How to Talk about Universal Representation and ICE Enforcement

Message Analysis for Advocates and Allies in California

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) commissioned YouGov to conduct a poll and message testing around the topics of universal representation and immigration enforcement. The poll surveyed 606 registered voters in California and was conducted from June 26 to July 2, 2026. Vera analyzed the results of the message testing to better understand how to most effectively communicate to different audiences about the right to government-funded counsel for all people facing deportation in immigration court ("universal representation") and about U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) enforcement and detention, including in response to opposition messaging.

While not all messages that were tested are presented here, this analysis document distills the best messages to use when speaking about universal representation or ICE enforcement/detention, and how and when to use them for different audiences including 1) the general public, 2) immigrant advocates and allies, and 3) voters concerned about the economy getting worse. It also lists some messages that were found polarizing and less effective for the general public, specifically. In the tables below:

- **Green messages** were the most effective among messages presented with the general public (and potentially resonated with immigrant advocates and allies or voters concerned about the economy specifically as well);
- **Yellow messages** did not resonate as well as other messages with the general public, but were the most effective with immigrant advocates and allies and/or voters concerned about the economy as sub-groups;
- **Red messages** were less effective than other messages and potentially polarizing for the general public in response to the specific statement or context laid out.

How to speak generally about why universal representation is important:

Q: *"Why support universal representation for people facing deportation?"*	**Resonates with:** The general public	Immigrant advocates and allies	Voters concerned about the economy	**Polarizing & less effective for general public**
A: Due Process: "Due process is a fundamental American right enshrined in the Constitution for everyone on U.S. soil, including immigrants. But there is no due process when people are forced to defend their rights in a complex legal system that they can't understand. Having a lawyer in immigration court helps ensure that everyone has the opportunity to understand their rights, defend their freedom, and have their fair day in court."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Protecting Democracy: "The Constitution requires due process rights for all people in the United States, regardless of where they were born. When we support constitutional protections for the vulnerable, like by providing representation for people in immigration court who cannot afford a lawyer, we help ensure the strength of our democracy for everyone."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Fairness and Dignity: "Everyone deserves to be treated with fairness and dignity. Many people facing deportation don't know their rights or how the complex legal process works. Helping people understand their rights by providing them with legal representation is the fair thing to do and ensures we respect human dignity."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Countering Discrimination: Too often, people end up in immigration court because of racial profiling by ICE or the police. With so much discrimination against people because of their race or skin color, we should at least make sure they have a lawyer to protect their rights."				✓
A: Disrupting Businesses: "Mass deportation policies disrupt local business and entire industries that rely on immigrants to keep them afloat. By helping people with valid legal claims remain in the United States, universal representation can help keep our economy and communities together and strong."				✓

How to respond to people wary about prioritizing investment in immigration legal services:

Opposition Statement: *"It is unfair to make American taxpayers cover legal fees for people who are in this country illegally. At a time when our communities are struggling and there are not enough resources to go around, helping Americans should be the real priority."*	**Resonates with:** The general public	Immigrant advocates and allies	Voters concerned about the economy	**Polarizing & less effective for general public**

A: Protecting Democracy: "The Constitution requires due process rights for all people in the United States,regardless of where they were born. When we support constitutional protections for the vulnerable, like by providing representation for people in immigration court who cannot afford a lawyer, we help ensure the strength of our democracy for everyone."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Comparative Cost of Enforcement: "Universal representation cost a fraction of what the government is already spending on immigration enforcement and detention. Investing in universal representation promotes due process and upholds our democratic values."	✓	✓		
A: Prevent Wrongful Deportation / Family Separation: "No child should ever be faced with returning home from school to find that their parent is gone. Universal representation helps keep families together by helping parents to defend their lawful right to stay in the U.S and preventing wrongful deportation."		✓		
A: Critical Workers: "Immigrants are critical to ensuring local businesses and entire industries have the workers they need to fill jobs. Helping people facing deportation allows more people with a legal right to remain in their community and on the job, keeping the economy running smoothly."				✓
A: Affordability: "At a time when prices of everyday goods are already rising, we cannot afford to further disrupt businesses by deporting the workers that they depend on. Helping people facing deportation allows more people with a legal right to remain in their community and on the job, which can help keep the prices from rising more."				✓
A: U.S. Families (Without Mentioning U.S. Citizenship): "Many people in immigration court have spouses and children* living in the United States. Providing lawyers to people in immigration court who cannot afford them would prevent wrongful deportation and benefit American families who are already struggling financially." **(*Note: this message fared substantially better when mentioning that many spouses and children of immigrants in the United States are U.S. citizens.)**				✓

How to respond when others say people facing deportation "broke the law":				
Opposition Statement: *"But if you came here 'illegally', you have to leave. The courts would find deportation necessary with or without legal counsel, and families would have been separated regardless, because of their own actions."*	**Resonates with:**			**Polarizing & less effective for general public**
	The general public	**Immigrant advocates and allies**	**Voters concerned about the economy**	
A: Devastating for Families / Prevent Wrongful Deportation: "The consequences of deportation are devastating to families. Providing legal counsel to these families helps them understand their legal	✓	✓	✓	

options and can prevent wrongful deportation, increasing their chances of staying together."				
A: Changed System: "The same legal pathways and opportunities to come or remain to the United States that our grandparents and great grandparents took no longer exist. Where people are trying to build a life in the United States, we should ensure they have a lawyer by their side to know what pathways do exist and defend their freedom."		✓	✓	
A: Political Theater: "Scapegoating and targeting our immigrant neighbors is just a way for politicians to divide us and distract from addressing the real issues facing Americans."				✓

How to respond when others say the government should not pay for representation for people with criminal justice system contact:				
Opposition Statement: *"Immigrants convicted of a crime are dangerous for our communities and have given up their right to stay here. We should not be paying for lawyers for people who cannot afford one in immigration court if they have been convicted of a crime."*	**Resonates with:**			**Polarizing & less effective for general public**
	The general public	**Immigrant advocates and allies**	**Voters concerned about the economy**	
A: Comparison to Criminal Court: "Due process ensures everyone, citizens and non-citizens alike, the right to a fair hearing. In criminal courts, this means that people have the right to a government-funded attorney if they cannot afford one. It should mean the same for those in immigration courts, where the consequences can be just as severe."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Over-policing: "Some immigrants who have lived in the U.S. a long time—including permanent residents with green cards—end up in immigration court due to overpolicing in poor communities and racial bias in the criminal justice system. Providing attorneys to everyone in immigration court who cannot afford one, promotes due process and ensures the government follows fair procedures before it deports someone."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Double Punishment: People with past criminal convictions still have the right to due process. It is unjust to subject a person to a double punishment, like excluding them from legal assistance, after they have already served their time for past criminal convictions.				✓
A: Victims: Many people with criminal convictions are victims of crime themselves, including survivors of domestic violence. People deserve a fair day in court to present all the facts of their case. A conviction alone should not exclude them from access to legal representation in immigration court.				✓

How to respond when people defend government funding for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE):				
Opposition Statement: *"With all the immigration issues we're having now, it is more important than ever that ICE has the funding its leaders say they need to keep us safe. This is the exact wrong time to be cutting ICE's budget - we need to do what it takes to enforce our laws and protect our border and streets from criminals. Cutting ICE now only increases the risk of more crime against American citizens."*	**Resonates with:**			**Polarizing & less effective for general public**
	The general public	**Immigrant advocates and allies**	**Voters concerned about the economy**	
A: Lack of Oversight and Accountability: "ICE needs to be reined in and follow the law. There have been too many incidents of violence between ICE agents and innocent Americans - including the killing of U.S. citizens - for this agency to be blindly entrusted with record-breaking budgets. Taxpayers should not keep footing the bill for an agency that does not follow the law."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Waste of Government Funds: "Congress has recently given ICE a record-breaking $170 billion, far above its past budgets and far more than can be justified for this agency. As American families are struggling with the rising cost of living, using taxpayer dollars to write a blank check to ICE is an irresponsible waste of valuable resources."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Private Profit: "The big business of ICE enforcement pours billions of taxpayer dollars into private prisons and big tech companies that profit off detention and surveillance. Instead, we should prioritize funding things that are proven to create safe communities and improve Americans' quality of life, like good schools, healthcare, and making housing affordable."	✓	✓	✓	
A: Not Making Us Safer: "Rather than enforcing immigration laws and keeping us safe, ICE is patrolling our streets, stoking fear, and harassing and intimidating innocent people, without making us any safer."		✓		

How to respond when people say immigration detention is necessary for public safety and to ensure people show up in court:				
Opposition Statement: *"This is necessary to keep illegal immigrants off our streets. Confining people in detention centers guarantees people show up to immigration court and allows the government to efficiently facilitate deportations. Concerns about poor conditions in detention facilities are overblown or falsified."*	**Resonates with:**			**Polarizing & less effective for general public**
	The general public	**Black voters**	**Voters concerned about the economy**	

A: Reinvest In Communities: "Immigration detention costs taxpayers billions of dollars each year, even though less expensive alternatives have proven effective at helping people navigate the immigration court process and appear for their hearings. Rather than spending large sums to detain people, those resources could be invested in community needs, public services, and programs that support fair and efficient immigration proceedings."				
A: No Public Safety Function: "If immigration detention were really about public safety, ICE wouldn't be locking up preschoolers. Most people in immigration detention are being held for civil immigration proceedings, not because they have been convicted of a violent crime. Detaining people who pose little or no threat to public safety does not make communities safer."				
A: Oversight Transparency: "The government has rapidly expanded detention while gutting oversight mechanisms and routinely denying members of Congress access to detention. With no transparency or oversight, ICE takes no responsibility for its actions or their consequences, and cannot be entrusted with the lives and safety of people in its custody."				
A: Economic Harm: "Immigration detention harms local businesses and economies. When workers are suddenly detained, employers lose experienced staff, productivity declines, and businesses face increased costs to recruit and train replacements."				

Source: YouGov June/July 2026 California poll commissioned by Vera

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Vera works to end mass incarceration, protect immigrants' rights, ensure dignity for people behind bars, and build safe, thriving communities.