on? And second, for immigration advocates who want to pass a new path to citizenship after 2027, what is the best argument in favor?

In new October polls of 1,000 registered voters nationally, 1,030 in Florida and 502 in Pennsylvania, Wave asked respondents to prioritize 14 different immigration policies. After deporting unauthorized immigrants who have been convicted of a violent crime, voters say Congress should focus on (1) Investigations for ICE agents who have killed immigrants and citizens on the streets, and of detention centers where people have died, and (2) passing citizenship for long-time immigrants who pay taxes and pass a background check.

Democrats and Republicans have proposed several bills in Congress that also approach long-term status for unauthorized immigrants in different ways. Our poll tests support for making these immigrants citizens, versus making them long-term legal migrants without full citizenship.

For advocates, this poll finds durable support for citizenship even under popular attacks from the right. In an August poll, Wave found that a citizenship message with conditions can beat generally “America First” language, including attacking a plan for citizenship as “amnesty.” In this survey we ran a survey experiment to see how voters who saw such attacks reacted differently in support for citizenship. Amnesty attacks do decrease support for citizenship among soft supporters and Republicans, but a rebuttal built on conditioning citizenship to those who qualify wins most of those voters back. Regardless, though, a majority of voters support a path to citizenship even if the plan is attacked as being “amnesty” with no counter-messaging.

1. Earned citizenship is a priority.

Asking whether voters support a policy only gets you so far: most of the policies we tested win majority support on their own, and nothing stops a respondent from backing all of them. To measure what voters want a new Congress to take up first, we used a MaxDiff exercise, which forces respondents to make trade-offs.

Each respondent saw the same 14 immigration policies four at a time and picked the highest and lowest priority in each set, seeing every policy twice. A policy’s “priority score” is the share of the time it was picked highest when it was shown, minus the share of the time it was picked lowest, so scores run from –100 to +100 and a policy picked at random would score zero. The chart below pairs each policy’s priority score with its net support, so you can see what is both popular and a priority.

Accountability for ICE is a top priority for the next Congress, across party lines. Investigating ICE killings and deaths in detention ranks second (+26), only behind deportations for convicted violent criminals. Investigations also have 77% support, including from 61% of Republicans, and Republicans score it as neutral rather than negative as a priority. Lower on the list, body cameras and visible identification for agents draw 80% support, including 72% of Republicans, and rank sixth.

Earned citizenship comes third. A path to citizenship for immigrants who have lived here at least ten years, pay taxes and pass a background check scores +21 on prioritization, and it’s the only immigration-expansion policy with a positive priority score among Democrats, independents and Republicans alike. On the other side of the spectrum, deporting every unauthorized immigrant regardless of how long they’ve been here (the stated policy of ICE and DHS) ranks 11/14 (–22), and constructing more detention facilities rank dead last (–36).

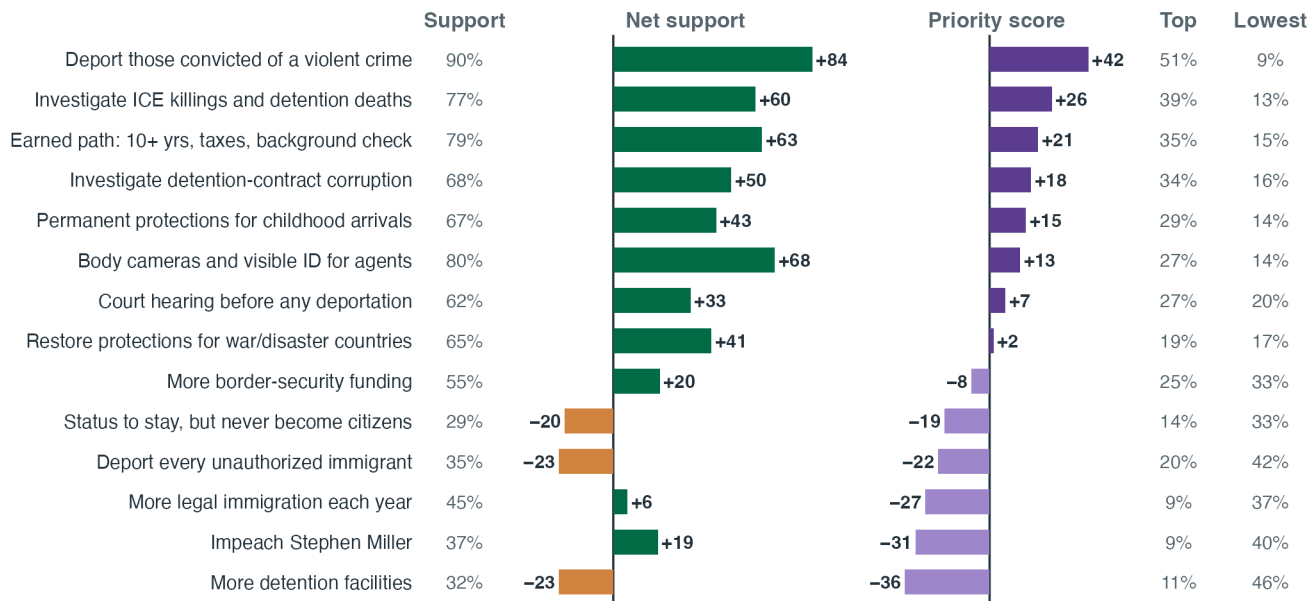
A full earned pathway to citizenship is both more popular and higher-priority than a competing proposal that would let long-time immigrants stay but bar them from citizenship. That is opposed 50–29, and no segment of the

population ranks it as a net priority.

Accountability for ICE and path to citizenship are 2nd and 3rd highest priorities for Congress

Net support: % support minus % oppose, asked separately (± 3 to 6 pts).

MaxDiff priority score: % of times a policy was picked as top priority when shown, minus % picked lowest (± 3 to 5 pts).



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, Sept. 30-Oct. 5, 2026, N=1,000 U.S. registered voters.

WAVE
POLLING AND RESEARCH

Several policies receive net support from the public but are not highly prioritized by voters. Impeaching Stephen Miller, for example, draws just 37% support, with 45% unsure, and it scores negative as a priority in every party group. Even Democrats rank it below policies that would expand immigration. Voters also support more border-security funding in theory, but do not make it priority; it ranks at -8.

2. Amnesty decreases but doesn't tip majority support for citizenship

We tested three different proposals for citizenship and found support at or above 70% support for most cases, nationally and in both Florida and Pennsylvania. These three cases include (a) a blanket program applying to all unauthorized immigrants who meet certain criteria, (b) a program just for temporary authorized migrants and green card holders, and (c) a program for immigrant workers. In each case, support for the program was around 70%, and responses to each question were within the margin of error of each other. Only 12% of voters nationally say there should be no path to citizenship at all.

A path for unauthorized immigrants who “meet certain requirements over a period of time” wins the support of 73% of voters. A version for people who have lived here at least ten years, pay taxes and pass a background check wins 79%, including 94% of Democrats, 73% of independents and 64% of Republicans.

But conditions do make support more intense, and they win over some skeptics. More than half of voters (52%) *strongly* support the ten-year path, compared with 44% for the generic plan, and the share is the same 52% in Florida and Pennsylvania. Among voters who oppose the generic plan, 35% support the conditional version, as do 61% of those who were unsure. Those converted opponents alone make up 8% of all registered voters.

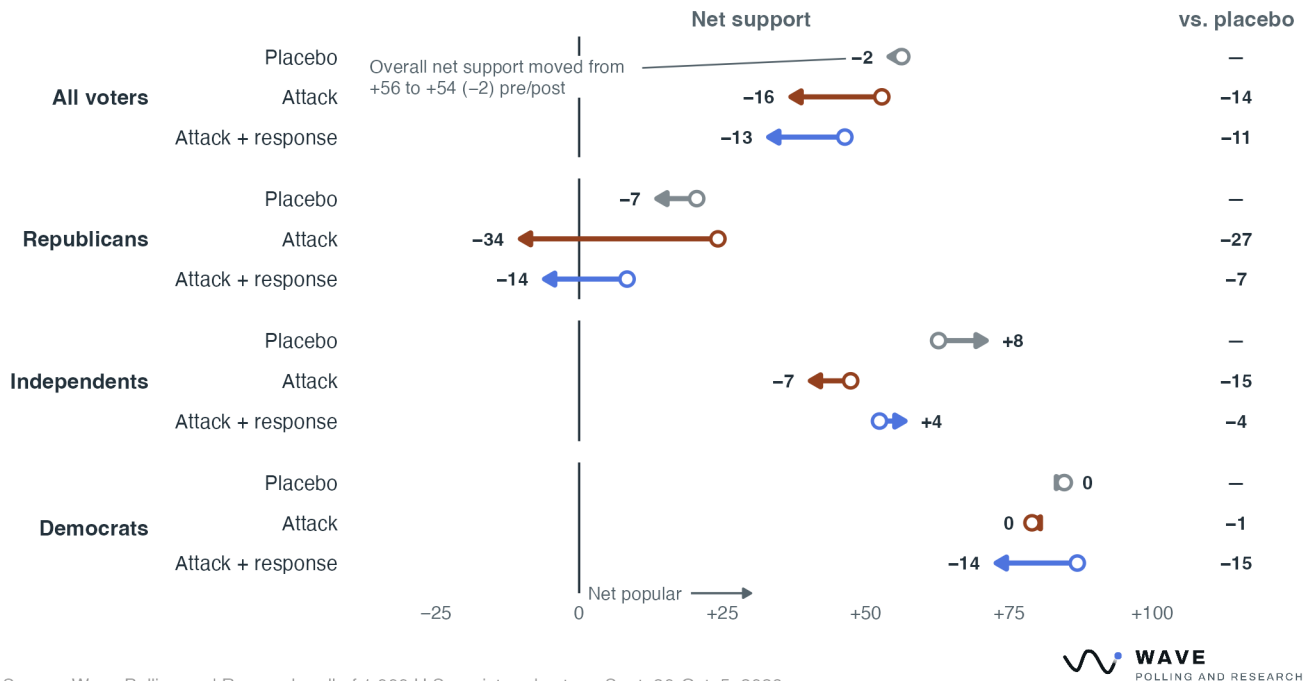
When we asked which requirements they would want, voters picked a background check (69%), steady employment (59%) and registering with the government (57%). Republicans add one more: 51% of them want applicants to wait until people who applied legally have been processed, compared with 32% of Democrats.

In a message test exposing a path to citizenship to attack from opponents, we randomly assigned each respondent to read one of three passages after an initial citizenship ask: a placebo on an unrelated topic, an attack, or the attack followed by a response. In the attack, opponents call the plan “blanket mass amnesty” that rewards lawbreakers and puts them ahead of legal immigrants. The response says the plan isn't amnesty but an earned pathway for people who pay taxes and pass a background check, with serious criminals deported. Then we asked about a path to citizenship again.

The attack does lower support, but modestly. In the national survey, it cuts net support for a path by 14 points relative to the placebo. Even so, 66% of voters still supported a path after reading it. And as the chart below shows, almost all of the movement comes from Republicans.

“Amnesty” attack only moves Republicans; most move back with conditions counterargument

Net support for a path to citizenship (% support minus % oppose) at the first ask (circle) and after reading each passage (arrow). Labels show each arm's change; effect = change minus the placebo arm's change.



Even with no attack, net support slipped 2 points between the two asks, so we measure each passage against the placebo. Measured that way, Democrats do not move after reading the attack, and independents are too few in each arm to read on their own. Republicans are a different story: after the attack, their net support for a path fell 34 points, from +24 to -10, compared with a 7-point drop among Republicans who read the placebo. Soft supporters, who only somewhat supported a path at first, moved too: their net support at the second ask was +33 after the attack, compared with +74 after the placebo.

The messaging counter-argument wins most of those Republicans back. Among Republicans, the response shrinks the attack's effect from 27 points to 7, and 46% of them support a path after reading the attack and the response, compared with 42% after the attack alone. Across all voters, those who read the attack and then the response end up 11 points below the placebo, compared with 14 for the attack alone, and 64% still support a path. The difference between the two arms is inside the margin of error, so we read the recovery among Republicans as strong but not settled. The response we tested was also long, and a tighter version may do even better.

3. Immigration backlash is not fading

Opinion on immigration enforcement hasn't moved much since early this year, when it plunged against incidents of violent domestic troop deployments across the country. Trump's net approval on deportations and immigration enforcement is -14 among registered voters, statistically unchanged from -12 in August.

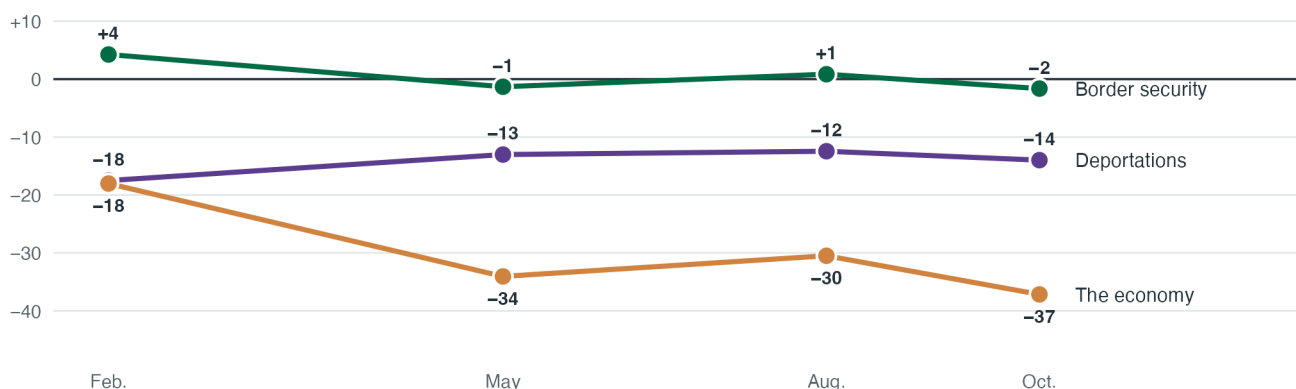
Additionally, opinion toward a dozen different enforcement practices is stable compared to the August reading. A majority of voters still say deporting long-time residents with no criminal record goes too far (56%), and even more say the same about sending troops into neighborhoods (67%) and detaining U.S. citizens in raids (71%).

Across all four of our polls this year, Trump's net approval on deportations has stayed between -12 and -18 and his rating on border security has hovered near zero, while his economy rating has sunk to -37. In every wave, about two-thirds of voters have said the administration is "focusing too much on deportations and not focusing enough on fixing the economy, inflation, and the rising cost of living": 69% in February and 68% in May among adults, and 63% in August and 64% now among registered voters. The backlash against the administration's approach is not a passing reaction; it has been the baseline all year.

Trump's immigration ratings have barely moved all year; his economy rating has sunk

Net approval (% approve minus % disapprove) of the Trump administration's handling of each issue.

Feb. and May polls are of U.S. adults; Aug. and Oct., registered voters. Feb. asked about "jobs and the economy."



Source: Wave Polling and Research national polls, Feb. 6-10, May 18-20, Aug. 7-11 and Sept. 30-Oct. 5, 2026.

WAVE
POLLING AND RESEARCH

Today 74% agree that unauthorized immigrants who commit a crime should be deported, but that hard-working unauthorized immigrant workers need a path to legal status. Voters want violent criminals deported and workers legalized.

Since 2025, they have turned against enforcement that sweeps up workers, families and citizens, not enforcement itself.

4. Opinions in Florida and Pennsylvania mirror the nation as a whole

We also compared simultaneous surveys in Pennsylvania and Florida with our numbers on the nation on 77 measures, and found many of the same results. On the questions that matter most for advocates, both states look like the country. Support for earned citizenship runs about 70–75%, accountability ranks near the top of the priority list, and the effect of the “amnesty” attack is statistically the same as it is nationally.

Methods

Wave Polling and Research surveyed 1,000 registered voters nationally, 1,030 in Florida and 502 in Pennsylvania, Sept. 30–Oct. 5, 2026. Verasight conducted the fieldwork online. Respondents came from the Verasight Community panel, with additional SMS-to-web recruitment for hard-to-reach groups in Florida and Pennsylvania, and all were matched to the voter file as registered voters. Each survey is weighted separately to registered-voter benchmarks: age, race/ethnicity, sex, household income, education and white/non-white race by education from the Census Bureau’s November 2024 Current Population Survey (with its income distribution adjusted to self-reported family income); 2024 presidential vote from certified results; and local Trump vote share by zip code. The national survey is also weighted by Census region and to leaned party identification from Pew’s 2026 National Public Opinion Reference Survey. Margins of sampling error, including the design effect of weighting, are ± 3.4 points nationally, ± 4.4 in Florida and ± 5.6 in Pennsylvania. Experimental effects compare each arm’s change in support between the two asks with the placebo arm’s change, and are reported from the national survey.

Questions? Email contact@wavepolling.com.