

California Voters Support the Right to an Attorney in Immigration Court and Express Concerns about ICE

A summer 2026 YouGov poll, commissioned by the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), found a majority of California voters express concerns about U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and support the government providing lawyers to people facing deportation in immigration court who cannot afford their own, or “universal representation.”

The survey, fielded from June 26 to July 2, 2026, sampled 606 U.S. registered voters in California. It included measures of support for universal representation in the U.S. immigration system, sentiments towards ICE, and other issues.

Key Takeaways

- Four in five California voters (79 percent) support universal representation, as well as majorities of Democrats (96 percent), Independents (68 percent), and Republicans (56 percent) in the state.
- The cost of living/inflation and jobs and the economy—not unauthorized immigration—are the top issues California voters, and U.S. voters generally, believe are facing the United States today. Three in five California voters (62 percent) see immigrants as valuable, as opposed to harmful, to the economy.
- California voters expressed even higher concerns about ICE than the U.S. electorate overall. Roughly three in five California voters say that ICE’s use of force has been excessive (64 percent), and that they have little to no confidence in ICE (58 percent).
- Nearly two in three California voters (65 percent) see mandatory detention policies as harmful rather than justified, and nearly three in five California voters say that fewer people should be detained by ICE (58 percent).
- Three in five California voters (59 percent)—slightly less than U.S. voters generally—are not aware that the government provides attorneys to people who cannot afford one in criminal court, but not immigration court.

Four in five California voters support universal representation.

Figure 1 shows at initial ask, 77 percent of the overall U.S. electorate—including 79 percent of California voters—say they support providing a government-funded attorney for those who cannot afford one, including in immigration court. Broken down by political party, 56 percent of Republicans respondents, 68 percent of Independents, and 96 percent of Democrats in the state expressed support.

Figure 1

Support for Universal Representation



Source: YouGov July 2026 survey commissioned by Vera.

Economic matters, not unauthorized immigration, are the top issues California voters—and voters generally—believe are facing the United States today.

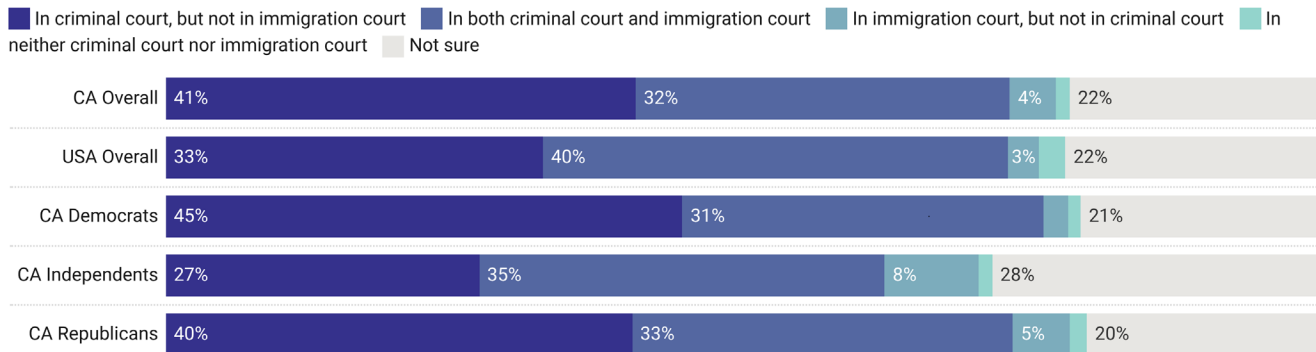
Respondents were asked, “What are the top issues facing the United States today?” and could choose up to five responses among a battery of issue options. “Unauthorized immigration” did not fall among the top five issue areas selected by California voters, nor voters generally. The top issue facing the United States expressed by 62 percent of California voters was “cost of living/inflation,” followed by “jobs and the economy” (43 percent); “healthcare policy, including Medicare and Medicaid” (40 percent); “presidential power and authority” (37 percent); and “war and other international military conflicts” (29 percent). These were the same top five issues of concern expressed by the national electorate overall.

Two in three California voters—like U.S. voters generally—are not aware that people in criminal court have the right to a government-funded attorney if they cannot afford one, but people in immigration court do not.

Figure 2 shows that across the U.S. electorate, two in three voters (67 percent) do not know the status quo on the right to an attorney. Approximately 41 percent of California voters—compared to 33 percent of voters across the country—correctly selected that the government provides lawyers for people who cannot afford an attorney in criminal court, but not in immigration court.

Figure 2

Awareness of Universal Representation Status Quo



Source: YouGov July 2026 survey commissioned by Vera.

Three in five California voters see immigrants as valuable, as opposed to harmful, to the economy.

Respondents were asked:

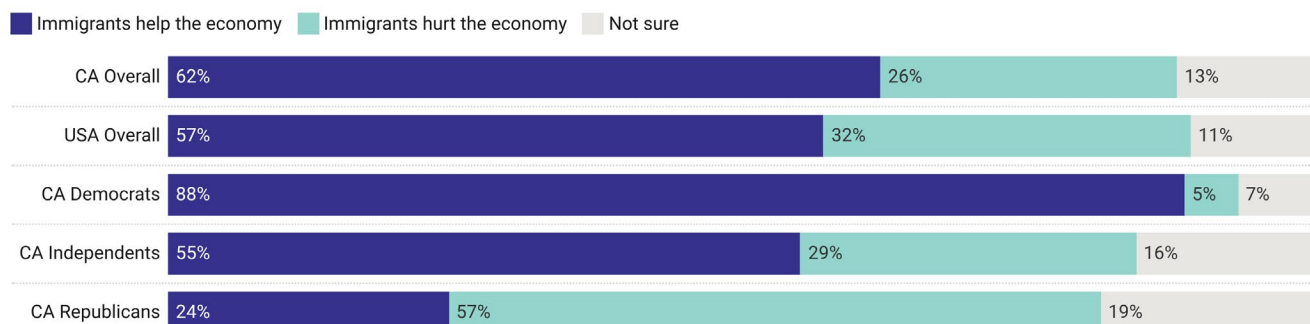
Even if it isn't exactly right, which of the following is closer to your view?

- > Immigrants help the economy - they are valuable consumers, start businesses, fill critical jobs, pay taxes, and bring new ideas
- > Immigrants hurt the economy - they buy up houses and property that should go to Americans first, take government benefits, and refuse to integrate
- > Not sure

Figure 3 shows that a majority of U.S. voters (57 percent)—including more than three in five California voters (62 percent)—agree that immigrants help the economy, compared to 32 percent who say they hurt it. Only 26 percent of California voters responded that they believe immigrants hurt the economy. The majorities of Democrat respondents (88 percent) and Independents (55 percent) in the state agree immigrants are more beneficial than harmful to the economy, as do about one quarter of Republicans (24 percent).

Figure 3

Do Immigrants Help or Hurt the Economy?



Source: YouGov July 2026 survey commissioned by Vera.

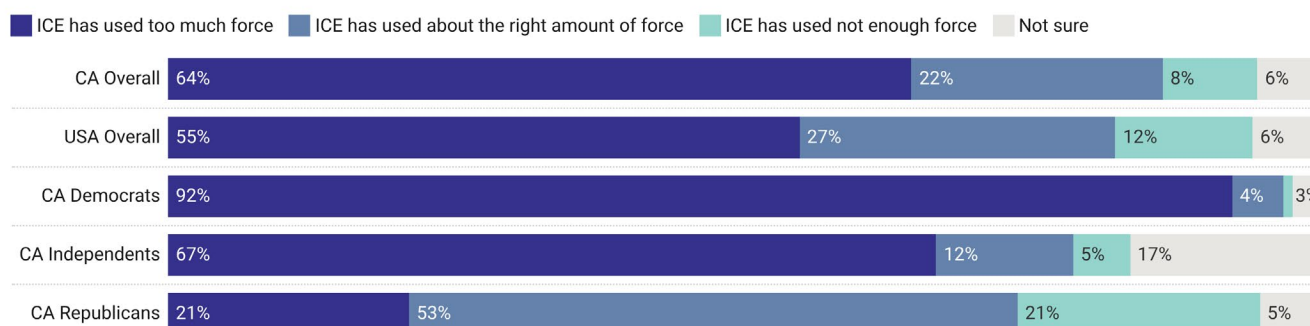
More than three in five California voters believe ICE's use of force has been excessive.

Figure 4 shows that when asked, “Do you think the use of force by ICE has been excessive or not?” a majority of U.S. voters (55 percent) believe that ICE has used too much force. Among California voters, more than three in five (64 percent) say ICE has used “too much” force, while just 8 percent say ICE had used “not enough” force.

Opinions on this matter differ by party in the state. The majorities of California Democrat respondents (92 percent) and Independents (67 percent) say ICE has used excessive force, while only 21 percent of California Republicans say the same. The majority of Republicans (53 percent) in the state say that ICE's use of force has been “about the right amount.”

Figure 4

Concern about Use of Force by ICE



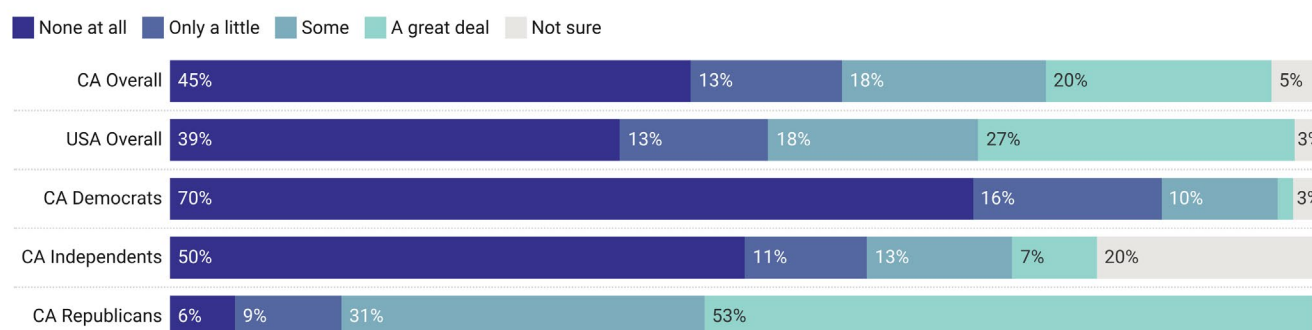
Source: YouGov July 2026 survey commissioned by Vera.

A majority of California voters have little to no confidence in ICE.

Figure 5 shows that while a majority (52 percent) of U.S. voters overall have little to no confidence in ICE, California voters have even less confidence in ICE. When asked “Overall, how much confidence do you have in ICE?”, only 20 percent of California voters say they have “a great deal” of confidence in ICE, while the majority (58 percent) say they have “only a little” (13 percent) or “none at all” (45 percent). In California, majorities of Democrats (86 percent) and Independents (61 percent) have little to no confidence in ICE.

Figure 5

Confidence in ICE



Source: YouGov July 2026 survey commissioned by Vera.

Nearly two in three California voters see mandatory detention policies as harmful, as opposed to justified.

Figure 6 shows that a majority of U.S. voters (56 percent)—including two in three California voters (65 percent)—say mandatory detention goes too far. By party, 91 percent of Democrat respondents, 65 percent of Independents, and 25 percent of Republicans in the state aligned more closely with the statement against mandatory detention. In other words, more voters agree that mandatory detention “unfairly strips people of their freedom, separates them from their families and jobs, and subjects them to harsh and indefinite detention conditions” than agree that “mandatory detention is justified to keep criminals off our streets and keep real Americans safe.”

Figure 6

Is Mandatory Detention Justified?



Source: YouGov July 2026 survey commissioned by Vera.

Three in five California voters say fewer people should be detained by ICE.

In addition to supporting legal representation for people in immigration court and expressing concerns about ICE generally, voters also express skepticism about the current immigration detention system.

Respondents were asked:

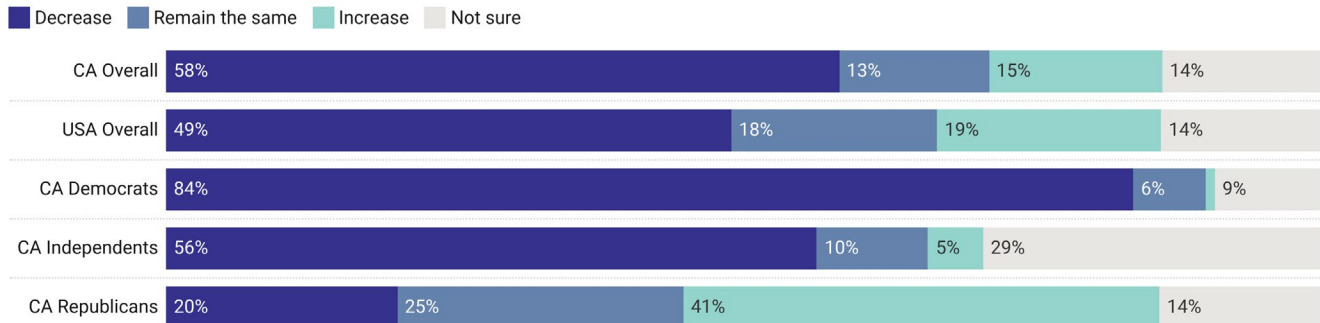
Recently, some have talked about reducing the number of people in ICE detention. ICE detention involves ICE detaining someone facing deportation for an indefinite period in a detention center, jail, prison, or other facility, including people awaiting a legal decision on their immigration court case, as well as people who never have a court case. Do you think the number of people in ICE immigration detention nationwide should...

- > Increase
- > Remain the same
- > Decrease
- > Not sure

Figure 7 shows that only about 13 percent of California voters say the number of people detained by ICE should stay the same, only 15 percent say ICE should detain more people, and 58 percent of California voters say the number of people in ICE detention should be reduced. The majorities of Democrat respondents (84 percent) and Independents (56 percent) in the state say there should be fewer people in ICE detention.

Figure 7

Support for Increasing or Decreasing the Number of People in Detention



Source: YouGov July 2026 survey commissioned by Vera.

Conclusion

California voters—like U.S. voters generally—strongly support the right to government-funded legal representation for people facing deportation in immigration court. Many U.S. voters, including the California electorate, mistakenly believe that this right already exists.

Also similar to U.S. voters generally, California voters say the cost of living and the state of the economy are the top issues facing the United States and more believe that immigrants “help the economy” than “hurt the economy.”

California voters also express concerns about ICE—even more than the U.S. electorate overall. Roughly three in five California voters say that ICE’s use of force has been excessive and that fewer people should be detained by ICE. Similarly, nearly two in three California voters see mandatory detention policies as harmful rather than justified, and a majority have little to no confidence in ICE.

Methodology

On behalf of Vera, YouGov fielded a sample of 606 U.S. registered voters in California. The sample was weighted according to gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, U.S. Census region, as well as geography. YouGov weighted the sample based on voter registration lists, the U.S. Census American Community Survey, and the U.S. Census Current Population Survey, as well as 2020 Presidential vote and approximate 2024 Presidential vote based on available results, and party identification estimates based on Pew Research Center's National Public Opinion Reference Survey. Respondents were selected from YouGov to be representative of registered voters. The weights range from 0.11 to 6.06 with a mean of 1 and a standard deviation of 0.97.

The margin of error (a 95 percent confidence interval) for a sample percentage p based upon the subsetting sample is approximately 5.7 percent. It is calculated using the formula:

$$\hat{p} \pm 100 \times \sqrt{\frac{1 + CV^2}{n}}$$

where CV is the coefficient of variation of the sample weights and n is the sample size used to compute the proportion. This is a measure of sampling error (the average of all estimates obtained using the same sample selection and weighting procedures repeatedly). The sample estimate should differ from its expected value by less than the margin of error in 95 percent of all samples. It does not reflect non-sampling errors, including potential selection bias in panel participation or in response to a particular survey.

In this analysis, Independent voters who lean toward a party are classified with their preferred party. The category "Independents" refers only to Independent voters who also report they do not lean toward one party.

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Furthermore, percentages are calculated from the raw data, and therefore may differ from the crosstabs data where aggregated at different levels.