Republicans and Democrats in Different Worlds on Immigration

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This year, Republican and Democratic leaders have argued over migrant detention facilities, the Trump administration's family separation policy, nationwide immigration enforcement raids, tightening asylum rules, and the status accorded to DREAMers. Reflecting the partisan rancor on Capitol Hill, the 2019 Chicago Council Survey finds many deep divisions between supporters of both parties over immigration. Republicans see immigration as a critical threat to the country, say restricting immigration makes the United States safer, and support using US troops to stop migrants from crossing into the United States. Democrats, on the other hand, do not consider immigration a critical threat and their views on policy actions substantially and consistently differ from Republicans.

Key Takeaways

- Self-described Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to view immigration as a critical threat (78%, compared to 19%), to believe that restricting immigration makes the United States safer (78%, compared to 24%), and to support the use of US troops to prevent immigration at the US-Mexico border (81%, compared to 23%).
- Republicans are also far more likely than Democrats to consider strict immigration policy measures effective, like carrying out more arrests and deportations (82%, compared to 29%) and separating immigrant children from parents when they are accused of entering the United States illegally (40%, compared to 10%).
- Likewise, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to view increasing border security (93%, compared to 55%) and imposing new fines on businesses that hire illegal immigrants (83%, compared to 54%) as effective policies.
- Americans are divided over legal immigration, too. Half of Republicans (47%) say legal immigration should be decreased, while a third of Democrats (36%) say it should be increased.
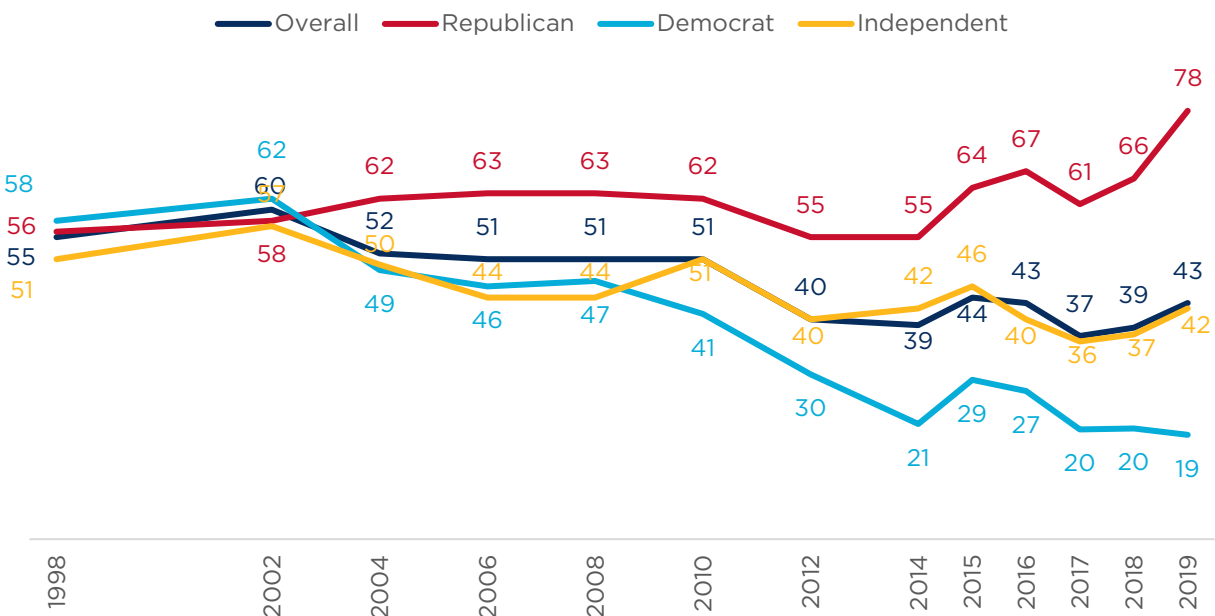
Immigrants and Refugees as a Threat

Politicians on the left and the right acknowledge the strains between the two parties on immigration. At a July 12 congressional hearing on family separation, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) remarked that "it feels like we're speaking in two different worlds" and Representative Debbie Lesko (R-AZ) used the analogy of "parallel universes." The 2019 Chicago Council Survey echoes this sentiment; data shows that the public is deeply divided along partisan lines, with Republicans and Democrats holding starkly different views of the issue and which policies the government should pursue.

Eight in ten Republicans (78%) consider large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States to be a critical threat, up from 66 percent in 2018 and the highest percentage recorded in Chicago Council Surveys since the question was first asked in 1998. This elevated level of concern stands in sharp contrast to the views of Democrats. Fewer than two in ten Democrats (19%) consider immigrants and refugees a critical threat, the lowest number recorded in Council surveys. Independents, for their part, split the difference: four in ten (42%) consider large numbers of immigrants and refugees a critical threat.

Immigration as a Threat

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: **Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the US** *(% critical threat)*
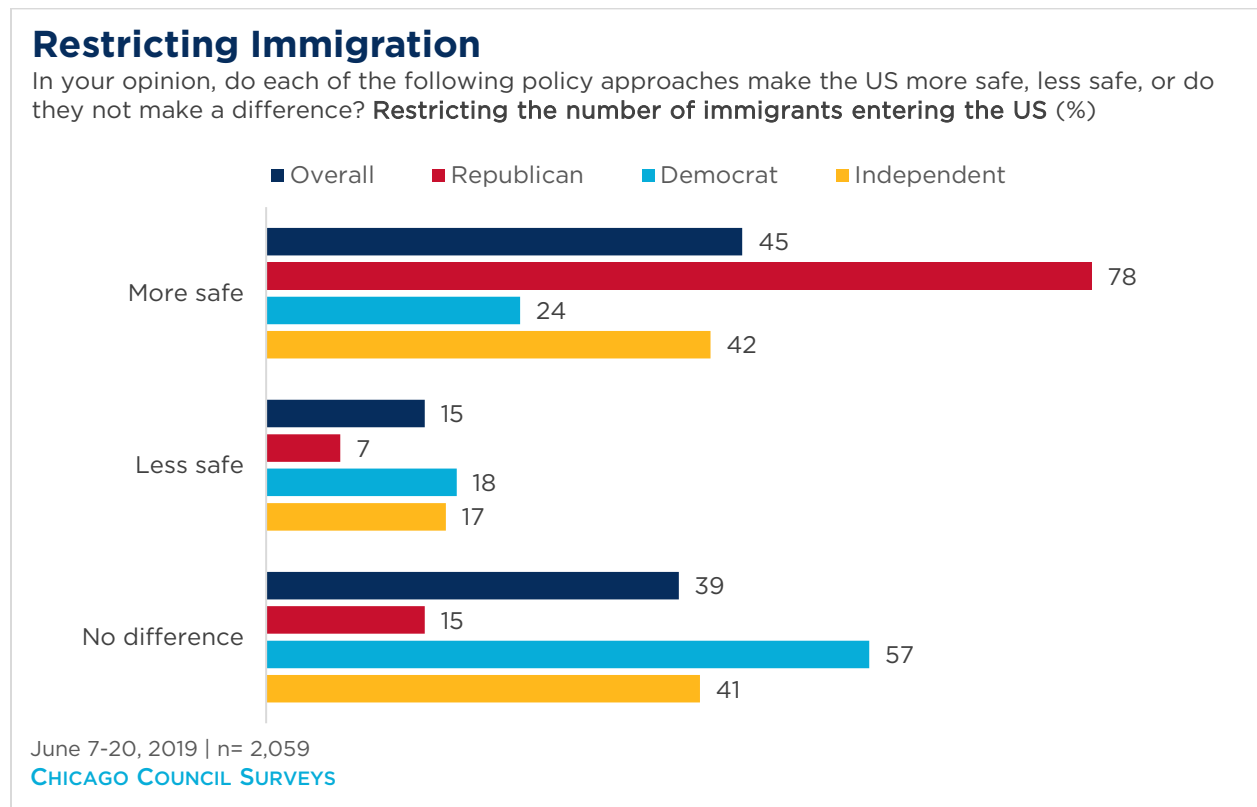

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The yawning gap between the parties is also a sign of how views on both sides of the aisle have changed in recent years. In 2002, majorities of Republicans and Democrats both described large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States as a critical threat. Since then, despite a fall in the overall percentage of Americans viewing immigration as a critical threat (from 60% to 43%), the opinion gap between Republicans and Democrats has dramatically increased. In fact, the current 59 percentage point difference between the two parties on the perceived threat of immigrants and refugees is the largest partisan divide on any policy issue in the 2019 Chicago Council Survey. These divergent views on the threat posed by immigrants and refugees also inform a range of other policy opinions on restricting immigration, the use of troops to stop immigrants, the efficacy of different policy measures in dealing with illegal immigration, and whether Washington should adjust the level of legal immigration.

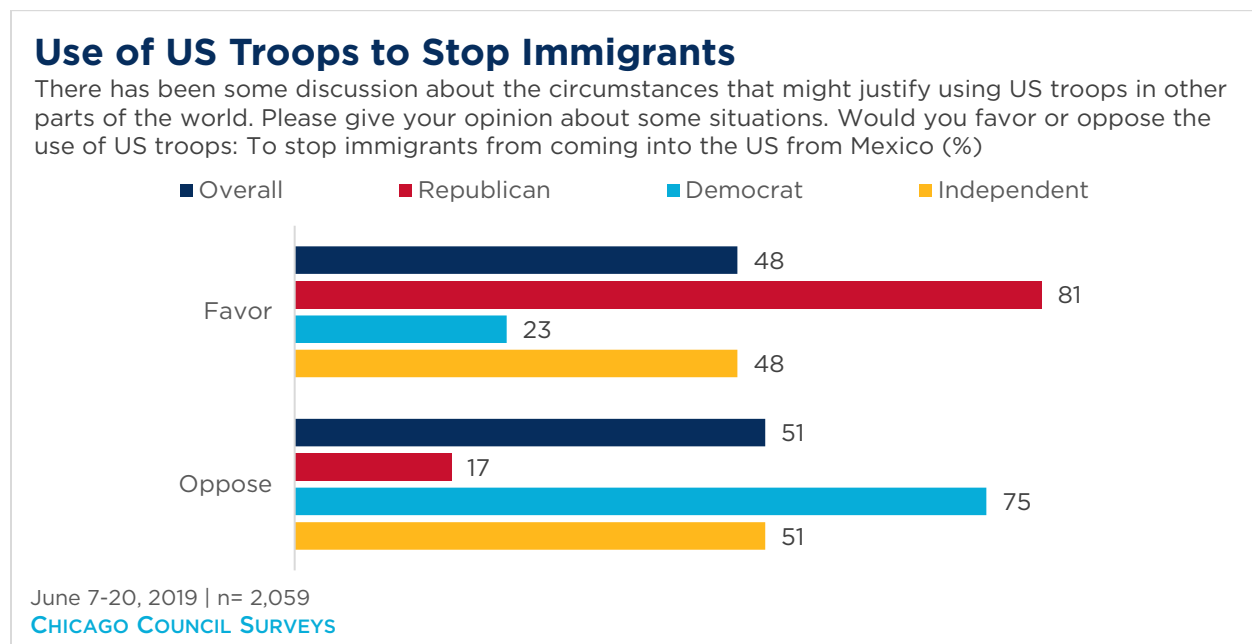## Republicans Say Restricting Immigration Makes America Safer

Given that a strong majority of Republicans consider immigration a critical threat, they believe that restrictions would help improve US security. Eight in ten Republicans (78%) believe that restricting immigration makes the United States safer, while only one in four Democrats agree (24%). Instead, most Democrats say it makes no difference to US safety (57%). Independents are largely split between seeing immigration restrictions as making the United States safer (42%) or making no difference (41%).

Restricting Immigration

In your opinion, do each of the following policy approaches make the US more safe, less safe, or do they not make a difference? **Restricting the number of immigrants entering the US** (%)

Legend: ■ Overall ■ Republican ■ Democrat ■ Independent

More safe
- Overall: 45
- Republican: 78
- Democrat: 24
- Independent: 42

Less safe
- Overall: 15
- Republican: 7
- Democrat: 18
- Independent: 17

No difference
- Overall: 39
- Republican: 15
- Democrat: 57
- Independent: 41

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When it comes to Americans overall, a plurality (45%) says that restricting the number of immigrants entering the United States makes the country safer. Not far behind, four in ten Americans (39%) believe it makes no difference, while only 15 percent say restricting immigration makes the country less safe.

Partisan Divides over Using US Troops to Stop Immigrants at US-Mexico Border

In July, the Pentagon deployed an additional 1,100 active-duty troops to the US-Mexico border, raising the number of US troops serving alongside the Texas National Guard to 3,600. Backing the Trump administration's line, eight in ten Republicans (81%) support the use of US troops for this purpose. By contrast, three in four Democrats (75%) oppose doing so, while Independents are narrowly divided, with half in favor (48%) and half opposed (51%). Like Independents, the overall public is evenly split, with 48 percent in favor and 51 percent in opposition.

Use of US Troops to Stop Immigrants

There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops: To stop immigrants from coming into the US from Mexico (%)

■ Overall ■ Republican ■ Democrat ■ Independent

Favor
- Overall: 48
- Republican: 81
- Democrat: 23
- Independent: 48

Oppose
- Overall: 51
- Republican: 17
- Democrat: 75
- Independent: 51

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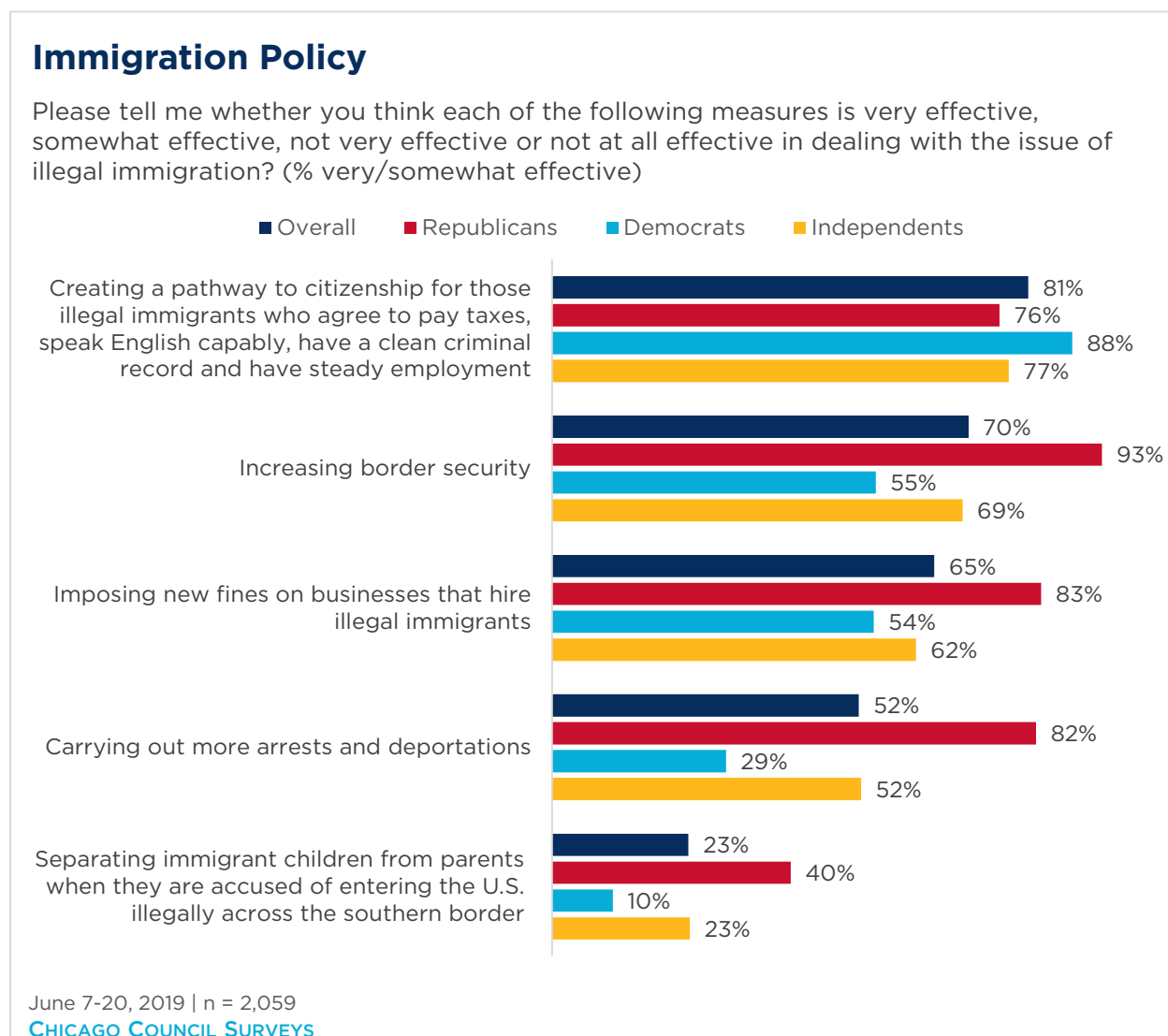CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Immigration Policy

Republicans and Democrats also divide over the policies they consider effective in dealing with illegal immigration. Nearly all Republicans (93%) say increasing border security is very or somewhat effective, compared to just over half of Democrats (55%). And more than eight in ten Republicans (83%) believe that imposing new fines on businesses that hire illegal immigrants is very or somewhat effective, versus 54 percent of Democrats.

Carrying out more arrests and deportations is even more polarizing, with 82 percent of Republicans and 29 percent of Democrats considering it very or somewhat effective. And while four in ten Republicans (40%) think separating immigrant

children from parents when they are accused of entering the US illegally across the southern border is very or somewhat effective, only one in ten Democrats (10%) do.

Despite partisan divisions, some policy measures are considered effective by majorities across party lines. This is the case for increasing border security (70% overall) and fining businesses that hire illegal immigrants (65% overall). Notably, four in five Americans (81%) agree that creating a pathway to citizenship is effective in dealing with the issue, matching past Council surveys showing widespread support for a pathway to citizenship contingent on various criteria and when paired with additional border security measures.[1] While the specific numbers vary by party, the overall agreement on certain policy measures indicates possible avenues for action in addressing one of America's most polarized issues.

Immigration Policy

Please tell me whether you think each of the following measures is very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective or not at all effective in dealing with the issue of illegal immigration? (% very/somewhat effective)

■ Overall ■ Republicans ■ Democrats ■ Independents

Creating a pathway to citizenship for those illegal immigrants who agree to pay taxes, speak English capably, have a clean criminal record and have steady employment
- Overall: 81%
- Republicans: 76%
- Democrats: 88%
- Independents: 77%

Increasing border security
- Overall: 70%
- Republicans: 93%
- Democrats: 55%
- Independents: 69%

Imposing new fines on businesses that hire illegal immigrants
- Overall: 65%
- Republicans: 83%
- Democrats: 54%
- Independents: 62%

Carrying out more arrests and deportations
- Overall: 52%
- Republicans: 82%
- Democrats: 29%
- Independents: 52%

Separating immigrant children from parents when they are accused of entering the U.S. illegally across the southern border
- Overall: 23%
- Republicans: 40%
- Democrats: 10%
- Independents: 23%
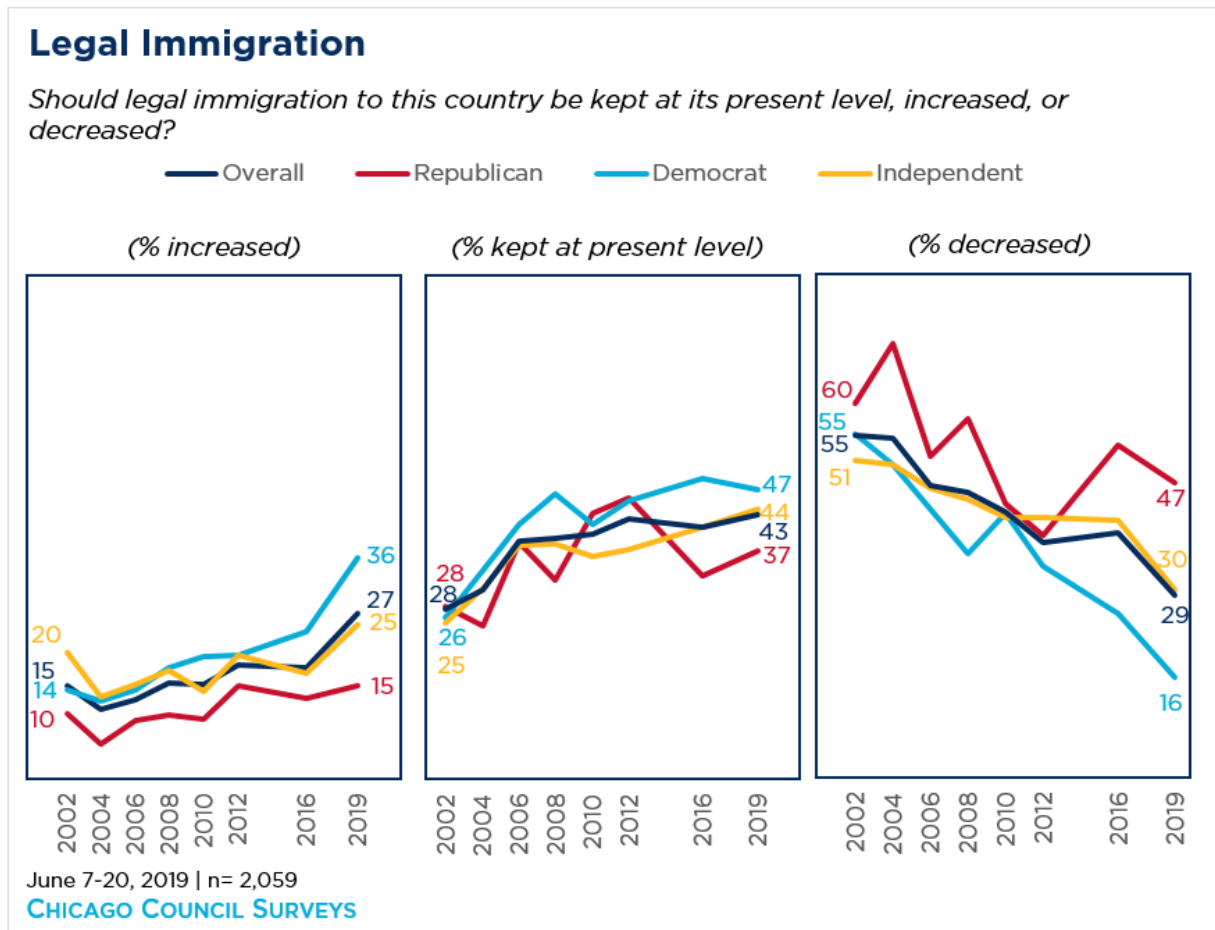
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[1] In the 2017 Chicago Council Survey, two in three Americans (65%) said they supported a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants with or without preconditions. In 2016, this policy approach had less support, with 58 percent of Americans favoring it. And in 2013, even fewer Americans (50%) supported a pathway to citizenship. Though the proportion has changed over time, the majority of Americans have supported it since 2013. See: "Bipartisan Support for Path to Citizenship for Unauthorized Immigrants," Craig Kafura and Sara McElmurry, October 18, 2017.

The partisan gap on creating a pathway to citizenship is smaller than the divisions over other measures. Nearly nine in ten Democrats (88%) believe it is very or somewhat effective, as do three in four Independents (77%) and Republicans (76%). Yet, Republicans are less confident in creating a pathway to citizenship than in other measures, such as increasing border security, carrying out more arrests and deportations, and imposing new fines on businesses that hire illegal immigrants.

Rising Support for Increasing Legal Immigration

American public support for decreasing legal immigration is at an all-time low in Council surveys (29%, down from 55% in 2002). This trend holds across party lines, with Republicans, Democrats, and Independents all less likely to support decreased immigration. Over the past two decades, support for increasing legal immigration has also risen (27% today, up from 15% in 2002), particularly among Democrats, as has the proportion of Americans who say immigration should be kept at its present level (43%, up from 27% in 2002), particularly among Republicans. Democrats and Republicans tend to prefer different adjustments to the level of immigration, with 83 percent of Democrats supporting increased or unchanged levels and 84 percent of Republicans supporting decreased or unchanged levels.

Legal Immigration

Should legal immigration to this country be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased?

Legend: Overall — Republican — Democrat — Independent

(% increased)   (% kept at present level)   (% decreased)

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Conclusion

Immigration has long been a hotly divisive issue in American politics and, as Council data shows, the partisan gaps on immigration have never been wider. These differing levels of concern over immigration between Republicans and Democrats are reflected in the types of policies each group considers effective. And though majority agreement exists on certain measures to deal with illegal immigration, partisan divides underlie and would complicate adopting and implementing any of these measures.

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2019 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2019 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 7-20, 2019 by IPSOS using their large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,059 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ±2.3, including a design effect of 1.1607. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?"

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