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After the Midterms, Voters Want Citizenship, Narrower Deportations and Oversight of ICE

To Interested parties
From G. Elliott Morris, CEO of Wave Polling and Research
Date November 12, 2026

A new Wave Polling and Research poll of 1,000 registered voters, conducted Nov. 5–10, offers the first post-election look at voters' demands for the new Democratic majority in Congress on immigration and deportations. The survey reveals intense appetite for accountability in how ICE conducted deportation operations and immigration enforcement since Donald Trump's presidency began in January 2025, and broad disapproval of the status quo on immigrant detention, especially regarding harsh policies including indefinite detention and family separation.

The poll also reveals a sharp change in the images that come to Americans' minds when they think about immigration policy. When voters think about immigration today, they picture ICE, not the border Much of the conversation about immigration in Washington still runs on frames that no longer match how voters think about immigration or immigrants. Voters today want a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants who have lived here for years, deportations significantly curtailed, and accountability for a detention system a majority of the country describes as inhumane and abusive.

A supermajority of voters favor an earned path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants, and believe Donald Trump is focusing too much on deportations.

Notably, this is a stable finding in our polling, not a blip. Wave has asked several tracking questions in each of five national polls since February. The backlash against the deportation push was visible in our first poll this year, and it has held or grown ever since.

- Trump's net approval on deportations and immigration enforcement has been negative in every poll, between −12 and −18. It's −16 now. His rating on border security has stayed within four points of even all year. Voters have separated the border, where they're split, from deportations, which they reject.
- In every poll, between 63% and 69% have agreed that the Trump administration is "focusing too much on deportations and not focusing enough on fixing the economy, inflation, and the rising cost of living."
- On all six enforcement tactics we have tracked since May, the share saying each "goes too far" has gone up, by 2 to 4 points (section 2).

Opinion settled against mass deportation months before the election, and the election provided Democrats new majorities to act on voters' demands. That gives advocates and the new Congress a durable base to organize a solution.

Voters turned against the deportation push early in 2026, and they haven't come back

Weighted results from five Wave national polls. Feb. and May are U.S. adults; Aug., Oct. and Nov. are registered voters.



Source: Wave Polling and Research national polls, Feb. 6-10 (N=1,500), May 18-20 (N=2,000), Aug. 7-11 (N=1,591), Sept. 30-Oct. 5 (N=1,000) and Nov. 5-10, 2026 (N=1,000).

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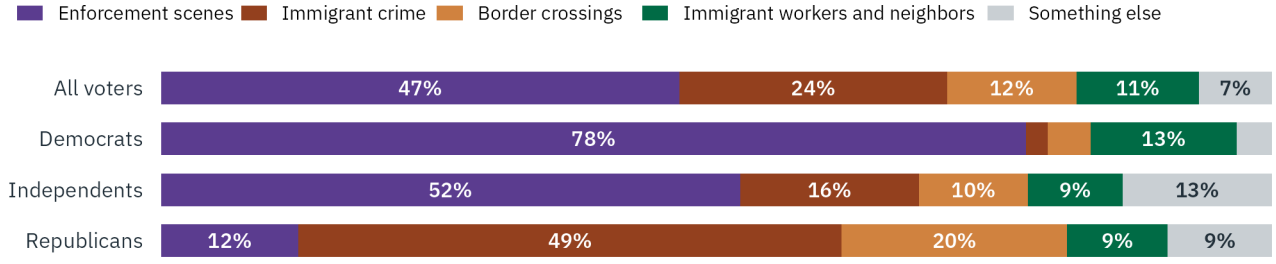
1 “Immigration” now means enforcement, not the border

Asked what comes to mind when they think about immigration today, 47% of voters name an enforcement image: masked agents making arrests (21%), ICE separating families (12%), agents shooting people at traffic stops (10%), deaths in detention (3%) or troops in neighborhoods (1%). Only 12% picture people crossing the border. Among independents, it’s 52% enforcement and 10% border.

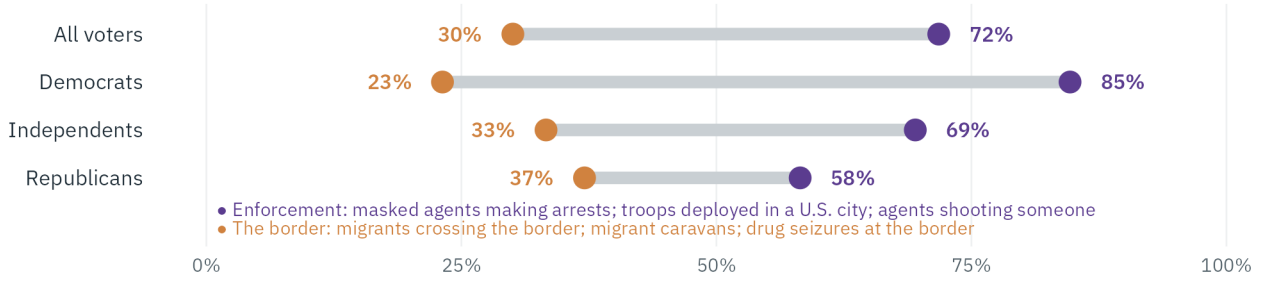
That matches what voters have been seeing. Nearly three in four (72%) have seen at least some news or social media about enforcement — masked agents, troops in cities, agents shooting someone. Only 30% have seen that much about the border, and 42% have seen nothing about it at all. Even among Republicans, it’s 58% enforcement and 37% border.

When voters think about immigration, they picture enforcement, not the border

What voters picture when they think about immigration today (nine images, grouped)



Have seen "a lot" or "some" of each in the news or on social media in the past few months



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, Nov. 5-10, 2026, N=1,000 U.S. registered voters. Party includes leaners.

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The border message Republicans ran on in 2024 doesn’t carry a majority today. Asked to choose between two statements, 54% pick “Donald Trump’s cruel immigration enforcement policies are unacceptable and a threat to the economy,” and 46% pick “Joe Biden screwed up and let in too many asylum seekers through the U.S.-Mexico border.” Independents lean the same way, 58% to 42%.

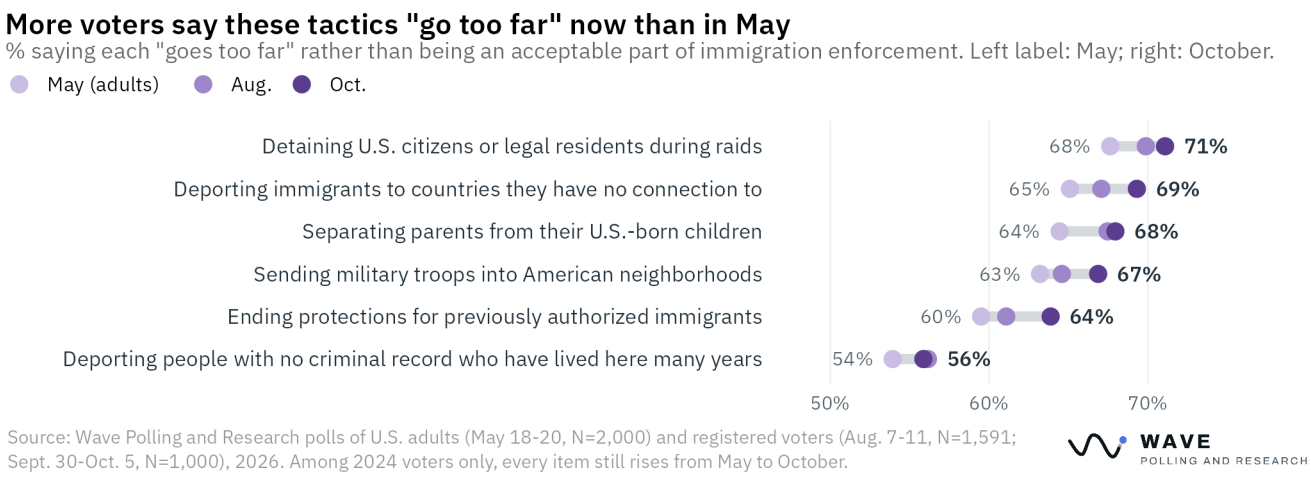
And the enforcement push is costing Republicans. Sixty-four percent of voters agree that the administration is "focusing too much on deportations" instead of the economy, including 73% of independents and 27% of Republicans. Trump's 2024 voters who didn't vote Republican for the House this year look very different from those who did. Among these defectors, 68% want deportations significantly curtailed, compared with 30% of Trump voters who stayed Republican, and 52% say Trump focused too much on deportations, compared with 20% (defectors: n = 96, margin of error about ±11).

> **Takeaway:** The issue is no longer about the border. It's about what ICE is doing in American cities, and backing that is not safe ground.

2 Voters want deportations significantly curtailed

Most voters (57%) disapprove of how the Trump administration is handling deportations and immigration enforcement, and 41% approve; independents disapprove by 63%. Given a choice between two approaches, 70% would narrow deportations and "offer a path to citizenship for those who work and pay taxes," against 30% who would deport everyone regardless of how long they've lived here. Even 39% of Republicans pick the narrower option. And by 73% to 18%, voters say people in immigration detention should get a hearing before a judge who can decide whether to release them, rather than being held without one. Republicans agree, 51% to 35%.

And opinion has only moved one way. The share of voters saying each of six enforcement tactics "goes too far" has risen on every one since May. (The May poll was of all adults, and each change is small, but they all point the same direction.)

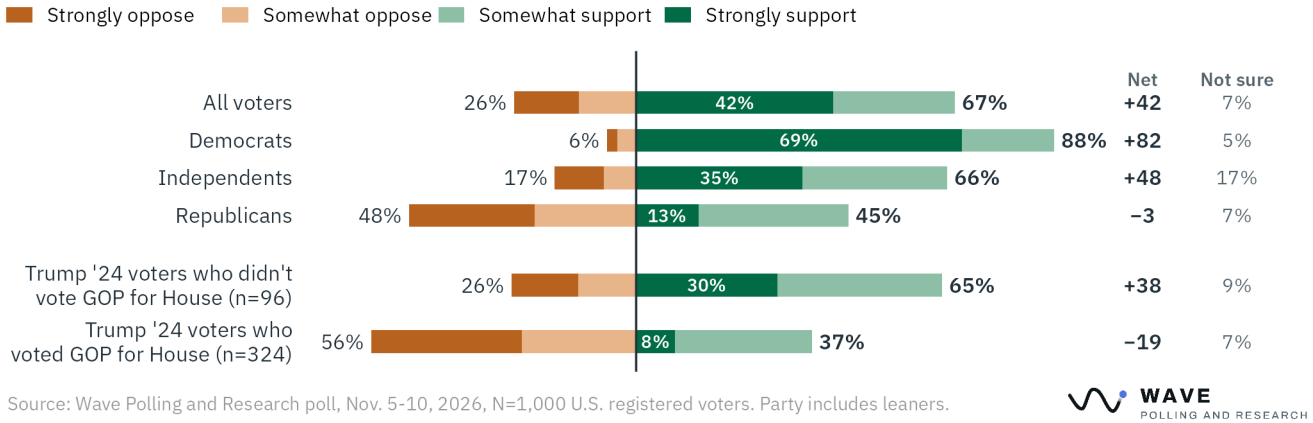


3 A path to citizenship is the majority position, and voters want it done soon

Two-thirds of voters (67%) support "a broad plan that would allow longtime unauthorized immigrants who are already here the chance to become U.S. citizens," and 26% oppose it. That includes 66% of independents, and Republicans are split, 45% for and 48% against.

Two in three voters back a path to citizenship; Republicans are split

"Do you support or oppose a broad plan that would allow longtime unauthorized immigrants who are already here the chance to become U.S. citizens?"



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, Nov. 5-10, 2026, N=1,000 U.S. registered voters. Party includes leaners.

Voters also want Congress to move. Almost half (46%) want it to act right away, as one of its first priorities in 2027, including 21% who say so even if the president would veto it. Sixty-three percent want action within two years. Only 18% say Congress should never pass a path to citizenship, and 9% say it should wait until after the 2028 election.

The most persuasive case is that immigrants would earn it. Registering with the government, passing a background check and paying taxes is a convincing reason to support a path for 75% of voters. It's also the only argument we tested that a majority (52%) of voters who don't already support a path find convincing. The community-safety argument is next, at 70% overall. Arguments about families, ICE and lost jobs convince most voters but fewer than a third of skeptics, so they're better for rallying supporters than for persuading.

Argument for a path to citizenship	All voters	Don't yet support
Earn it over years: register, pass a background check, pay taxes	75%	52%
Communities are safer: background checks; police focus on dangerous criminals	70%	34%
Lived here for years, raising American kids; deporting them tears families apart	66%	27%
Deporting millions isn't realistic; earned citizenship is the practical solution	62%	21%
Corporations profit from the shadow economy; citizenship ends the exploitation	58%	30%
ICE is out of control; citizenship is the only lasting protection	57%	17%
Mass deportation is costing American workers their jobs	53%	19%

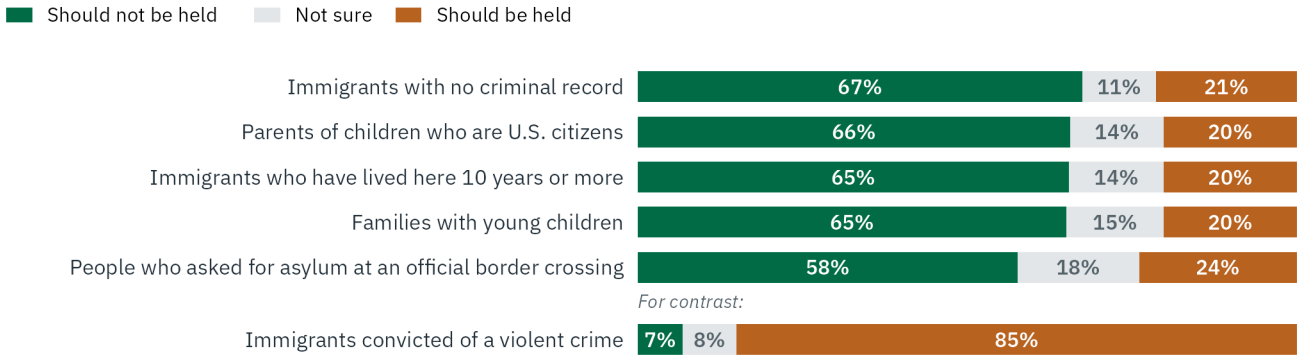
% calling each a very or somewhat convincing reason to support a path to citizenship. "Don't yet support": the 32% who oppose a path or are not sure (n = 317).

4 Oversight of detention has consensus support

Voters are clear about whom they want detained and whom they don't. Immigrants convicted of a violent crime should be held while their cases are decided, say 85%. Roughly two-thirds say immigrants with no criminal record, parents of U.S.-citizen children, people who have lived here ten years or more, and families with young children should not be.

Voters oppose most immigrant detentions

"While their immigration cases are being decided, should each of the following people be held in immigration detention, or not?"



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, Nov. 5-10, 2026, N=1,000 U.S. registered voters.

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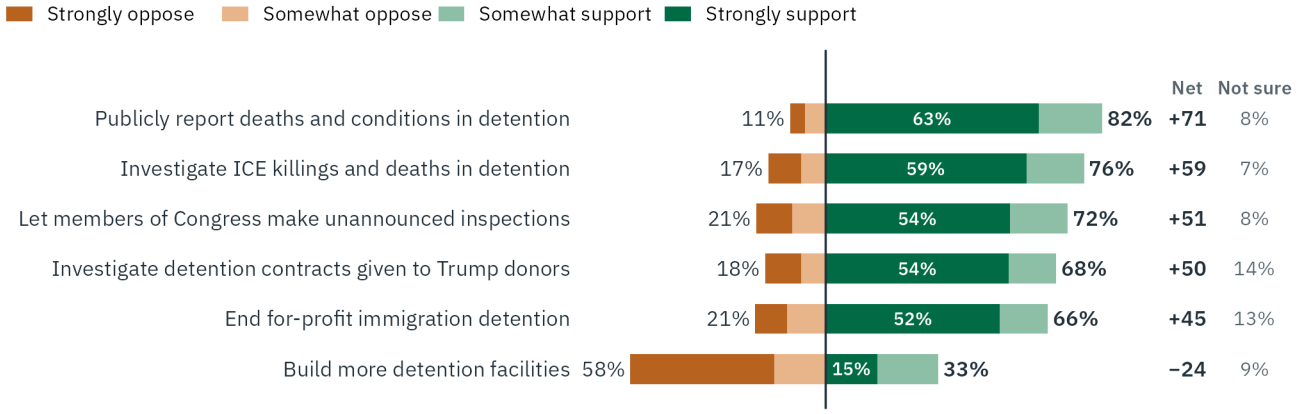
That gives members an easy contrast between what voters want and what ICE is doing now: detaining parents of citizen children, longtime residents, families, and those without criminal records.

Detention is the administration's weakest ground. Building more detention facilities loses, 33% to 58%, and voters oppose keeping large numbers of immigrants in detention while their cases are decided, 60% to 32%. Most (64%) say immigrants who aren't a flight risk and attend their hearings shouldn't be detained at all; 24% want the government to build more ICE detention centers to hold them. The same share, 64%, agree that more detention centers are a waste of taxpayer dollars, and 71% don't want one built in their own community, including 54% of Republicans. More than three in four (77%) reject holding people in detention indefinitely, including 62% of Republicans. Half of voters say detained immigrants are being treated abusively, and 46% believe deaths in detention have gone up over the past two years; just 12% think they've gone down.

Oversight is the lowest-risk way for members to be aggressive. Each item below is a concrete action that a large majority supports: publicly reporting deaths and conditions in detention (82% support, 11% oppose), investigating ICE killings and deaths in detention (76% to 17%), unannounced congressional inspections of detention centers (72% to 21%), investigating detention contracts given to Trump donors (68% to 18%) and ending for-profit detention (66% to 21%).

Detention oversight wins big majorities; more detention loses

Support for each policy, asked separately (oppose to the left, support to the right); sorted by net support



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, Nov. 5-10, 2026, N=1,000 U.S. registered voters. Net = % support minus % oppose.

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5 Only the MAGA base is on the other side

Support for these measures isn't confined to the left. We split Republicans (including leaners) into two groups. MAGA Republicans, 29% of voters, voted for Trump in 2024 and for the Republican House candidate in 2026, and approve of Trump's handling of immigration. Non-MAGA Republicans, 16% of voters, are all other Republicans. Majorities of non-MAGA Republicans back every measure below, and majorities of even MAGA Republicans back public reporting of detention deaths, investigations of ICE killings and unannounced inspections.

Even non-MAGA Republicans oppose mass deportations, support and prioritize citizenship and accountability

% of each group giving the answer shown. The rest oppose, disagree or are not sure.

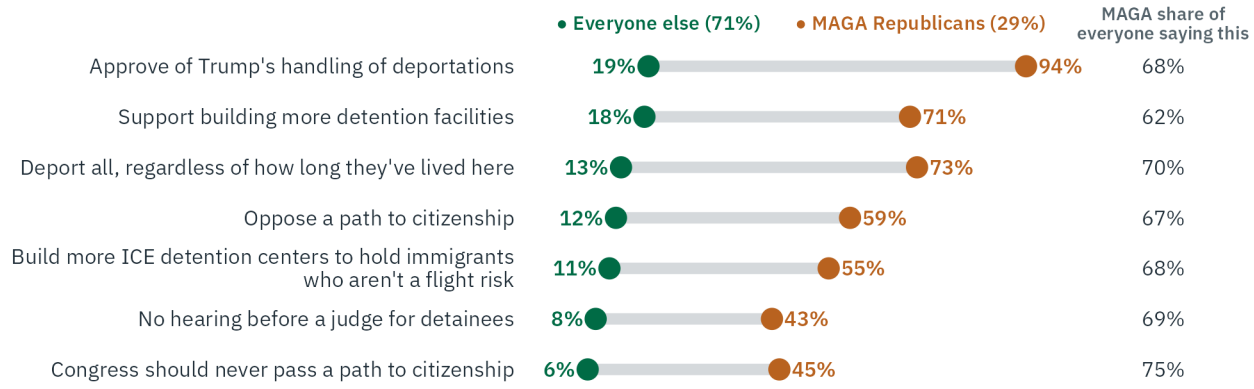
	All voters n=1,000	Not Republicans (55% of voters) n=577	Non-MAGA Republicans (16% of voters) n=154	MAGA Republicans (29% of voters) n=269
Support a path to citizenship	67%	86%	62%	36%
Congress should act within two years	63%	79%	58%	35%
"Earn it" is a convincing argument	75%	81%	74%	64%
Deport only those convicted of a violent crime	70%	95%	61%	27%
Hearing before a judge for detainees	73%	91%	62%	44%
Publicly report deaths and conditions in detention	82%	89%	74%	72%
Investigate ICE killings and deaths in detention	76%	88%	68%	59%
Unannounced congressional inspections	72%	82%	66%	55%
Investigate detention contracts given to Trump donors	68%	83%	59%	46%
End for-profit detention	66%	81%	57%	42%

Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, Nov. 5-10, 2026, N=1,000 U.S. registered voters. Party includes leaners. Not Republicans: Democrats and independents. MAGA Republicans: voted Trump in 2024 and GOP for House in 2026, approve of Trump on immigration. Non-MAGA Republicans: all other Republicans (margin of error about ±8.5).

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Turn it around, and the MAGA base is nearly alone. MAGA Republicans make up 29% of voters but 62% to 75% of the voters on the other side of each of these questions. Among everyone else, the other 71% of the electorate, no more than one in five takes the MAGA side on any of them. (The MAGA group is defined partly by approving of Trump on immigration, so its members siding with him is expected; how few others join them is the finding.)

Outside the MAGA base, few voters take the MAGA side
% of each group taking the position shown



Source: Wave Polling and Research poll, Nov. 5-10, 2026, N=1,000 U.S. registered voters.

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Talk interior enforcement rather than border to reach independents and voters Republicans lost. Enforcement overreach mattered to more voters than the border did: 51% say "immigration enforcement and deportations overreach" mattered a great deal to their vote for Congress, against 41% for border security, and among independents it was 42% to 29%. The Trump voters who didn't back Republicans for the House this year favor significantly curtailed deportations by more than two to one (section 1). Meanwhile, a narrower approach costs little even with Trump's own voters. Only 9% of them say focusing deportations on serious criminals would have made them less likely to vote Republican.

Don't give Trump an out. Voters side with the Democratic position on nearly every question in this poll, but they haven't yet given Democrats credit for it. Asked which party's position they're more supportive of, they split on immigration (42% Democrats, 43% Republicans) and on deportations (40% to 43%), compared with a 48% to 30% Democratic edge on the cost of living. That gap is the opening. Democrats can claim an issue on which voters already agree with them by building on that support, not by meeting the administration halfway on proposals, like more detention, that only its base wants.

Methods

Wave Polling and Research poll of 1,000 registered voters, Nov. 5–10, 2026, national survey. Trend comparisons use Wave's earlier national polls of U.S. adults (Feb. 6–10, N=1,500; May 18–20, N=2,000) and registered voters (Aug. 7–11, N=1,591; Sept. 30–Oct. 5, N=1,000).

Questions? Email contact@wavepolling.com.