

Public Support in Prince George's County, Maryland, 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 Prince George's County, Maryland. The survey was administered online in August 2020 and included 579 adults (18 years and older) living in the area. The results are statistically weighted to be representative of the Prince George's County population with regard to age, education, gender, household income, and race and ethnicity.

Key findings

Five in six people in Prince George's County, or 83 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation. This support is widespread, existing among:

- 83 percent of likely voters;
- 90 percent of people who self-identify as Democrats, 66 percent of those who self-identify as Republicans, and 81 percent of people who do not identify with either party; and
- 90 percent of Biden supporters and nearly half (49 percent) of Trump supporters (among those who indicated on the pre-election survey that they intended to vote in the 2020 presidential election).

Even among people who oppose immigration to the United States, the vast majority, 72 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.

The next sections include details about the findings 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 likely voters, political party identification, and 2020 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=579

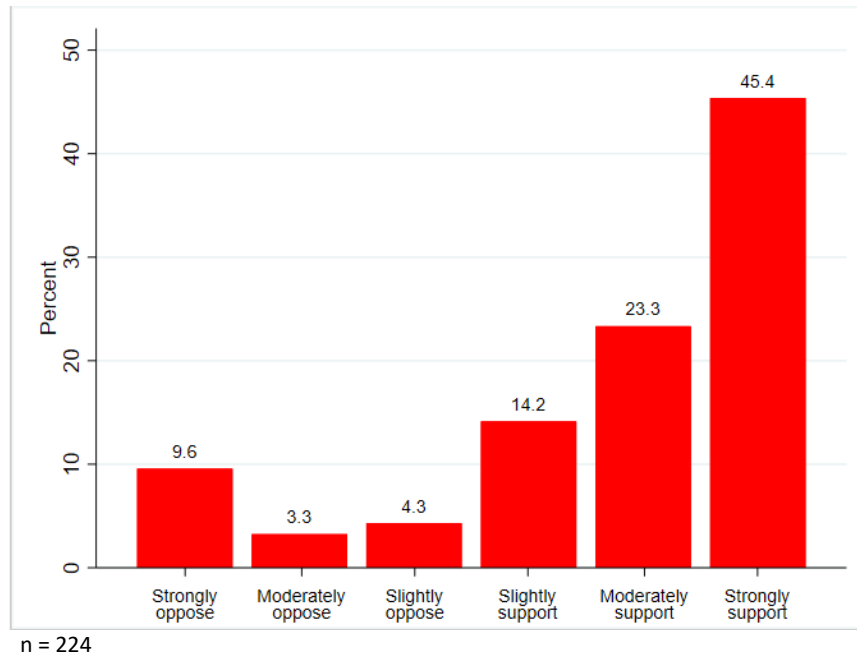
Key findings from Figure 1:

- Most people in Prince George’s County support government-funded attorneys in immigration court across all three questions.
 - There is overwhelming support for government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation (question one, with 83 percent support) and when attorneys in immigration court are framed as part of a larger system of attorneys for all (question three, with 82 percent support).
 - Fifty-four percent support government-funded attorneys for immigrants *with criminal convictions* (question two).¹

¹ T-tests that compare mean responses among the three questions reveal significant differences between question two and all other questions ($p \leq 0.010$ in both comparisons). There is no significant difference between questions one and three ($p = 0.653$), as people answered the two questions similarly. 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.).

Figure 2, below, includes responses to question one (about government-funded attorneys for “immigrants facing deportation”) only from people who are likely to vote.² 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, therefore, were not held to this requirement).³ Fifty-five percent of survey respondents were categorized as likely voters.⁴

Figure 2: Attitudes on government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation among likely voters



² As mentioned earlier, question one was the main question of interest and, therefore, was asked to more respondents than were questions two and three to allow for enough respondents in question one to perform subgroup analyses by likely voters, political party identification, and 2020 vote choice.

³ For discussions of how to measure likely voters in surveys, see Scott Keeter and Ruth Igielnik, “Can Likely Voter Models be Improved?: Evidence from the 2014 U.S. House Elections,” Pew Research Center, January 7, 2016, <https://perma.cc/3W22-XTFC>; and Michael Dimock et al., “A Voter Validation Experiment: Screening for Likely Voters in Pre-election Surveys” (paper presented at the 56th Annual American Association for Public Opinion Research Conference, Montreal, May 16, 2001), <https://perma.cc/BX2L-F4A4>.

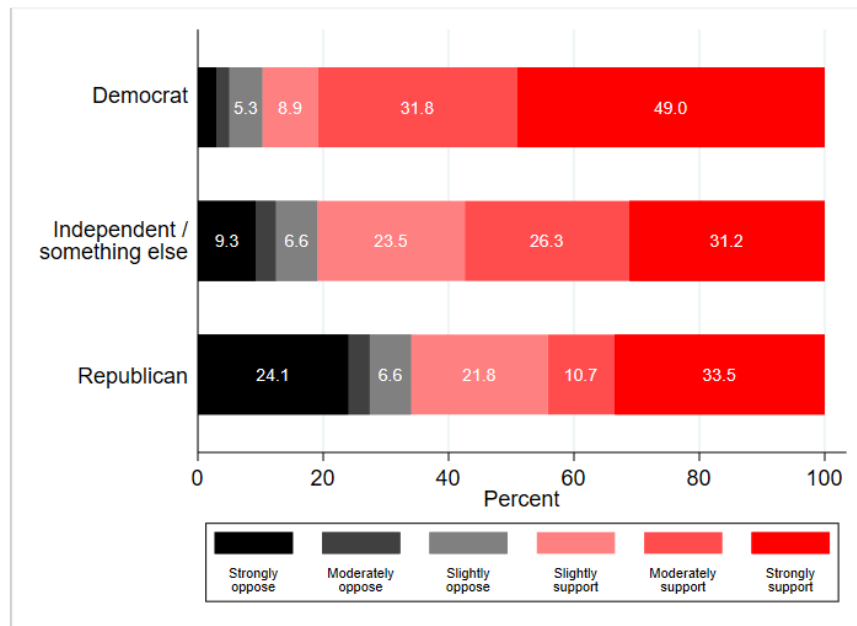
⁴ For reference, about 61 percent of those aged 18 years and older in Prince George’s County voted in the 2020 presidential election. See Prince George’s County Board of Elections, “Official 2020 Presidential General Election Results Summary,” <https://perma.cc/B2KY-7RFQ>; and the U.S. Census Bureau, “2015 – 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates,” <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=Age%20and%20Sex&g=0500000US24033&tid=ACSDP5Y2019.DP05&hidePreview=true>.

Key findings from Figure 2:

- Five in six likely voters, or 83 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.
- Nearly half of likely voters, or 45 percent, express *strong* support.

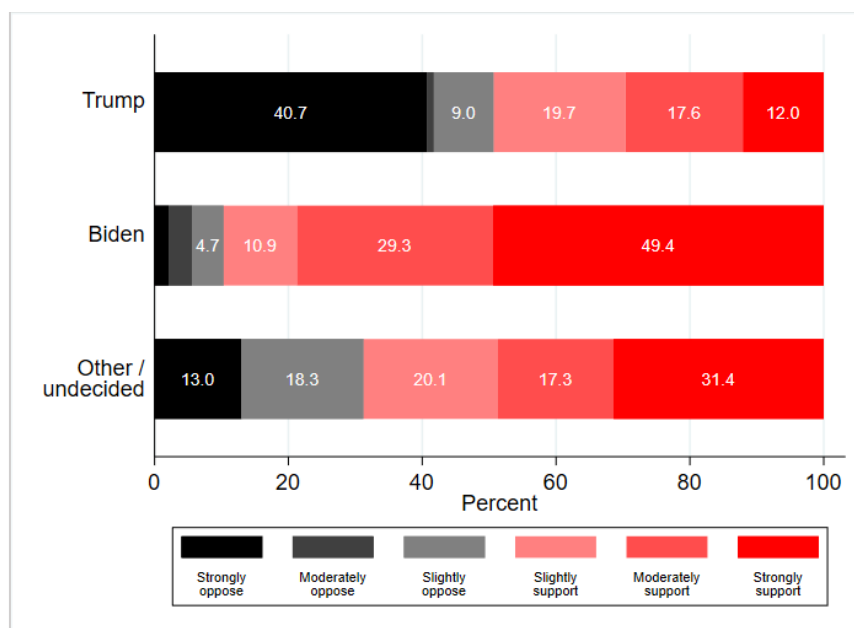
The next two graphs present responses to question one, about attitudes toward government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation, broken down by respondents' political party identification (Figure 3) and by their 2020 vote choice (Figure 4). Each bar in Figures 3 and 4 sums to 100 percent.

Figure 3: Attitudes on government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation by party identification



n = 401 (224 Democrats, 128 independents/something else, and 49 Republicans)

Figure 4: Attitudes on government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation by 2020 vote choice



n = 305 (32 Trump, 226 Biden, and 47 third-party candidate supporters or undecided in the pre-election survey). Only those who said they planned to vote in the pre-election survey are included in Figure 4.

Key findings from Figures 3 and 4:

- A majority of people, regardless of political party identification, and majorities of Biden supporters and of those who supported a third-party candidate in the 2020 presidential election or were undecided in their vote choice at the time the survey was administered support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.
 - At the lower end, 66 percent of Republicans expressed support.
 - At the upper end, 90 percent of Democrats and of Biden supporters favor government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.
- Nearly half, 49 percent, of Trump supporters also support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.
- In Figures 3 and 4, there are small numbers of Republicans, Trump supporters, and third-party candidate supporters/undecided people; this is unsurprising, given that Prince George’s County is typically a Democratic stronghold.⁵ Yet, the small numbers mean that the percentages listed above for these groups should not be interpreted as representative of the true population, but instead, they are suggestive of patterns that might exist.

⁵ To see a pattern of voters in Prince George’s County favoring Democratic candidates by wide margins in elections, see Prince George’s County Board of Elections, “Election Results,” <https://www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/1675/Election-Results>.

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 Prince George’s County who think immigration to the United States should be increased, decreased, or kept the same. The Prince George’s County sample appears in the first column of results, and the following columns present percentages of responses across three recent, prominent, national surveys from the American National Election Studies (ANES), Gallup, and the Pew Research Center.⁶ The table shows that immigration attitudes among the Prince George’s County sample are more favorable toward immigration than are attitudes across national surveys. One would expect Prince George’s County, which favors Democratic candidates in elections, to be more liberal regarding immigration than the United States as a whole.⁷

Table 1: Standard immigration question across four surveys

Immigration to the U.S. should be...	Survey			
	Prince George’s County/Vera	ANES	Gallup	Pew
Increased	41%	32%	34%	32%
Kept the same	38%	38%	36%	38%
Decreased	21%	30%	28%	24%

⁶ See American National Election Studies, “2019 Pilot Study,” <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/2019-pilot-study/>; Gallup, “Immigration,” data from May 28 to June 4, 2020, <https://perma.cc/B828-WX9Z>; 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/>. Some respondents to these surveys are coded as “no opinion,” as giving a “don’t know” response, or as refusing to answer the question, which is why the percentages do not always sum to 100 within each survey in Table 1.

⁷ To see a pattern of Democratic candidates winning by large margins in recent elections, see Prince George’s County Board of Elections, “Election Results,” <https://www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/1675/Election-Results>.

Finally, Table 2 shows the percentages of respondents who support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation (question one) 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	82%
Decreased	72%

n=405

Key findings from Table 2:

- There is strong support for government-funded attorneys among respondents, regardless of their attitudes on whether immigration to the United States should be increased, decreased, or kept the same.
- Even among people who oppose immigration to the United States (those who want immigration levels decreased), nearly three in four people, or 72 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.

The findings presented in this report show that there is strong support for government-funded attorneys in immigration court among Prince George’s County residents. Moreover, support is widespread, with majorities expressing support among likely voters and regardless of political party identification. Finally, majority support persists even when immigrants with criminal convictions are specified as the recipients of lawyers.