

Most voters support the right to an attorney in immigration court and express concerns about ICE

A new YouGov poll, commissioned by the Vera Institute of Justice, found the majority of 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 2,017 U.S. registered voters nationally. It included measures of support for universal representation in the U.S. legal system, sentiments towards ICE, and other issues.

Full cross tabs are available [here](#).

Key Takeaways

- Three in four voters (77 percent) support universal representation. This includes majority support among Democrats (94 percent), Independents (77 percent), and Republicans (60 percent).
- Two-thirds of voters (67 percent) do not know that the government provides attorneys to people who cannot afford one in criminal court, but not immigration court.
- The cost of living/inflation and jobs and the economy—not unauthorized immigration—are the top issues voters believe are facing the United States today, and the majority of voters (57 percent) see immigrants as valuable, as opposed to harmful, to the economy.
- A majority of voters say ICE has used too much force (55 percent) and have little to no confidence in ICE (51 percent).
- The majority of voters (56 percent) see mandatory detention policies as harmful, as opposed to justified.

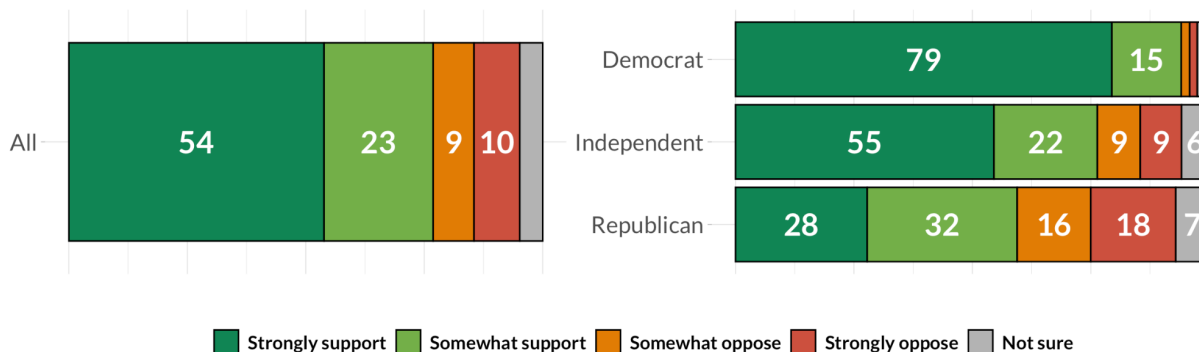
Three in four voters support universal representation.

Early in the survey, respondents were asked,

Do you [support or oppose] providing a government-funded attorney for everyone who cannot afford one in a court of law, including people in immigration court?

At initial ask, fully 77 percent of respondents say they support providing a government-funded attorney for those who cannot afford one, including in immigration court. Broken down by political party, 60 percent of Republicans, 77 percent of Independents, and 94 percent of Democrats expressed support.

Support for Universal Representation



Two-thirds of voters do not know 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.

Most voters do not know the status quo on the right to an attorney. Respondents were asked,

As far as you know, which of the following is true about our legal system?

<1> The government provides lawyers for people who cannot afford an attorney in both criminal court and immigration court

<2> The government provides lawyers for people who cannot afford an attorney in criminal court, but not in immigration court

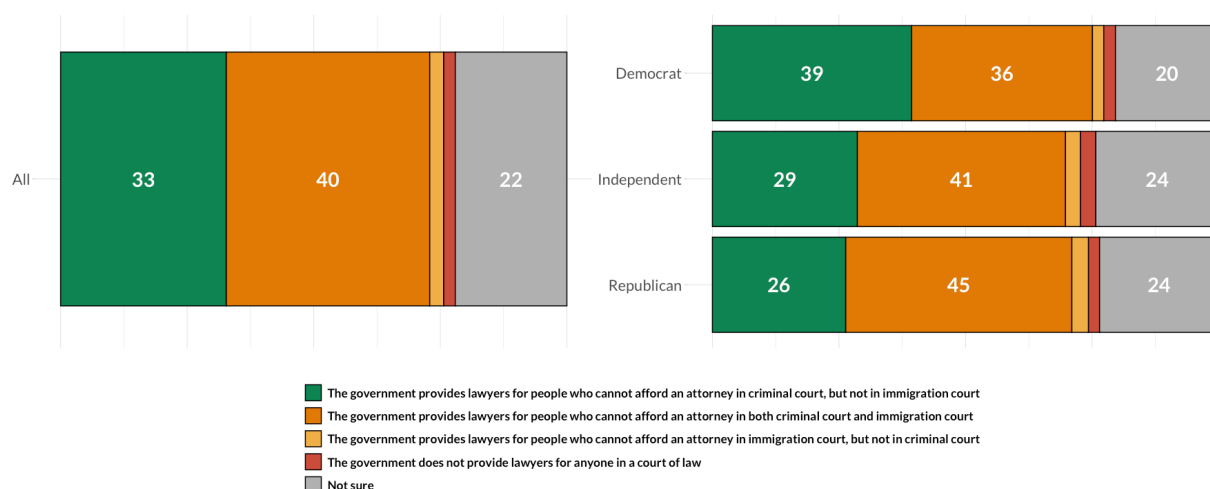
<3> The government provides lawyers for people who cannot afford an attorney in immigration court, but not in criminal court

<4> The government does not provide lawyers for anyone in a court of law

<5> Not sure

About 33 percent of voters correctly selected option two, with 22 percent selecting “not sure,” 40 percent selecting option one, and the remaining 5 percent selecting option three or four.

Awareness of Universal Representation Status Quo



Economic matters, not unauthorized immigration, are the top issues voters 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 expressed by voters. The top issue facing the United States expressed by 65 percent of voters was “cost of living/inflation,” followed by “jobs and the economy” (45 percent); “healthcare policy, including Medicare and Medicaid” (43 percent); “presidential power and authority” (30 percent); and “war and other international military conflicts” (29 percent).

The majority of voters see immigrants as valuable, as opposed to harmful, to the economy.

Overall, voters believe immigrants help, not harm, the economy. When asked to choose:

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

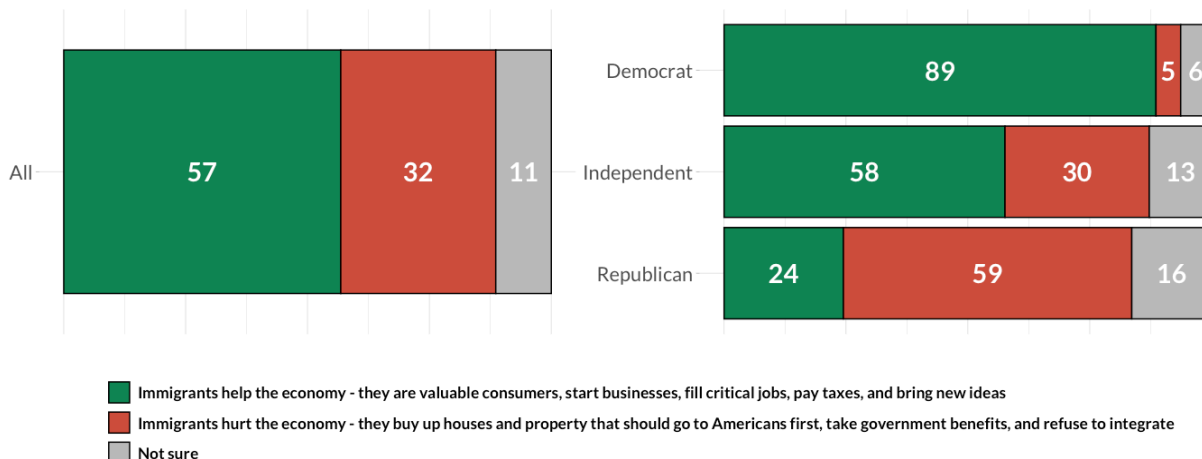
<> Immigrants help the economy - they are valuable consumers, start businesses, fill critical jobs, pay taxes, and bring new ideas

<> 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

Fully 57 percent agree that immigrants help the economy, and only 32 percent say they hurt it. The majorities of Democrats (89 percent) and Independents (58 percent) agree immigrants are more beneficial than harmful to the economy, as do about one quarter of Republicans.

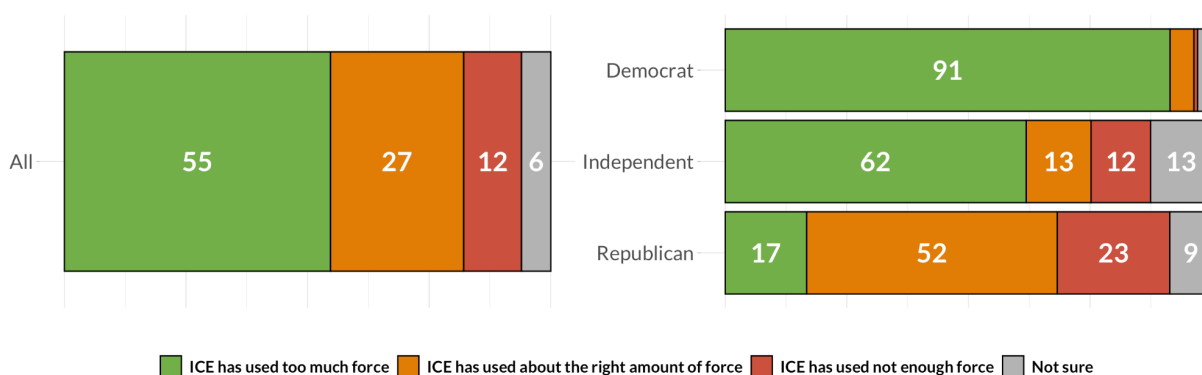
Do Immigrants Help or Hurt the Economy?



The majority of voters believe ICE's use of force has been excessive.

Voters generally believe that ICE has used too much force recently. When asked "Do you think the use of force by ICE has been excessive or not?", 55 percent said ICE has used "too much" force while just 12 percent said ICE had used "not enough" force. Opinions on this matter differ by party. Nine out of 10 Democrats and six of out 10 Independents say ICE has used excessive force, while less than two out of 10 Republicans say the same. The majority of Republicans say that ICE's use of force has been "about the right amount."

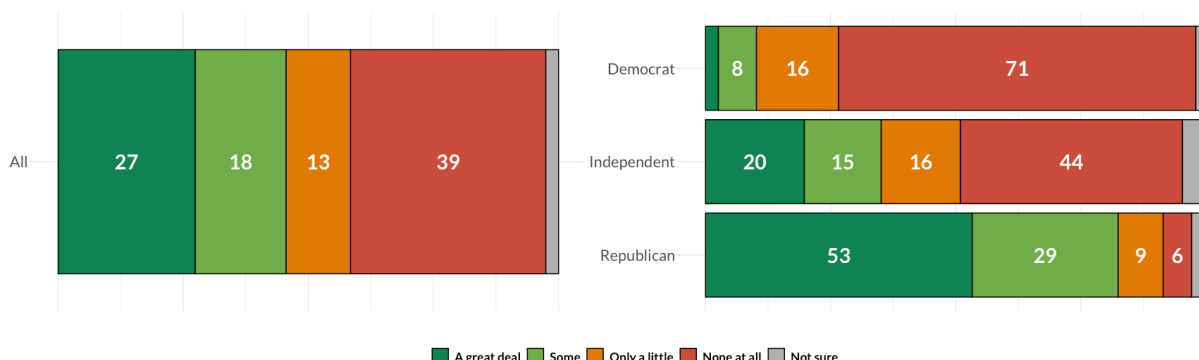
Concern about Use of Force by ICE



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

Regarding their confidence in ICE, only 27 percent of voters say they have "a great deal" of confidence in ICE, while the majority (51 percent) say they have "only a little" (13 percent) or "none at all" (39 percent). The majorities of Democrats (87 percent) and Independents (60 percent) have little to no confidence in ICE.

Confidence in ICE



Nearly half of voters say fewer people should be detained by ICE, including majorities of Democrats and Independents.

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.

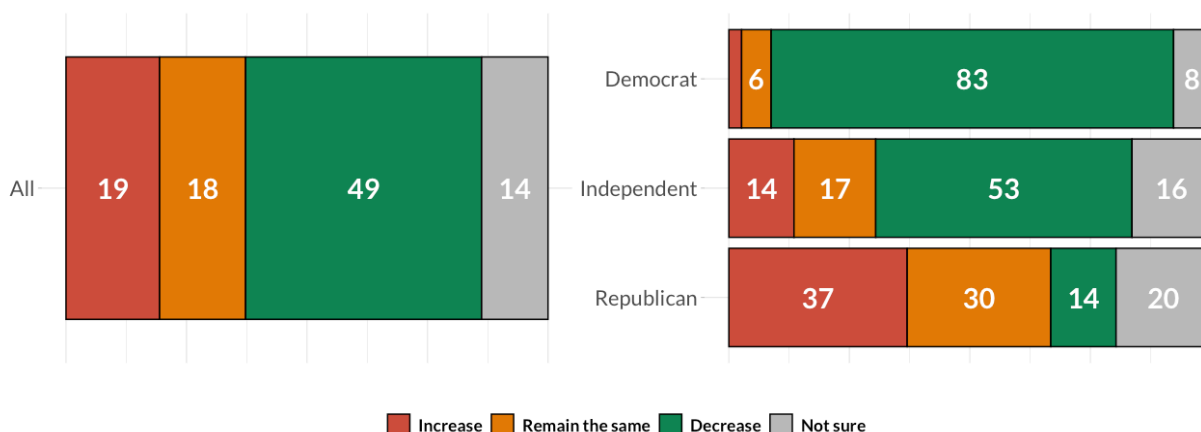
Respondents were asked:

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

Only about 18 percent of voters say the number of people detained by ICE should stay the same, only 19 percent say ICE should detain more people, and fully 49 percent of voters say the number of people in ICE detention should be reduced. The majorities of both Democrats (83 percent) and Independents (53 percent) say there should be fewer people in ICE detention.

Support for Increasing or Decreasing the Number of People in Detention



The majority of voters saw mandatory detention policies as harmful, as opposed to justified.

A majority of voters also express concern around ICE's mandatory detention policies. Specifically, respondents were asked:

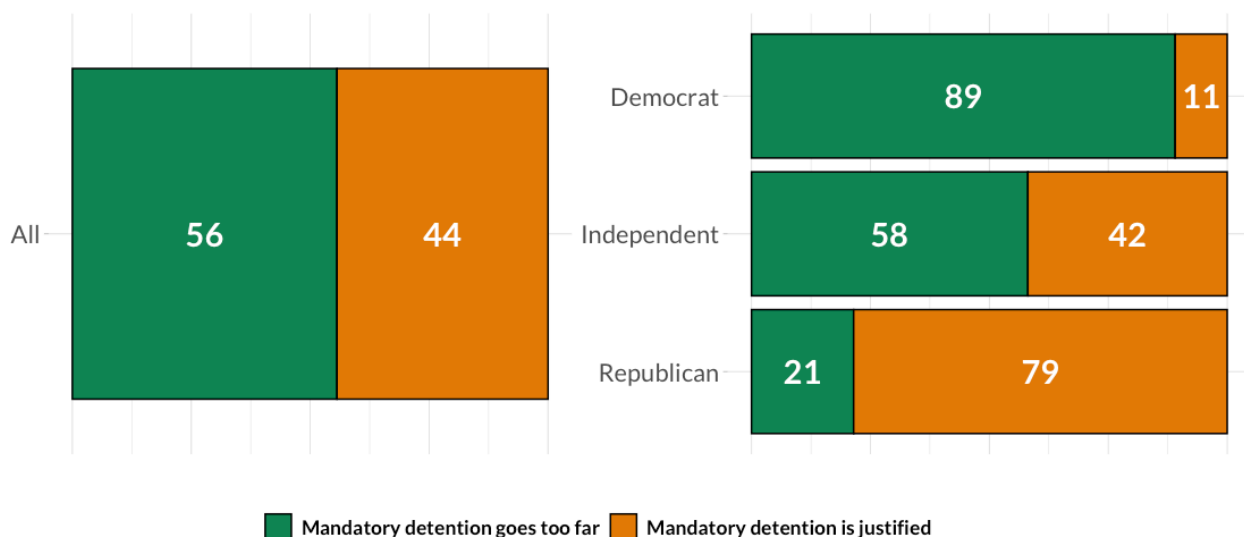
Lately, some say Congress should amend the law regarding "mandatory detention" - which prohibits many people in detention from being eligible to be released on bond while they await their day in court. Which aligns more closely with your view, even if neither is exactly right?

<> Mandatory detention unfairly strips people of their freedom, separates them from their families and jobs, and subjects them to harsh and indefinite detention conditions. Detention also wastes billions in taxpayer dollars and studies show that it is unnecessary to ensure people appear to comply with their court obligations. People should have a fair chance to seek release from detention, rather than being indefinitely subjected to cruel conditions.

<> Mandatory detention is justified to keep criminals off our streets and keep real Americans safe. It is also necessary to send a message and deter more people from breaking our country's immigration laws and coming here illegally. Enforcing these consequences helps uphold the rule of law and maintain an orderly immigration system.

A majority of voters (56 percent) say mandatory detention goes too far. By party, 89 percent of Democrats, 58 percent of Independents, and 21 percent of Republicans 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."

Is Mandatory Detention Justified?



Conclusion

Support for providing people with legal representation protection in the U.S. courts system, including people in immigration court, is high across the electorate. Indeed, many voters are under the misapprehension that such a system is already in place.

Voters say the cost of living and the state of the economy are the top issues facing the United States. More people believe that immigrants "help the economy" than "hurt the economy." Voters generally do not believe ICE needs to be behaving "more aggressively" to enforce the law; rather, voters believe ICE is going too far, should have its budget reduced, and should have less control over law enforcement.

In addition to supporting legal representation in immigration court and expressing concern for the economy, voters also express concerns about ICE. Nearly half say fewer people should be detained by ICE, while a majority of voters have little to no confidence in ICE and see mandatory detention policies as harmful rather than justified.

Methodology

On behalf of the Vera Institute of Justice, YouGov fielded a sample of 2,017 U.S. registered voters nationally. The sample was weighted according to gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, U.S. Census region, as well as state region 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 0.18 to 4.81 with a mean of 1 and a standard deviation of 0.51.

The margin of error (a 95 percent confidence interval) for a sample percentage p based upon the subsetting sample is approximately 2.4 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 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 percent due to rounding.

Note: A correction was made to this memo on September 8, 2026, by the Vera Institute of Justice. The in-line text "The majorities of Democrats (77 percent) and Independents (60 percent) have little to no confidence in ICE." has been corrected to accurately reflect the statistics in the "Confidence in ICE" graph to read "The majorities of Democrats (87 percent) and Independents (60 percent) have little to no confidence in ICE."