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Fewer Americans See Immigration as Critical Threat; Two-Thirds Back Citizenship Path

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US President Donald Trump has delivered on his campaign promise to make immigration enforcement and mass deportations a centerpiece of the US domestic agenda. Between January 20, 2025, and July 31, 2026, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) carried out roughly 980,000 deportations, many of them of them immigrants with no criminal convictions. Deportations have also increasingly occurred through interior enforcement, rather than border enforcement, under second Trump administration, a strategy that culminated in operations including Midway Blitz in Chicago and Metro Surge in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Such deployments of federal agents have sparked massive protests, particularly in the weeks following the fatal shootings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti in January 2026, and led to the ouster of Border Patrol 'commander-at-large' Gregory Bovino.

The 2026 Chicago Council Survey, fielded July 10-21, finds that public perception of immigration has shifted in the last two years, with Americans now far less likely to view it as a critical threat and a growing majority favoring a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Bipartisan majorities also generally support making it easier for immigrants to legally come and stay in the United States. Yet Americans remain sharply divided along partisan lines on immigration enforcement policies and spending.

Key Findings

- A third of Americans (35%) now see large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States as a critical threat, down from half (50%) in 2024. This includes a record-low 10 percent of Democrats.
- Two-thirds of Americans (64%) say undocumented immigrants working in the United States should be allowed to apply for citizenship, either immediately or after paying a penalty and waiting a number of years, up from 56 percent in 2015.

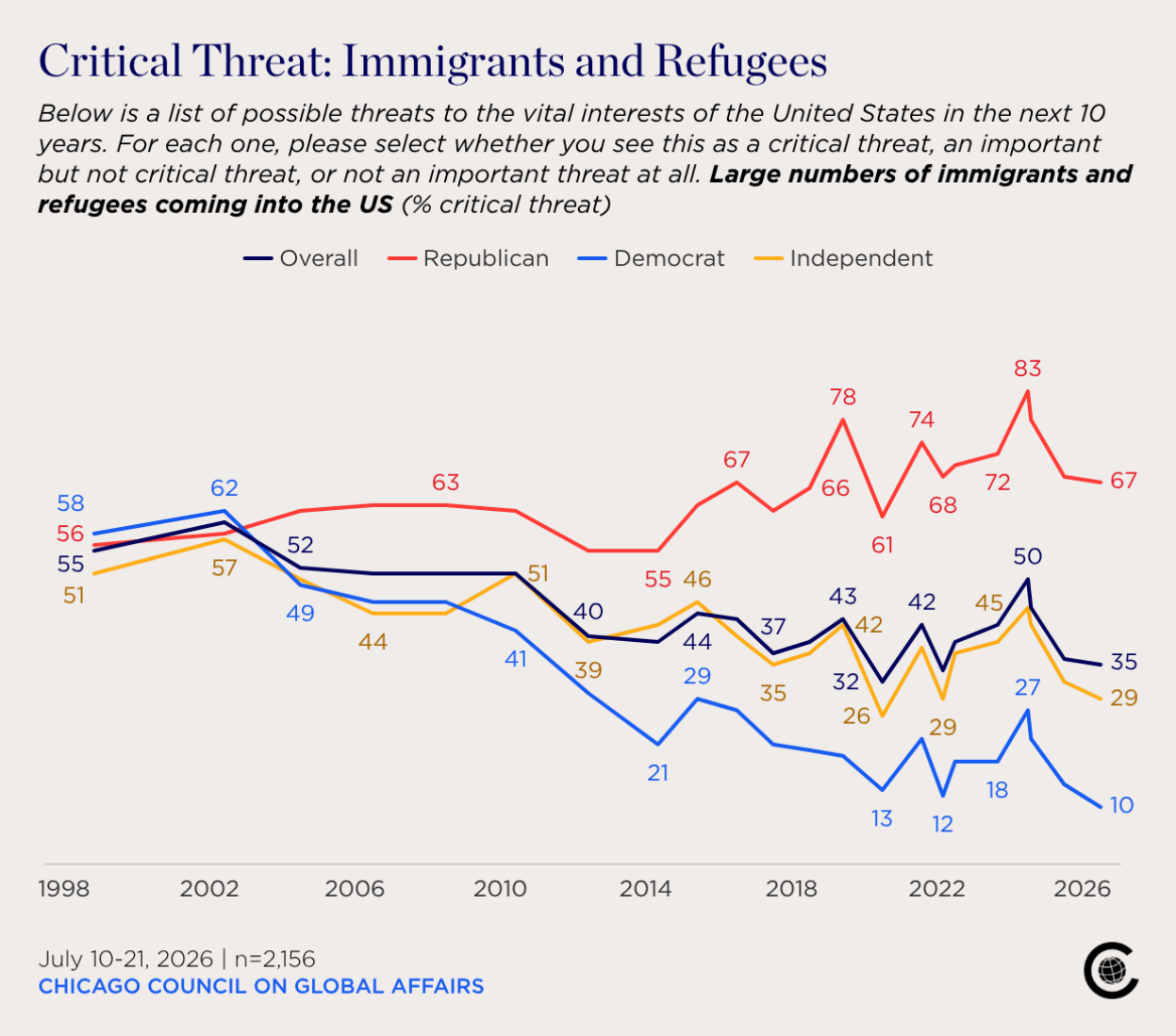
- While about half of MAGA Republicans (53%) say illegal immigrants working in the United States should be required to leave the country, just three in 10 non-MAGA Republicans agree (31%).[1]
- Large majorities of both liberal Democrats (91%) and moderate/conservative Democrats (82%) favor a path to citizenship.
- While Republicans are internally divided on immigration issues, Democrats are largely united behind a pro-immigration agenda.

Fewer Americans View Immigration as a Critical Threat to the Country

Two years ago, at the height of the 2024 presidential campaign, public concern about immigration reached a level not seen in over a decade (50% overall and a record high of 83% among Republicans). Since then, worries have seemingly subsided: Just a third of Americans (35%) today say the prospect of large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States represents a critical threat to the country, down from 50 percent in 2024.

The decline in public concern around immigrants entering the country has taken place across partisan groups. Today, just 29 percent of Independents and a record-low 10 percent of Democrats view large-scale migration as a critical threat to the country. For Republicans, the prospect of large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States remains a critical threat (67%), matching their average level of concern over the past three decades but still down significantly from an all-time peak in 2024 of 83 percent.

[1] MAGA Republicans are those self-identified Republicans who also identify as a supporter of the Make America Great Again or MAGA movement. In the 2026 Chicago Council Survey, 61 percent of Republicans identify as MAGA supporters. For more details, see the Methodology.



Other recent Council polling points to a public that views immigration's effects in a largely positive light—though with notable partisan divisions. In an April 2026 Chicago Council-Ipsos poll, six in 10 Americans said immigration has a positive impact on American culture (61%), the US economy (60%), their local economy (62%), and their own community (60%). Eight in 10 Democrats and more than six in 10 Independents shared that view across the different areas, compared to about four in 10 Republicans.

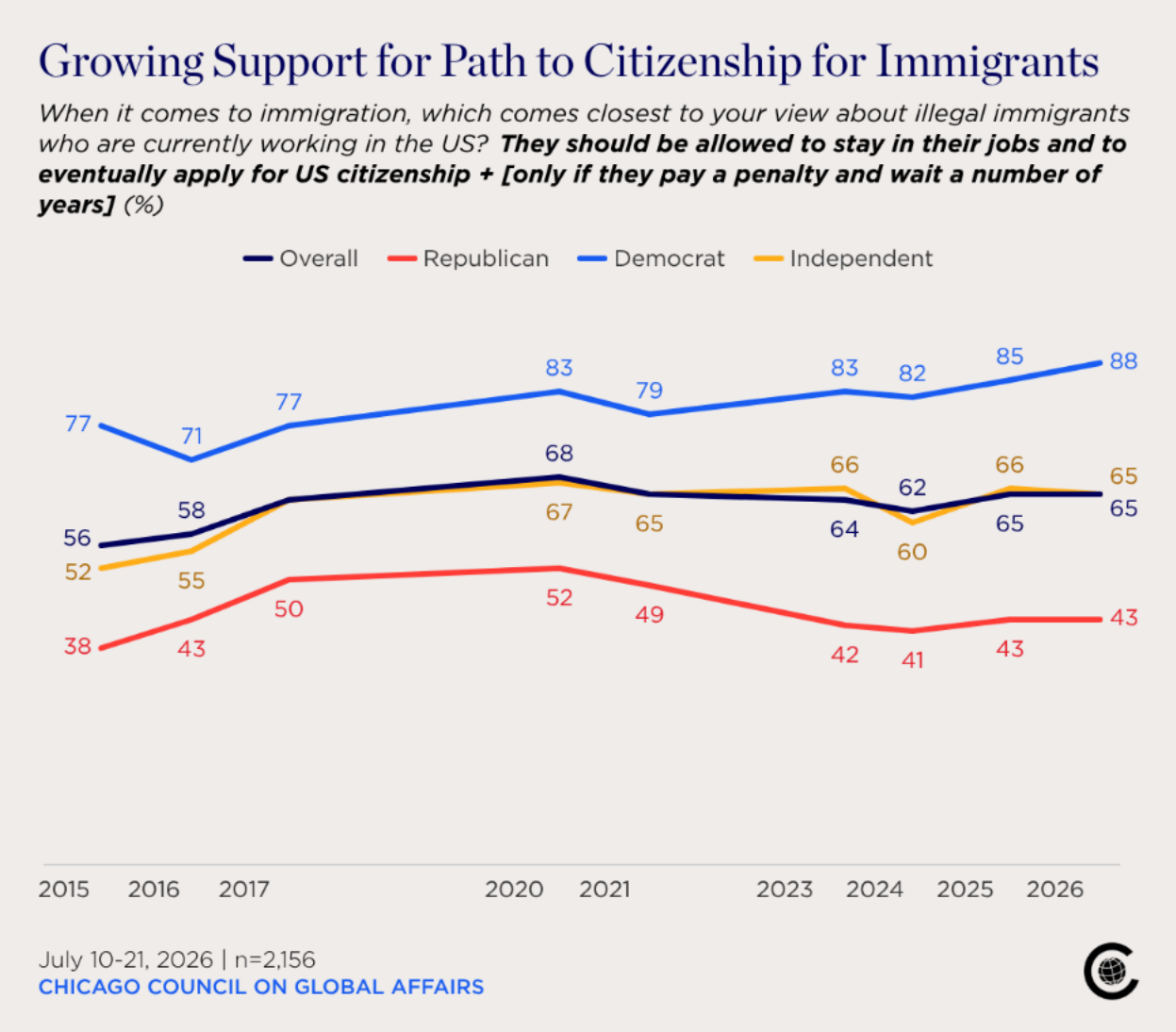
This divergence between Democratic and Republican views on the impact of immigration, and the threat posed by immigration, persist across a range of specific immigration policy questions.

Most Americans Favor a Path to Citizenship

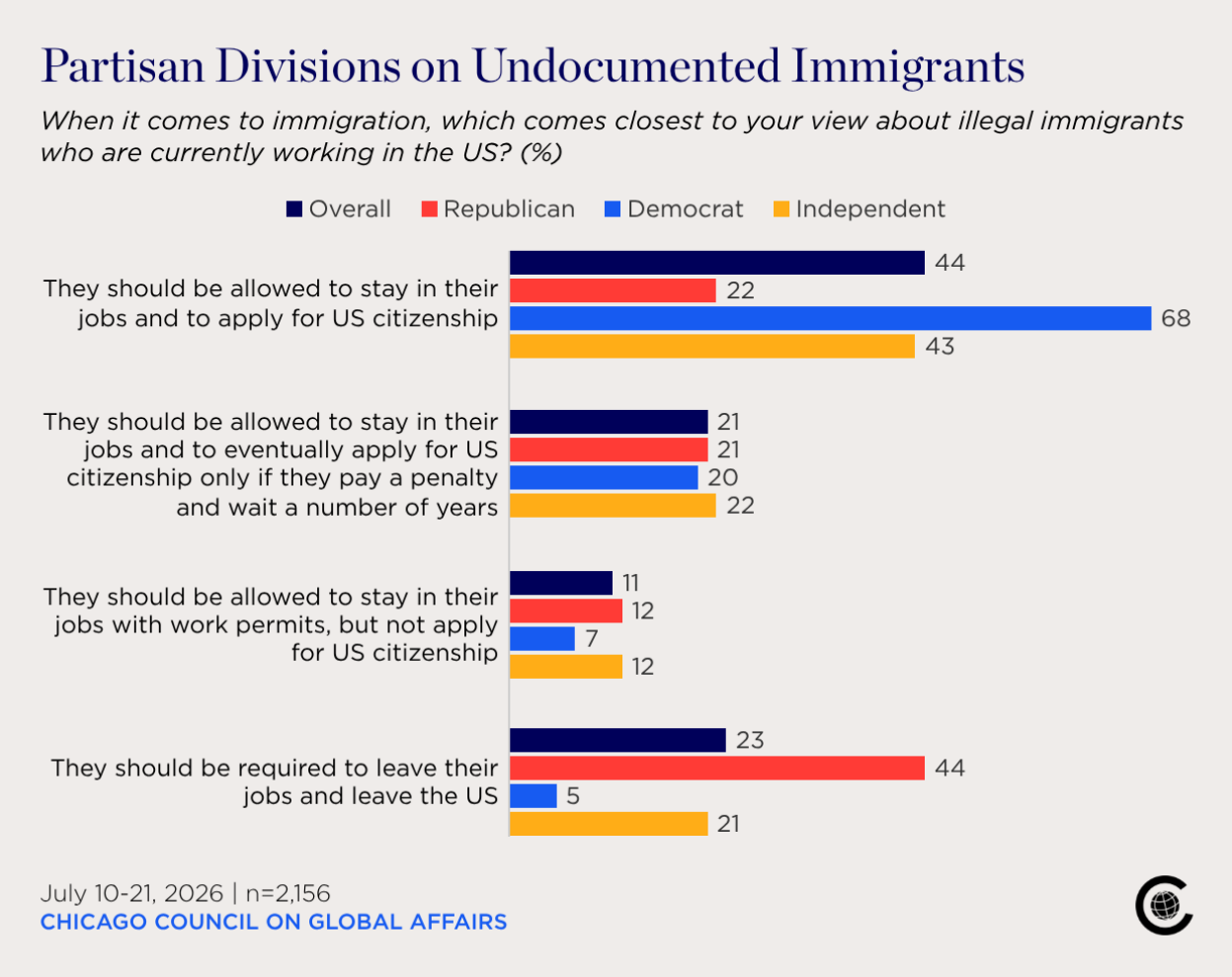
The question of what to do about the estimated 15.8 million undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States continues to be at the core of immigration reform debates.

Over the past decade, Americans have become more likely to favor a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Two-thirds of Americans today (65%) say undocumented immigrants should be able to apply for US citizenship either immediately (44%) or after paying a penalty and waiting for a number of years (21%)—up from 56 percent in 2015. That includes nine in 10 Democrats (88%, up from 77% in 2015) and two-thirds of Independents (65%, up from 52% in 2015).

Republican support, by contrast, has changed little (43%, similar to 2015's 38%)—and has fallen from a high of 52 percent in 2020. Over the same period, Democrats have also become more likely to favor allowing undocumented immigrants to apply for US citizenship *without* conditions: 68 percent today, up from 48 percent in 2015 when the Council first asked this question (see Appendix).



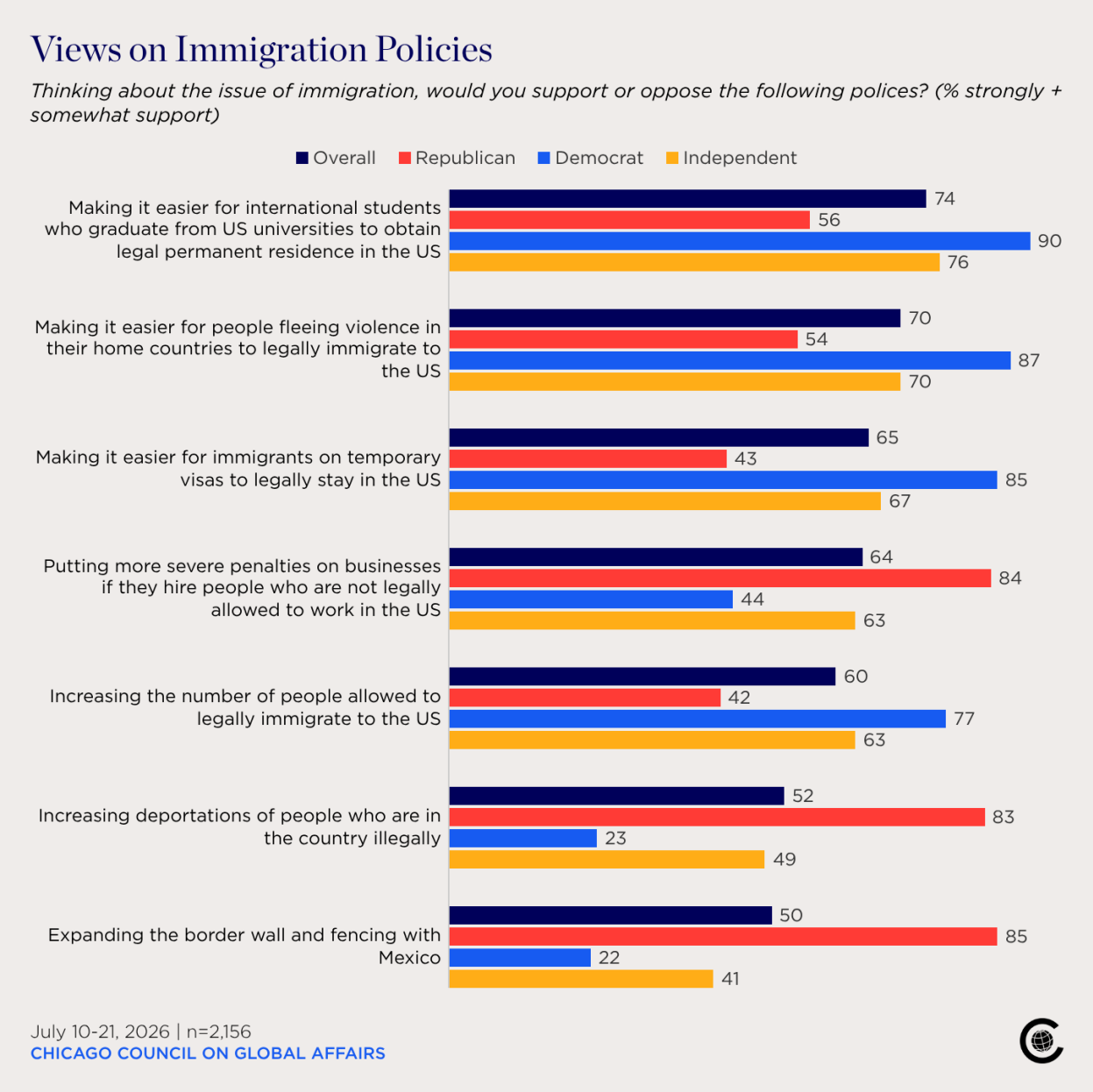
Overall, a quarter of Americans (23%) say undocumented immigrants should be required to leave their jobs and the country, while one in 10 (11%) support granting work permits to those working in the country without documentation, but not a path to US citizenship.



Broad Support for Legal Pathways for Immigration

When it comes to US immigration policies, six in 10 Americans (60%) support increasing the number of people allowed to legally immigrate to the United States, with larger proportions in favor of policies that would make it easier for people to come to or stay in the United States: This includes making it easier for international students to obtain legal permanent residence after graduating (74%), for people fleeing violence in their home countries to legally immigrate (70%), and for immigrants on temporary visas to legally stay in the country (65%).

At the same time, two-thirds of Americans (64%) favor increasing the penalty to businesses for hiring people not legally allowed to work in the United States. Other restrictive policies also get support from half of the public: 52 percent favor increasing deportations of undocumented immigrants and half (50%) favor expanding the border wall and fencing between the United States and Mexico.



Out of the seven proposed policies, two receive majority support across the political spectrum. Majorities of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans all favor making it easier for foreign students graduating from US universities to become legal permanent residents. Similarly, majorities across party lines favor making it easier for those fleeing violence at home to legally come to the United States. This matches the findings of the April 2026 Council-Ipsos poll, in which two-thirds of Americans supported the United States accepting refugees fleeing war and political instability (68%), climate disasters (66%), or political persecution (65%)—with half of Republicans in favor of accepting those fleeing war or political persecution (51% each).

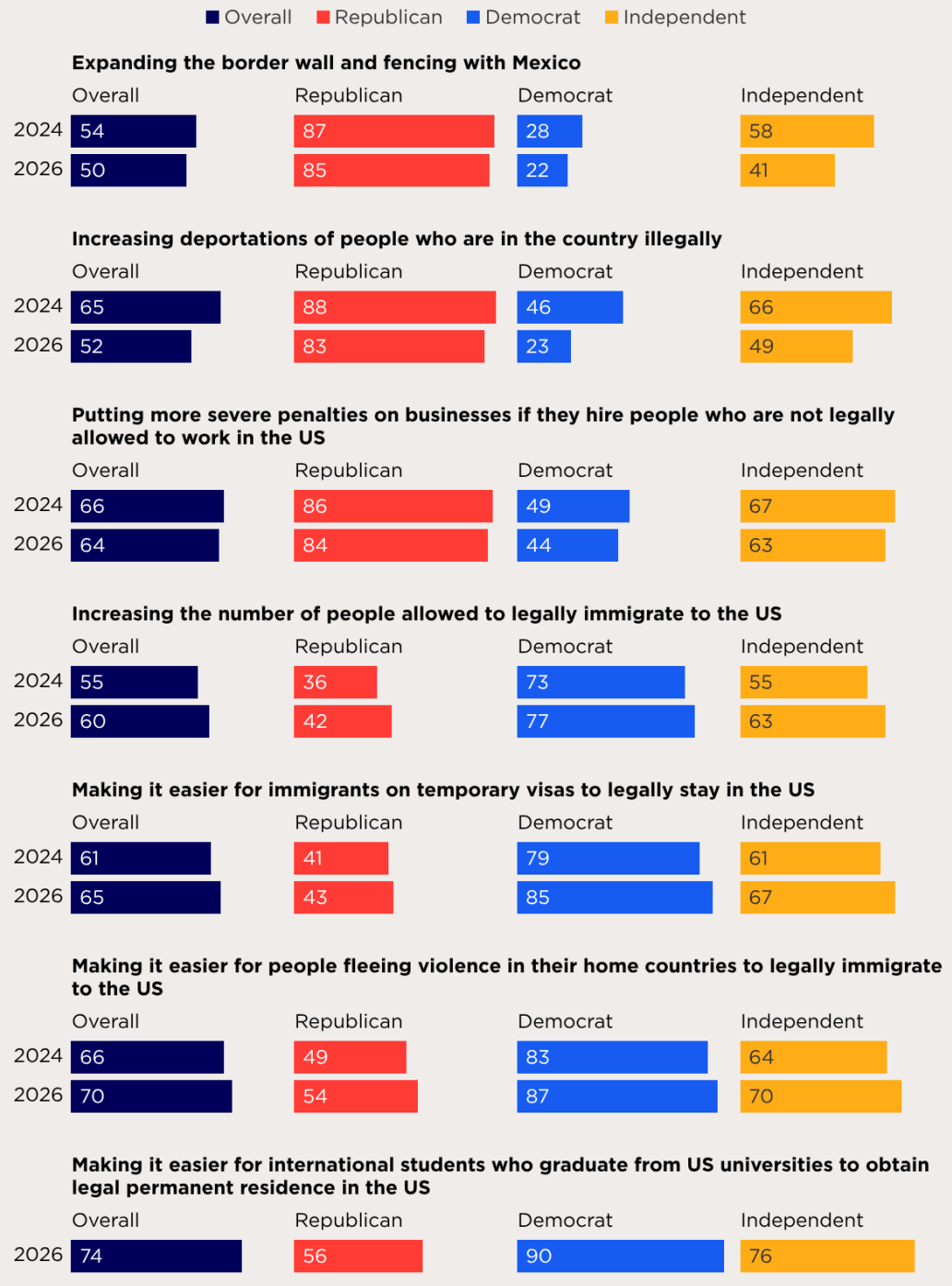
Other pro-immigration policies are supported by majorities of Democrats and Independents but only a minority of Republicans. These include making it easier for immigrants on temporary visas to legally stay in the country and, more generally, increasing the number of people allowed to legally immigrate to the United States. Conversely, a majority of Republicans and Independents favor increased penalties for businesses which hire people without legal work authorization, while just 44 percent of Democrats agree.

Republicans also support an expanded border wall with Mexico (85%) and increased deportations of people in the country without documentation (83%), while fewer than half of Independents and less than a quarter of Democrats favor either policy.

These partisan differences generally look similar to 2024 levels, with a few notable exceptions. Today, Independents are 17 percentage points less likely to favor expanding the US-Mexico border wall and fencing (41%, down from 58%) and are more likely to favor increasing the number of people allowed to immigrate legally to the United States (63%, up from 55%). And both Democrats and Independents have changed their views on deportations. Independents' support for increasing deportations of those in the country without documentation has fallen 17 percentage points (49%, down from 66%), while among Democrats, it has declined by 23 percentage points (23%, down from 46%).

Views on Immigration Policies

Thinking about the issue of immigration, would you support or oppose the following polices? (% strongly + somewhat support)

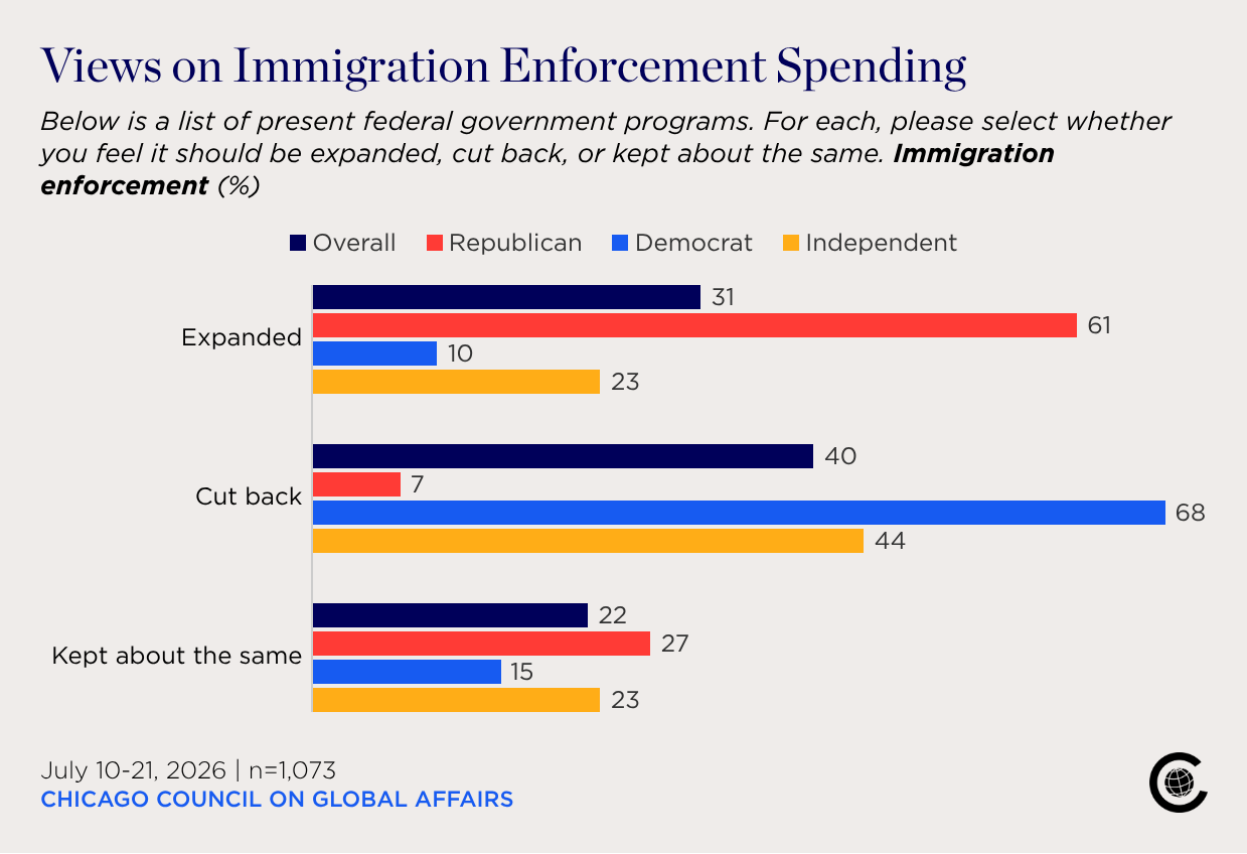


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Sharp Divides over Immigration Enforcement Spending

Overall, four in 10 Americans (40%) favor cuts to immigration enforcement spending, with three in 10 (31%) in favor of expanding that spending and two in 10 (22%) in favor of maintaining present levels. But partisans deeply disagree about the proper levels of funding for federal immigration enforcement. Six in 10 Republicans (61%) favor expanded federal spending on enforcement, while two-thirds of Democrats (68%) and a plurality of Independents (44%) favor cuts.

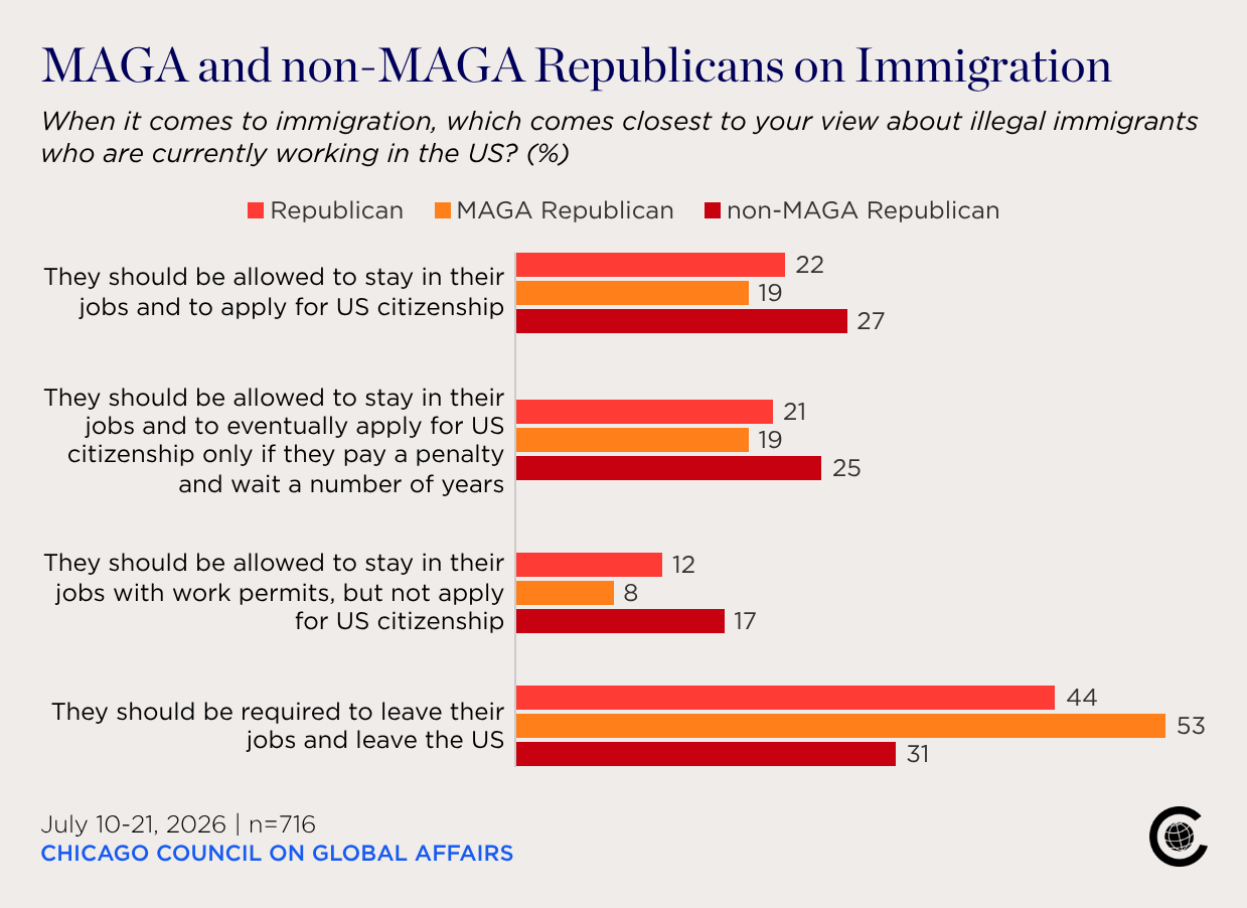


Republicans Split on Legal Immigration; Path to Citizenship

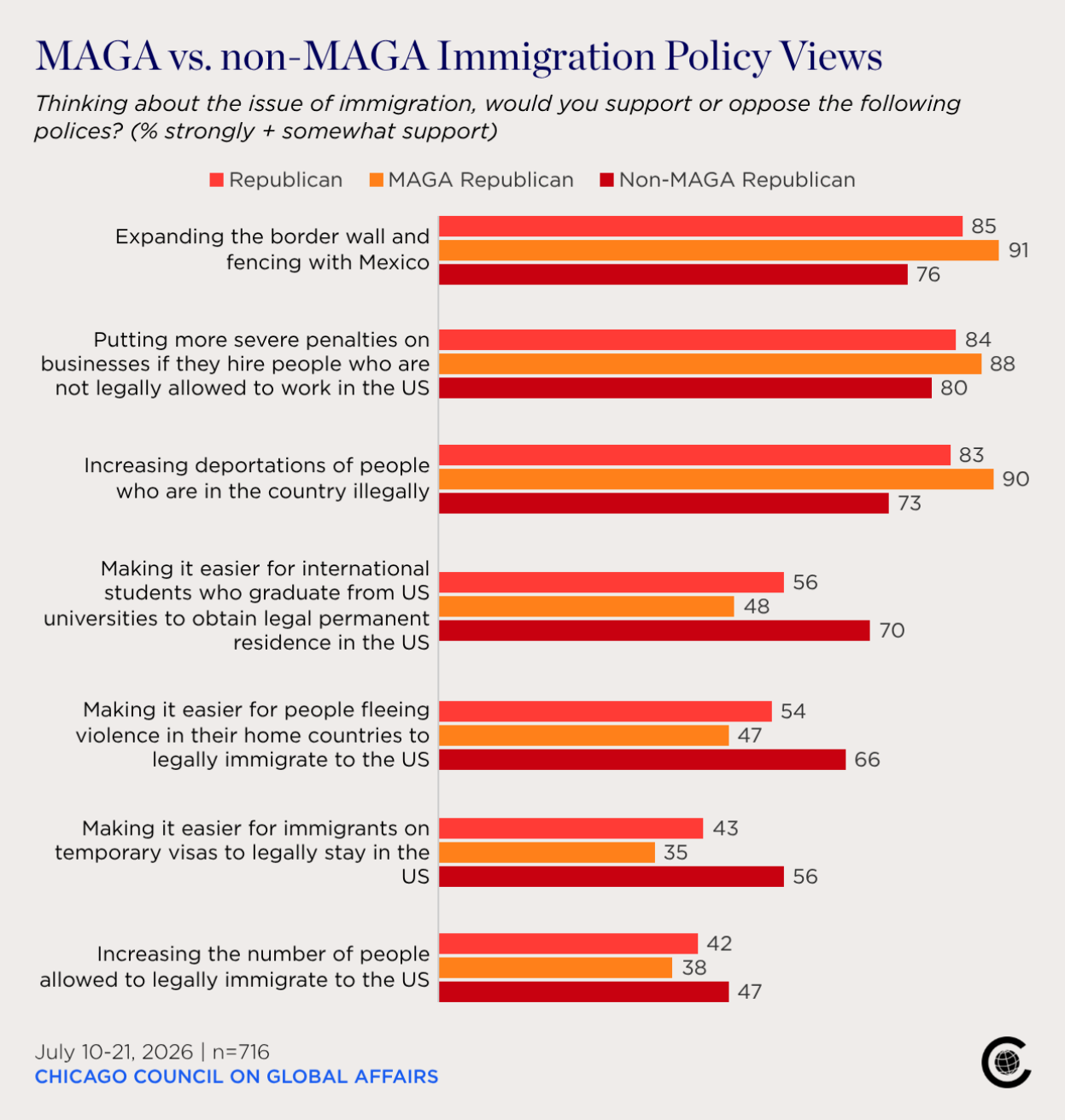
In addition to these interparty divisions on immigration issues, Republicans are also divided internally. Compared to their non-MAGA counterparts, MAGA Republicans are more likely to view large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States as a critical threat (78% vs. 48%). For MAGA Republicans, immigration tops the list of critical threats; for non-MAGA Republicans, it comes behind well other pressing concerns, like government corruption (64%) and Iran's nuclear program (58%).

A majority of MAGA Republicans (53%) say undocumented immigrants working in the United States should be required to leave their jobs and the United States, compared to just three in

10 non-MAGA Republicans (31%). Meanwhile, half of non-MAGA Republicans (52%) say undocumented immigrants should be allowed to apply for US citizenship, either immediately (27%) or following a waiting period and a penalty (25%). MAGA Republicans are less likely to favor a path to citizenship, with just 38 percent in favor of allowing undocumented immigrants a way to apply for US citizenship, either immediately or following a penalty and waiting period (19% each).



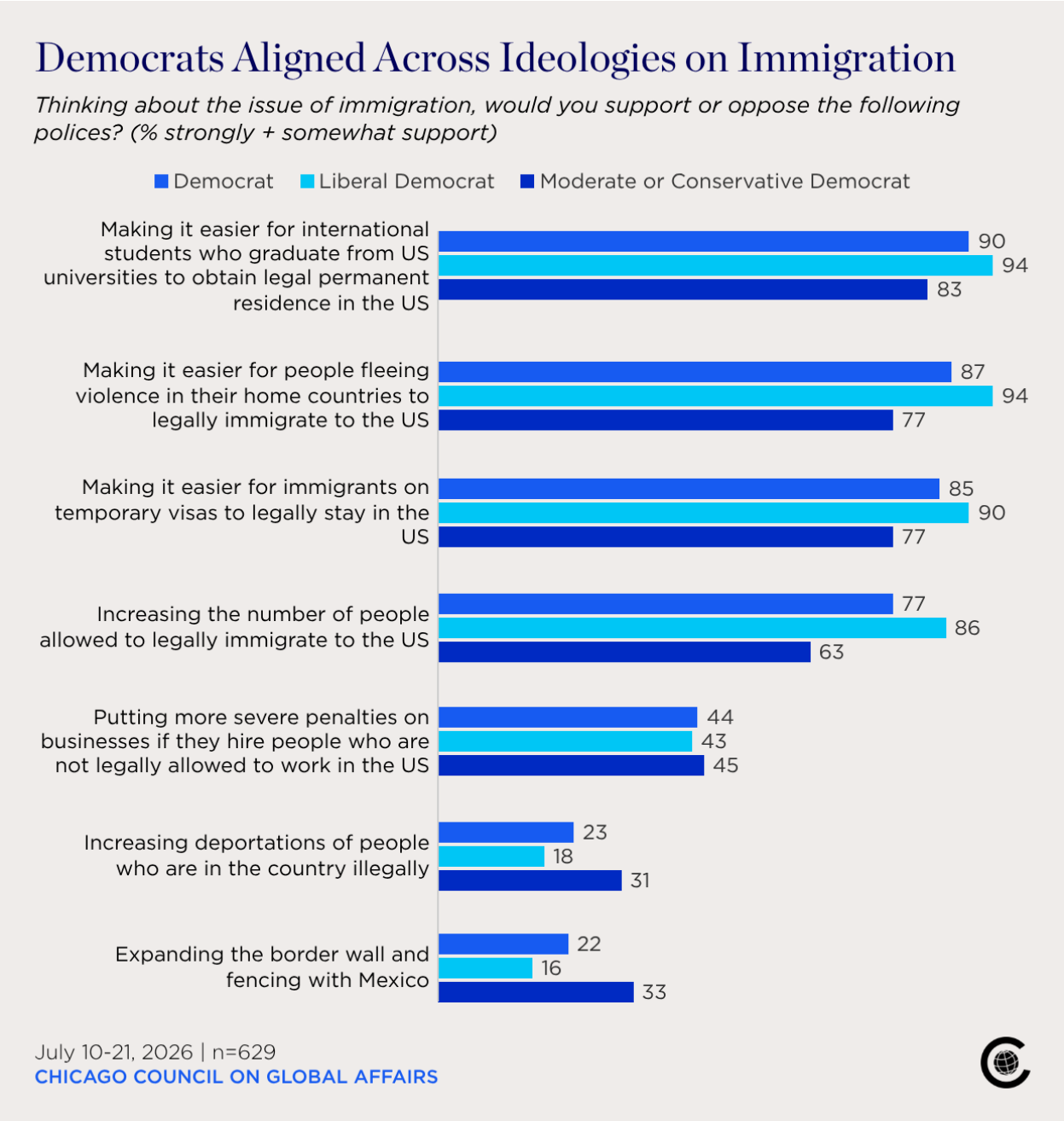
Expanding the federal budget for immigration enforcement is a point of relative agreement, with seven in 10 MAGA Republicans (69%) and half of non-MAGA Republicans (47%) backing higher spending. Both MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans also favor expanding the US-Mexico border wall and fencing, penalizing businesses for hiring unauthorized immigrants, and increasing deportations of those in the country illegally. However, the party faithful splits over policies that would make it easier for people to come to or remain in the United States legally. For example, while seven in 10 non-MAGA Republicans (70%) say it should be easier for students to obtain green cards after graduating from US universities, MAGA Republicans are divided (48% favor, 51% oppose).



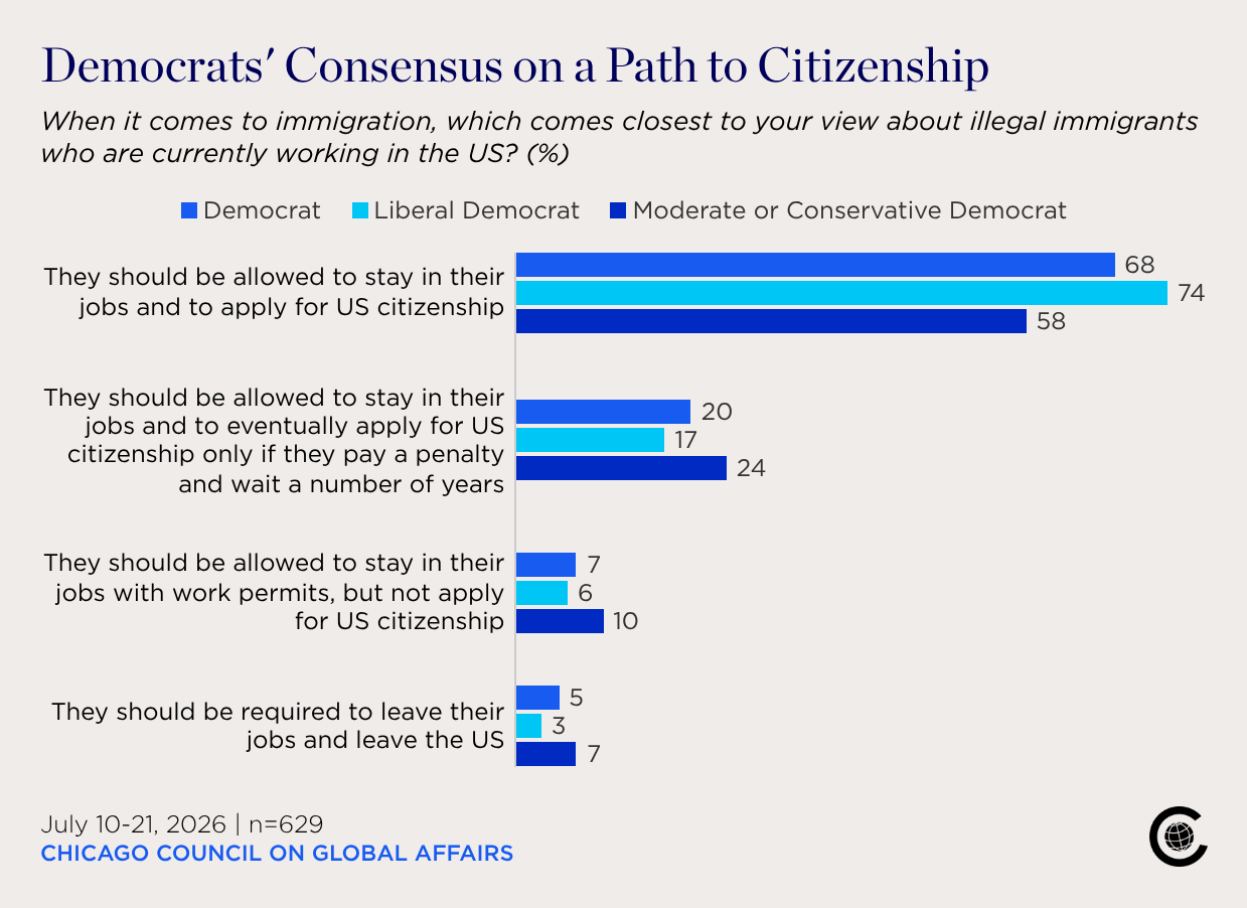
On Immigration, Democrats Find Agreement Across Ideological Spectrum

While immigration is an issue that divides Republicans, that is not the case for Democrats. Both the 63 percent of Democrats who self-identify as liberal and the 37 percent who self-identify as moderate or conservative hold consistently pro-immigration attitudes and favor pro-immigration policies, with few Democrats of any ideology viewing the prospect of large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the country as a critical threat (14% of moderate/conservative Democrats, 7% of liberal Democrats). And while liberal Democrats are

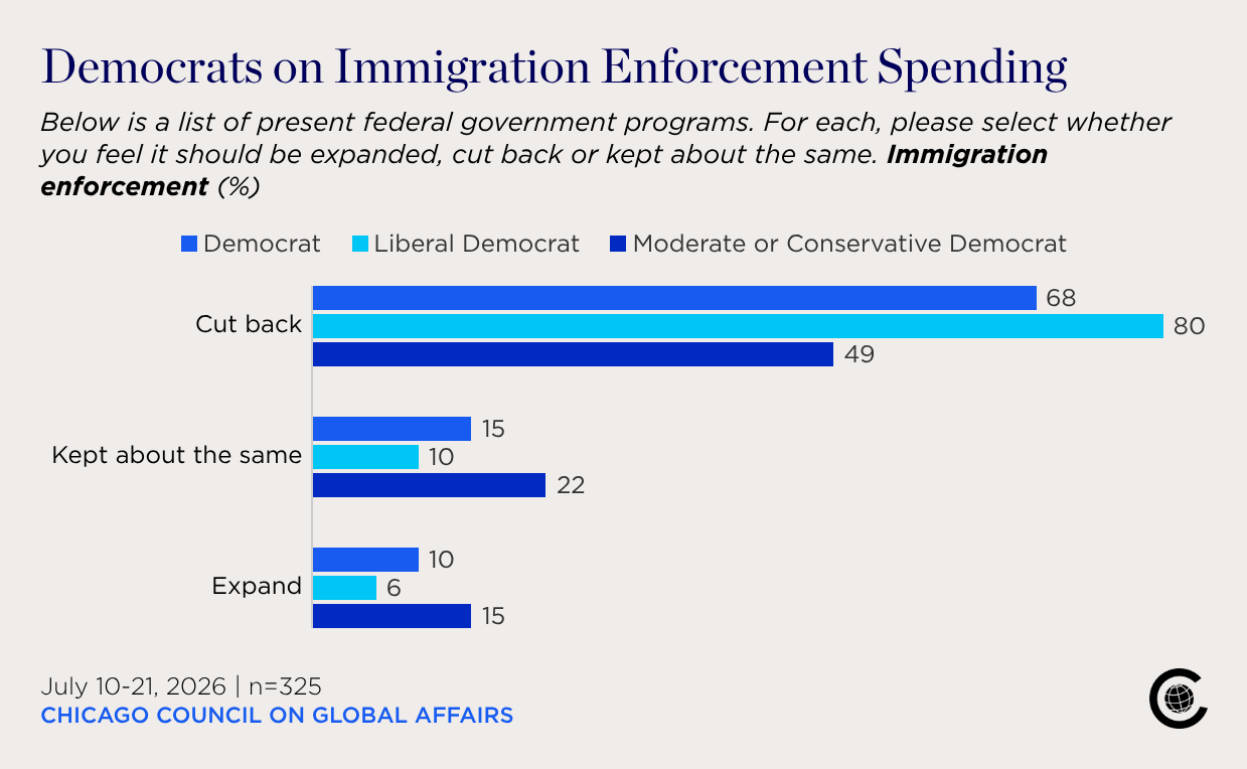
more likely than moderate or conservative Democrats to favor pro-immigrant and pro-immigration policies, the groups differ in degree of support or opposition rather than in kind.



Democrats across the ideological spectrum are similarly aligned in support for providing undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship. Nine in 10 liberal Democrats favor allowing undocumented immigrants to apply for US citizenship, either immediately (74%) or after a penalty and waiting period (17%). Eight in 10 moderate or conservative Democrats agree, with six in 10 (58%) favoring allowing them to apply immediately and another quarter (24%) saying there should be a waiting period and financial penalty.



The greatest point of difference is budgetary, but even here, the wings of the party do not directly disagree. Eight in 10 liberal Democrats (80%) say federal spending on immigration enforcement should be cut back, compared to half of moderate/conservative Democrats (48%). And while moderate and conservative Democrats are more likely than liberal Democrats to favor maintaining or expanding enforcement spending, neither is a particularly popular position.



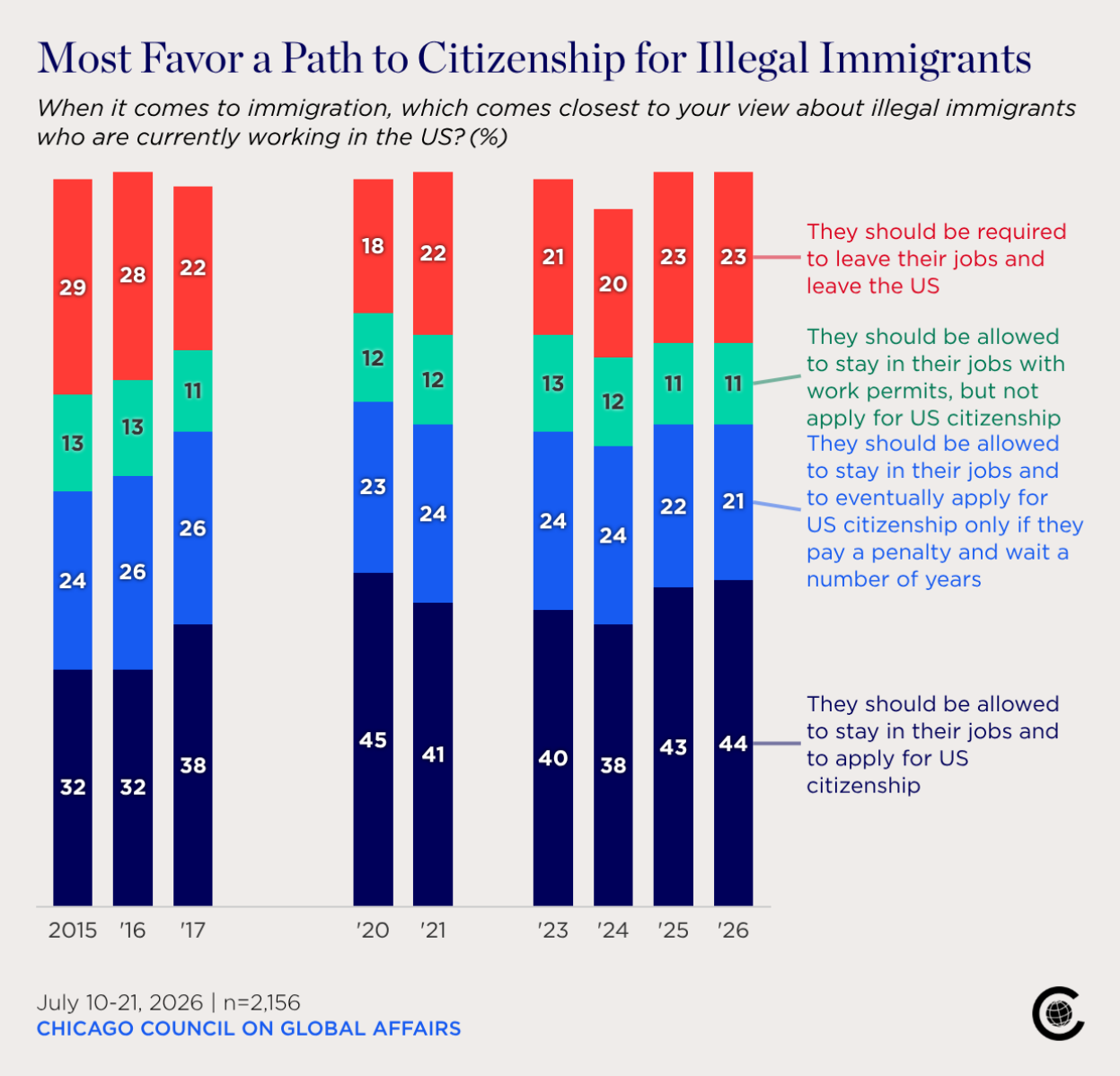
Conclusion

Two years after a presidential election in which immigration played a key role in the campaign, the American public has notably shifted its views. Today, fewer Americans view large numbers of immigrants and refugees entering the country as a critical threat and majorities favor a path to citizenship. And after two years in which the actions of federal agencies like US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have been front-page news, Americans are more likely to favor cutting federal spending on immigration enforcement than expanding it.

Immigration is still one of the most polarizing issues in American politics, with large gaps between Republicans and Democrats on the threat posed by immigration, federal spending on immigration enforcement, and deportation policy. Republicans continue to back an enforcement-first approach, with related policies uniting the MAGA and non-MAGA wings of the party. But Republicans are internally split over how to handle the millions of undocumented immigrants in the country, and whether to make legal immigration easier for students and refugees alike. Democrats, by contrast, are broadly unified on immigration issues. Liberal and moderate/conservative Democrats differ primarily in how strongly they support pro-immigration policies, not whether they support them to begin with.

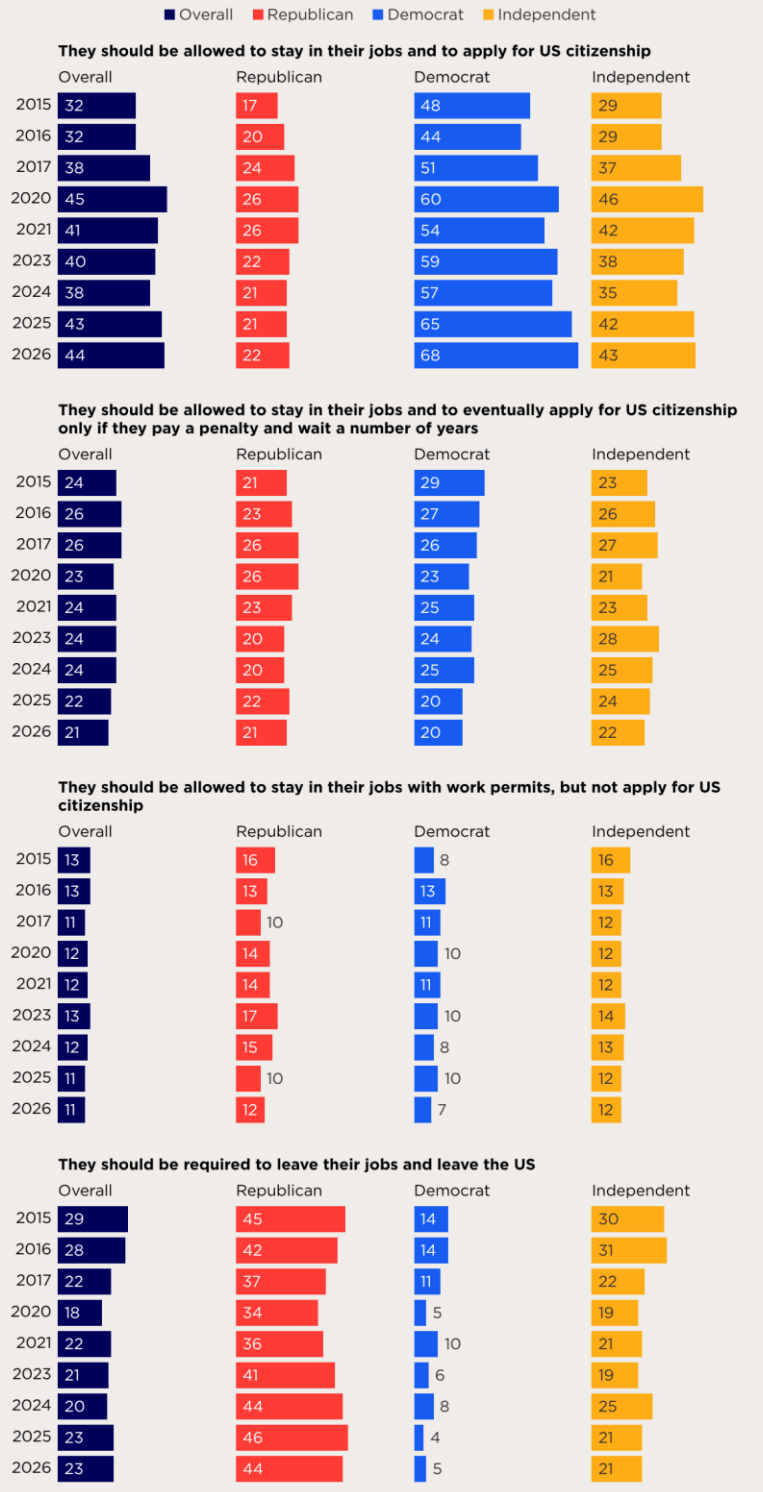
Following their overwhelming victory in the midterm elections, Democrats will control both the House and Senate for the 120th Congress. Its members will be sworn in with a far more pro-immigrant and pro-immigration mandate from their voting base.

Appendix


Most Favor a Path to Citizenship for Illegal Immigrants
When it comes to immigration, which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are currently working in the US? (%)
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They should be required to leave their jobs and leave the US
They should be allowed to stay in their jobs with work permits, but not apply for US citizenship
They should be allowed to stay in their jobs and to eventually apply for US citizenship only if they pay a penalty and wait a number of years
They should be allowed to stay in their jobs and to apply for US citizenship
July 10-21, 2026 | n=2,156
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Policy Towards Working Undocumented Immigrants

When it comes to immigration, which comes closest to your view about illegal immigrants who are currently working in the US? (%)



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For More Information

If you would like more details on the data in this report, please contact the author:

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Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the 2026 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy.

The 2026 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 10-21, 2026, by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide, online research panel (KnowledgePanel) in English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 2,156 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ±2.2 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.04.

The data were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race and ethnicity, education, census region by metropolitan status, household income, and language dominance. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2025 March supplement of the US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS). Additionally, language dominance benchmark was obtained from the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS).

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18–29, 30–44, 45-59, and 60+)
- Race/Hispanic Ethnicity (White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Other Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, 2+ Races Non-Hispanic)
- Education (Less than High School, High School, Some College, Bachelor's degree or higher)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West) by Metropolitan status (Metro, non-Metro)
- Household Income (Under $25,000, $25,000-$49,999, $50,000-$74,999, $75,000-$99,999, $100,000-$149,999, $150,000+)
- Language Dominance (English Dominant Hispanic, Bilingual Hispanic, Spanish Dominant Hispanic, Non-Hispanic)

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

To examine differences within the Republican and Democratic parties, we further divide Republicans and Democrats into subgroups.

Republicans are divided into MAGA Republicans (the 61% of Republicans who also say they are part of the Make America Great Again, or MAGA, movement) and non-MAGA Republicans (the 39% of Republicans who say they are not part of the MAGA movement).

Democrats are divided into ideological groups: 63 percent of Democrats identify as liberal to some degree (12% extremely liberal, 33% liberal, 17% slightly liberal), while another 37 percent of Democrats identify as moderate (30%) or conservative to some degree (6%).

The 2026 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Dr. Scholl Foundation.

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The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at globalaffairs.org.

About the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy

Established in 2018 with a transformative gift from the Crown Family, the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy is driven by the belief that the public plays a critical role in determining the direction of US foreign policy and that an informed and engaged public is critical for effective policymaking. The centerpiece of the Lester Crown Center is its annual survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy, the Chicago Council Survey, which has been conducted since 1974.