

Public Support in Dallas, Texas, for Government-Funded Attorneys in Immigration Court

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) partnered with the survey firm Lucid to conduct a public opinion poll to explore attitudes toward government-funded attorneys for people in immigration court in the Dallas metropolitan area. The survey was administered online in August 2020 and included 1,000 adults (18 years and older) living in the area. The results are statistically weighted to be representative of the Dallas population with regard to age, education, gender, household income, and race and ethnicity.

Key findings:

Two in three people in the Dallas metropolitan area, or 69 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation. This support exists among:

- 67 percent of likely voters;
- 82 percent of people who self-identify as Democrats, 58 percent of those who self-identify as Republicans, and 70 percent of people who do not identify with either party; and
- 86 percent of Clinton voters, 53 percent of Trump voters, and 62 percent of those who voted for third-party candidates (among those who voted in the 2016 presidential election).

The next sections include details about the results summarized above and additional results.

Government-funded attorneys in immigration court

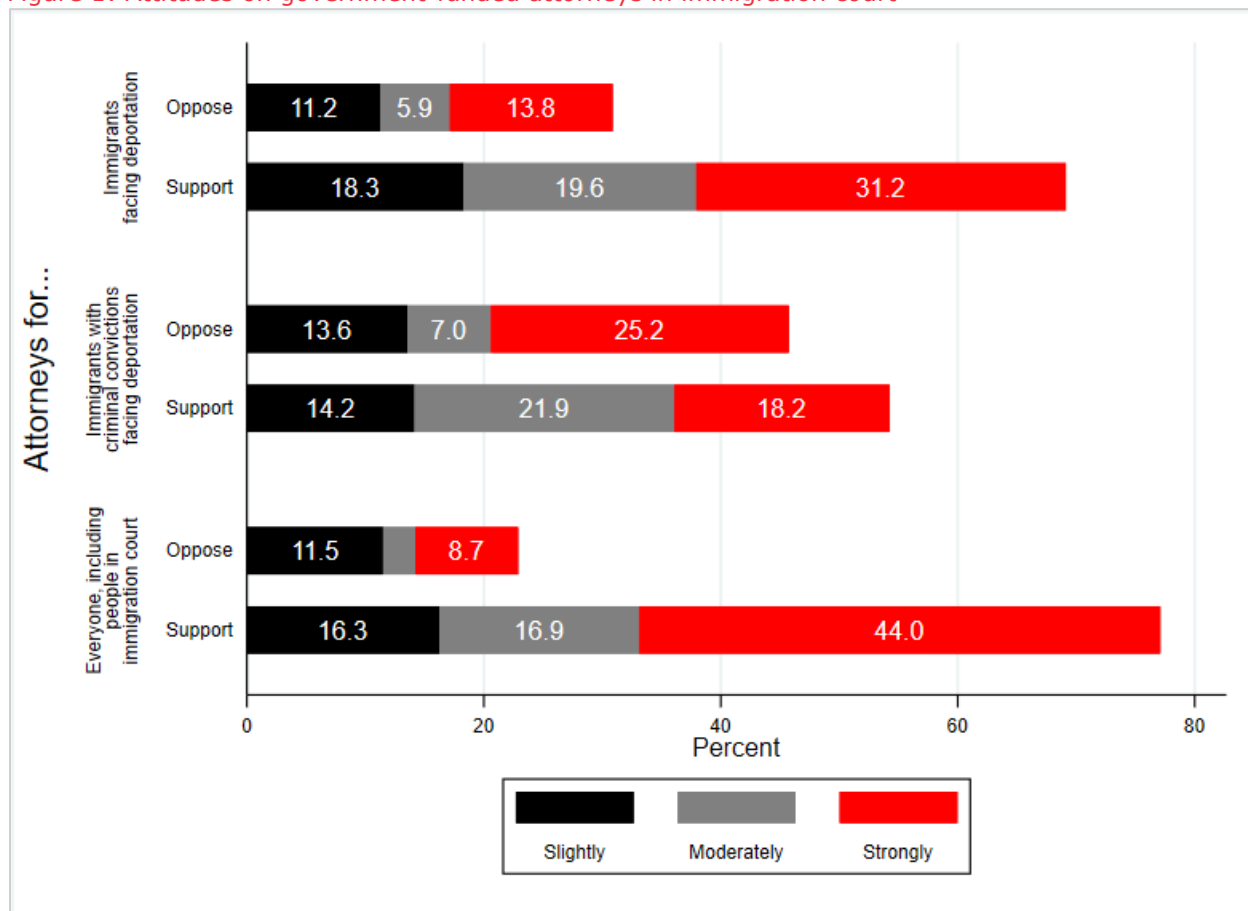
Respondents were randomly assigned to answer either question one, two, or three, below. The questions, while similar, contain important differences in wording. Randomly assigning respondents to answer one of the three questions allows for a comparison of attitudes towards government-funded attorneys in immigration court and how they may shift depending on the language used. The three questions are:

1. Do you support or oppose the government paying for an attorney for immigrants facing deportation who cannot afford one in immigration court?
2. Do you support or oppose the government paying for an attorney for immigrants with criminal convictions who are facing deportation and cannot afford one in immigration court?
3. Do you support or oppose the government paying for an attorney for everyone who cannot afford one in a court of law, including people in immigration court?

Question one asks about the government paying for attorneys for “immigrants facing deportation.” Question two is nearly the same, but asks about attorneys for “immigrants *with criminal convictions*.” Question three differs from questions one and two by asking about attorneys for “everyone...including people in immigration court.” All questions specify that government-funded attorneys are for those who cannot afford one. The main differences, then, are that questions one and two are directly about government-funded attorneys in deportation proceedings (question two taking a step further than question one by specifying immigrants with criminal convictions as recipients of attorneys), while question three allows for an exploration of whether support for government-funded attorneys is higher when framed as a universal right—as part of a system that provides attorneys “for everyone,” inclusive of “people in immigration court.” Moreover, question three does not use the words “immigrant” or “deportation,” instead humanizing the foreign-born population by specifying that these are *people* in immigration court.

Question one was the primary question of interest, as the main goal of the research was to understand attitudes toward government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation. Therefore, most respondents, 70 percent, were randomly assigned to answer this question—allowing for enough respondents to further break down the data by political party identification and 2016 vote choice, presented later in this document. Questions two and three were added to see how support may increase or decrease depending on the language used compared to question one. Therefore, fewer respondents were assigned to questions two and three than to question one (20 percent assigned to question two and 10 percent to question three). Answer options for all three questions are: strongly support, moderately support, slightly support, slightly oppose, moderately oppose, and strongly oppose. Responses to the questions are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Attitudes on government-funded attorneys in immigration court



n=1,000

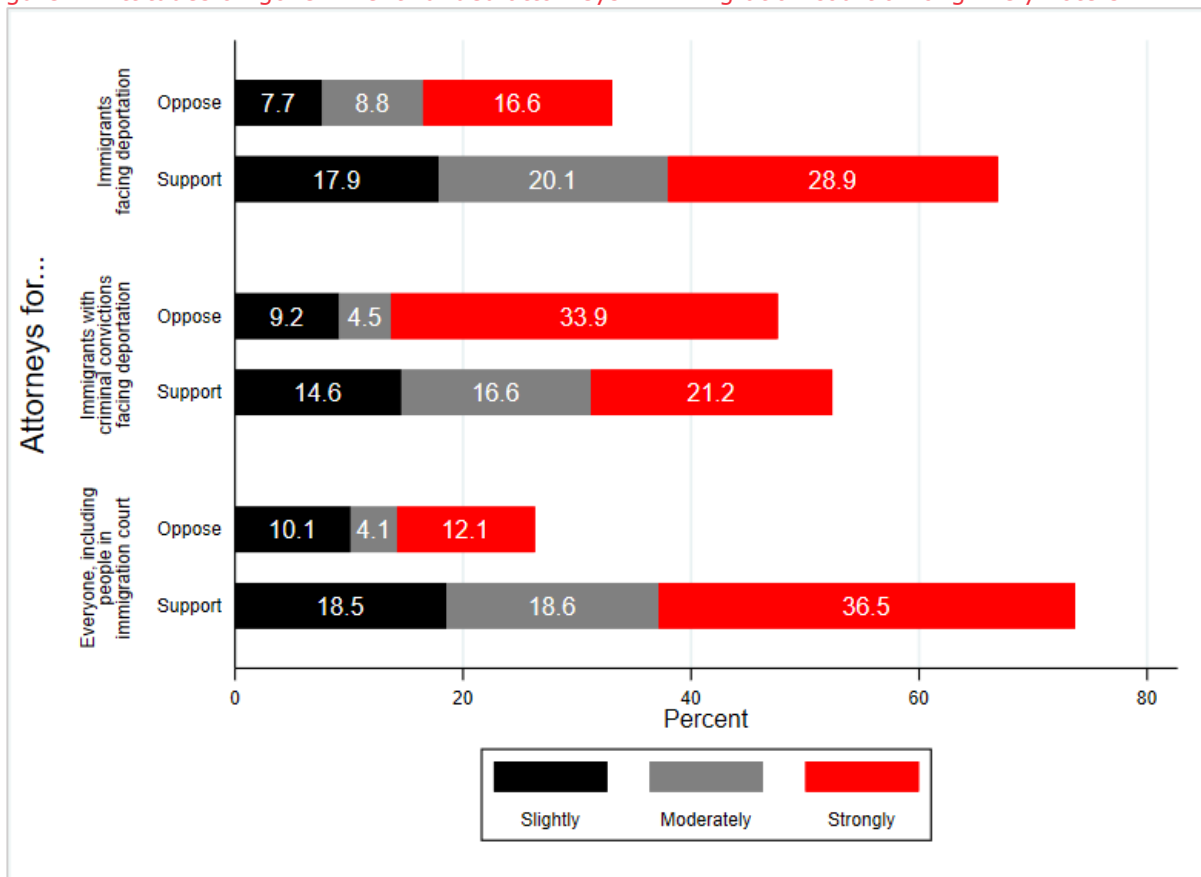
Key findings from Figure 1:

- Strong majorities of people in the Dallas metropolitan area support government-funded attorneys in immigration court across all three questions.
 - Sixty-nine percent express support for government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation (question one).
 - Fifty-four percent support government-funded attorneys for immigrants *with criminal convictions* (question two).
 - Support is even higher when attorneys in immigration court are framed as part of a larger system of attorneys for all (question 3), with 77 percent of respondents expressing support.¹

¹ T-tests that compare mean responses among the three questions reveal significant differences when question one is compared with question two and when question two is compared with question three ($p=0.002$ and $p=0.000$, respectively). This means that, although there is majority support when immigrants with criminal convictions are specified as the recipients of lawyers (question two), support is even higher—to a statistically significant degree—when immigrants with criminal convictions are not mentioned, as in questions one and three.

Figure 2, below, is analogous to Figure 1, but includes responses only from people who are likely to vote. Likely voters are defined as people who reported that they were registered to vote and planned to vote in 2020. Respondents aged 22 years or older were only included if they reported having voted in the 2016 presidential election and recalled for whom they voted (those under 22 may not have been old enough to vote in 2016 and were therefore not held to this requirement).² Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents were categorized as likely voters.³

Figure 2: Attitudes on government-funded attorneys in immigration court among likely voters



n = 576

Additionally, there is a slight difference between responses to questions one and three, although a t-test found it to be only marginally significant ($p=0.090$). This suggests that support is high and somewhat similar across both questions. In all t-tests referenced in this document, responses are coded to range from 0 (strongly oppose) to 1 (strongly support), with all other values falling evenly in between (moderately oppose = 0.2, slightly oppose = 0.4, etc.).

² For discussions of how to measure likely voters in surveys, see Scott Keeter and Ruth Igielnik, “Can Likely Voter Models be Improved?” Pew Research Center, January 7, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2016/01/07/can-likely-voter-models-be-improved/>; and Michael Dimock, Scott Keeter, Mark Schulman et al., *A Voter Validation Experiment: Screening for Likely Voters in Pre-Election Surveys* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2001), <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2001/05/12.pdf>.

³ For reference, 58 percent of registered voters in Dallas County (where the Dallas metropolitan area is located) voted in the 2016 presidential election. See Texas Secretary of State, “Dallas County Voter Registration Figures,” <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/dallas.shtml>.

Key findings from Figure 2:

- Majorities of likely voters support government-funded attorneys in immigration court across all three questions.
 - Two in three likely voters, or 67 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation (question one).
 - Fifty-two percent support government-funded attorneys for people in immigration court with criminal convictions.⁴
 - Three in four likely voters, or 74 percent, support government-funded lawyers in immigration court when attorneys are framed as part of a larger system of attorneys for all (question three).⁵

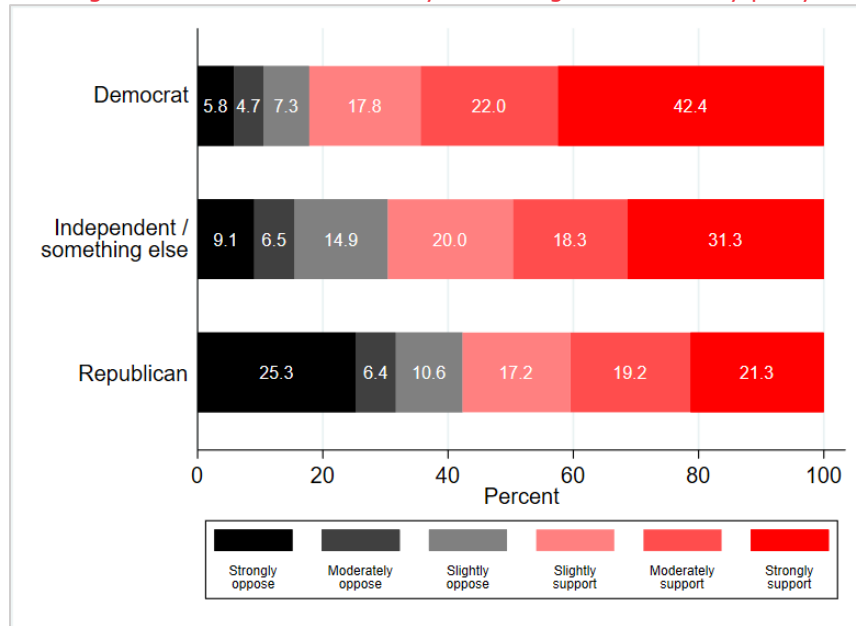
The next two graphs present responses to question one, about attitudes toward government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation, by their political party identification (Figure 3) and by their 2016 vote choice (Figure 4).⁶ Each bar in Figures 3 and 4 sums to 100 percent.

⁴ A t-test that compares mean responses between questions one and two reveals a significant difference ($p=0.026$). This means that people are significantly more supportive of attorneys in immigration court when immigrants with criminal convictions are not mentioned in the question. Nonetheless, even when immigrants with criminal convictions are the recipients of lawyers in question two, majority support persists.

⁵ A t-test that compares mean responses between questions one and three shows no significant difference between the two questions ($p=0.297$). This means that people may be responding similarly to the two questions.

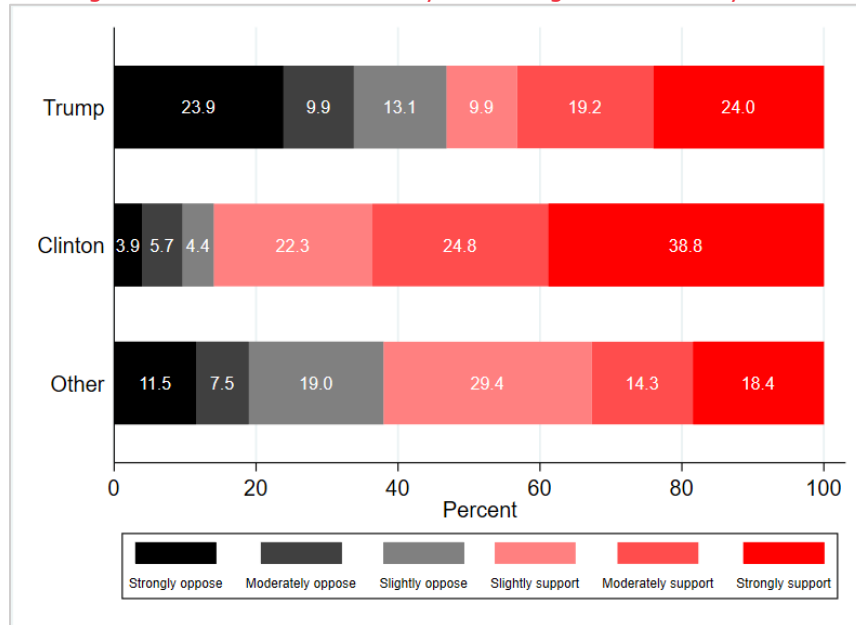
⁶ As mentioned earlier, question one was the main question of interest. It was therefore asked to more respondents than were questions two and three to allow for enough responses to perform subgroup analyses by political party identification and 2016 vote choice.

Figure 3: Attitudes on government-funded attorneys in immigration court by party identification



n = 698 (222 Democrats, 243 independents/something else, and 233 Republicans)

Figure 4: Attitudes on government-funded attorneys in immigration court by 2016 vote choice



n = 451 (216 Trump, 186 Clinton, and 49 third-party candidate voters). Only those who reported voting in 2016 are included in Figure 4.

Key findings from Figures 3 and 4:

- There is strong support for government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation across all political party identifications and regardless of 2016 presidential vote choice.
 - More than 80 percent of Democrats and Clinton voters express support.

- Seventy percent of people who do not identify with Democrats nor Republicans (Independents / something else) and 62 percent of those who voted for a third-party candidate in the 2016 presidential election support government-funded attorneys.
- A majority of Republicans (58 percent) and Trump voters (53 percent) support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.

Support for government-funded attorneys by general immigration attitudes

The survey included a standard immigration question that researchers have asked across many prominent surveys over many years. Including a standardized question allowed Vera to compare the sample with respondents to other surveys of immigration attitudes. The standard immigration question is:

4. Do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased, decreased, or kept the same as it is now?

Answer options to question four are: increased a lot, increased a moderate amount, increased a little, kept the same as now, decreased a little, decreased a moderate amount, and decreased a lot. Table 1 presents the percentages of people in the Dallas metropolitan area who think immigration to the United States should be increased, decreased, or kept the same. The Dallas sample appears in the first column of results, and the following columns present percentages of responses across three recent, prominent, national surveys: the American National Election Studies (ANES), Gallup, and the Pew Research Center.⁷ The table shows that immigration attitudes among the Dallas sample are more or less in line with immigration attitudes across national surveys—where roughly one third of people think immigration should be increased, about one third would like no change to current immigration levels, and roughly one third think immigration should be decreased.

Table 1: Standard immigration question across four surveys

Immigration to the U.S. should be...	Survey			
	Dallas/Vera	ANES	Gallup	Pew
Increased	39%	31%	34%	32%
Kept the same	31%	35%	36%	38%
Decreased	30%	33%	28%	24%

⁷ See American National Election Studies, “2018 Pilot Study,” <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/2018-pilot-study/>; Gallup, “Immigration,” (3 percent of the Gallup respondents are coded as “no opinion”), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>; and Pew Research Center, “Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration Into the U.S.” June 28, 2018, <https://www.people-press.org/2018/06/28/shifting-public-views-on-legal-immigration-into-the-u-s/>.

Finally, Table 2 shows the percentages of respondents who support government-funded attorneys (as asked in question one, about attorneys for immigrants facing deportation) by their responses to the standard immigration question (question four above).

Table 2: Support for government-funded attorneys by responses to the standard immigration question

Immigration to the U.S. should be...	Percentage supporting government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation
Increased	89%
Kept the same	72%
Decreased	37%

n=700

Key findings from Table 2:

- There is strong support for government-funded attorneys among respondents who believe immigration to the United States should be kept at present levels or increased.
 - Eighty-nine percent of people who support increased immigration to the United States also support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.
 - Seventy-two percent of those who believe immigration levels to the United States should be kept the same support government-funded attorneys in immigration court.
- Even among people who oppose immigration to the United States (those who want immigration levels decreased), there is sizeable support for government-funded attorneys for immigrants, with more than one in three, or 37 percent, expressing support.

The findings presented in this report show strong support among people in the Dallas metropolitan area for government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation. This support is widespread, with majorities expressing support regardless of political party identification and 2016 vote choice. Majority support persists even when immigrants with criminal convictions are specified as the recipients of lawyers, and support is even higher when attorneys in immigration court are framed as part of a larger system of attorneys for all.