

Public Support in Sacramento, California, 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 Sacramento metropolitan area. The survey was administered online in August 2020 and included 1,000 adults (18 years and older) living in the area. The survey sample approximates the Sacramento population with regard to age, education, household income, and race and ethnicity. However, people who are 65 years and older, those who did not graduate from high school, people who identify as male, and white people are underrepresented, while those aged 18 to 24 years, college graduates, and women are overrepresented.

Key findings

Five in seven people in the Sacramento metropolitan area, or 72 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.

Seven in 10 likely voters, or 70 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.

Support for government-funded attorneys increases substantially when lawyers for people in immigration court are framed as part of a larger system of government-funded attorneys for all, with 90 percent of respondents expressing support.

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:

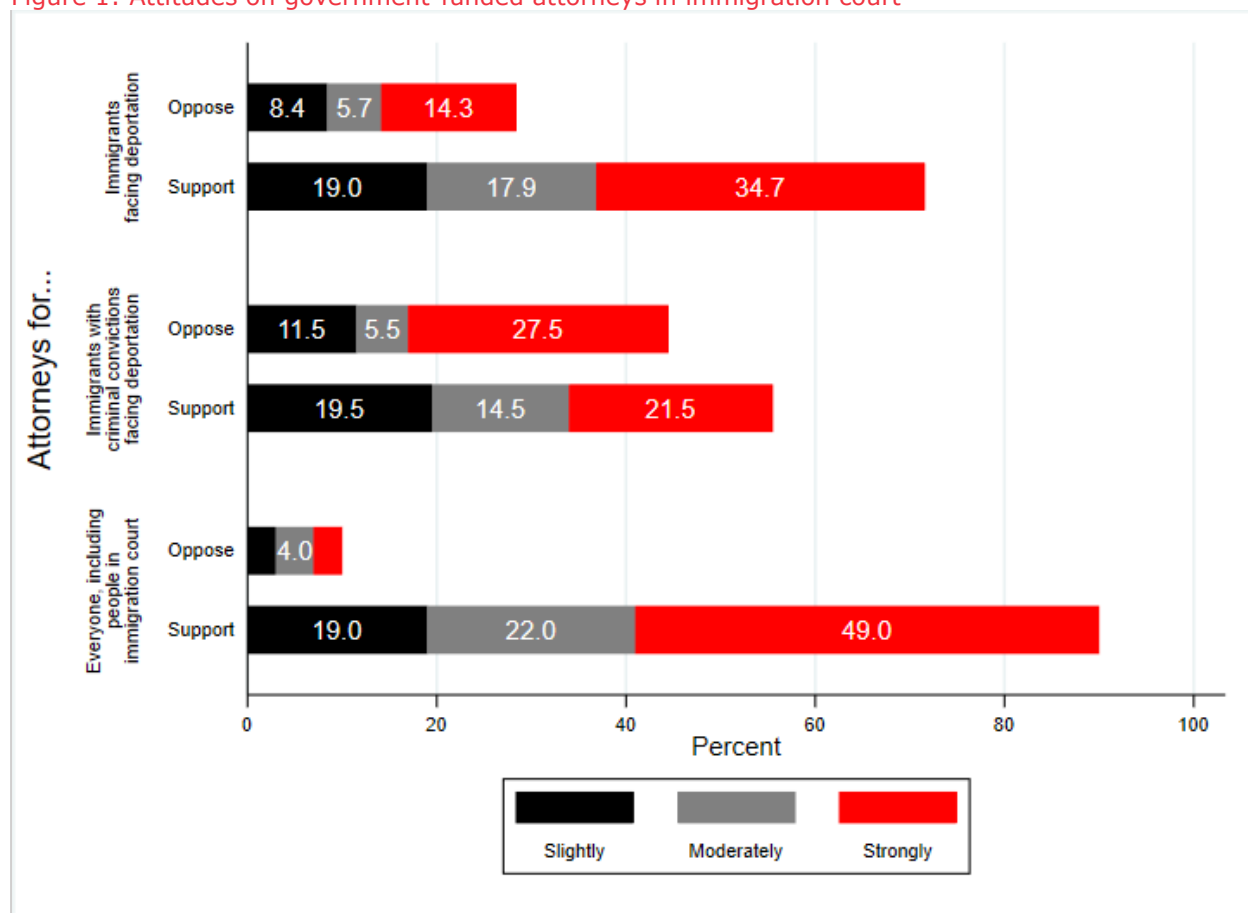
1. Do you support or oppose the government paying for an attorney for immigrants facing deportation who cannot afford one in immigration court?
2. Do you support or oppose the government paying for an attorney for immigrants with criminal convictions who are facing deportation and cannot afford one in 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 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=1,000

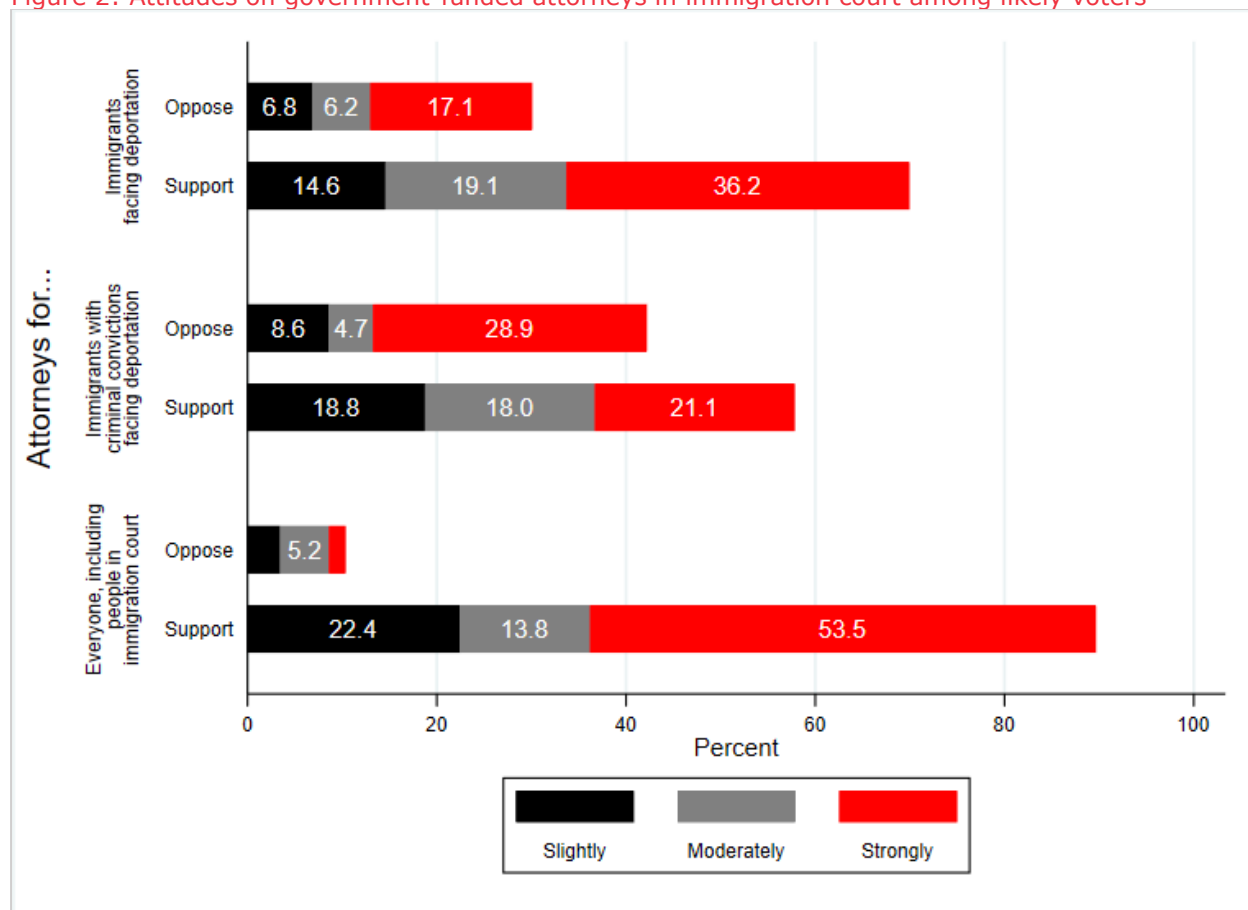
Key findings from Figure 1:

- Most people in the Sacramento metropolitan area support government-funded attorneys in immigration court across all three questions.
 - Seventy-two percent express support for government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation (question one).
 - Fifty-six 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 90 percent expressing support.¹

¹ T-tests that compare mean responses among the three questions reveal significant differences in all comparisons ($p=0.000$ in all comparisons). 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, 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 Sixty-three percent of survey respondents were categorized as likely voters.³

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



n = 625

² 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>.

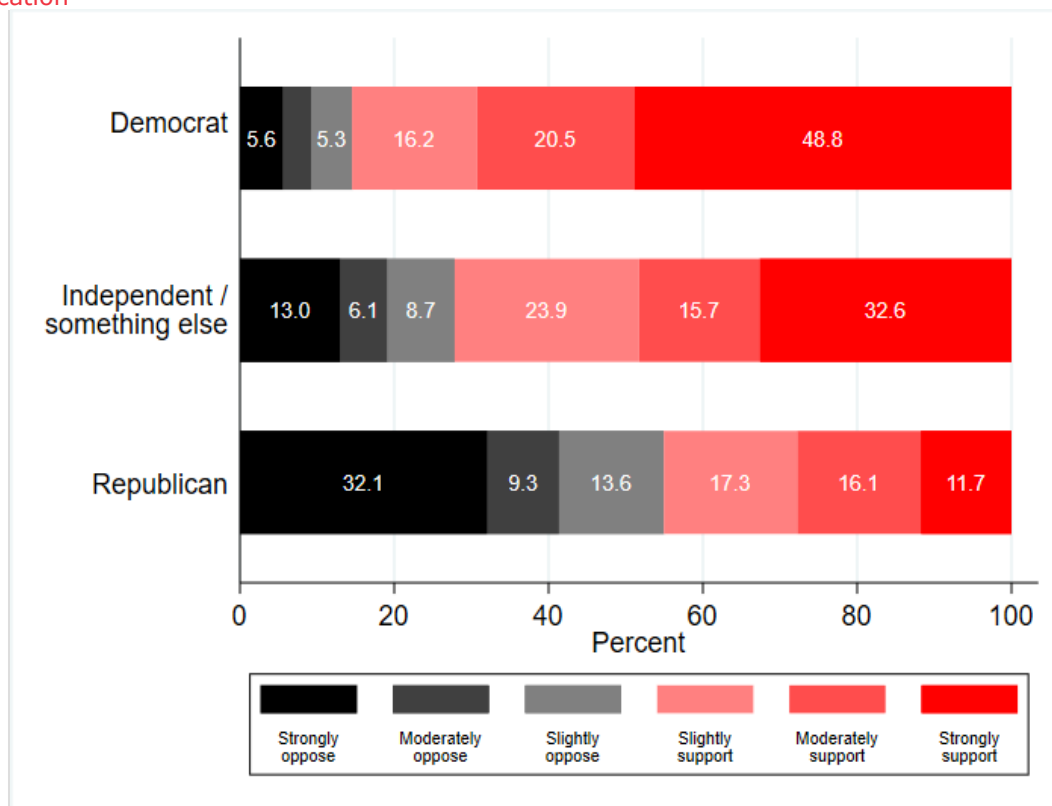
³ For reference, 58 percent of eligible voters in Sacramento County voted in the 2016 presidential election. See California Secretary of State Voter Participation Statistics by County, “November 8, 2016 – General Election (PDF),” <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/statistics/voter-participation-stats-county>.

Key findings from Figure 2:

- Seven in 10 likely voters, or 70 percent, support government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation (question one), with one in three expressing *strong* support.
- Support is particularly high when attorneys for immigrants are framed as part of a larger system of attorneys for all (question three), with 90 percent expressing support.
- Fifty-eight percent of likely voters support government-funded attorneys for people in immigration court with criminal convictions.⁴

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).⁵ 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

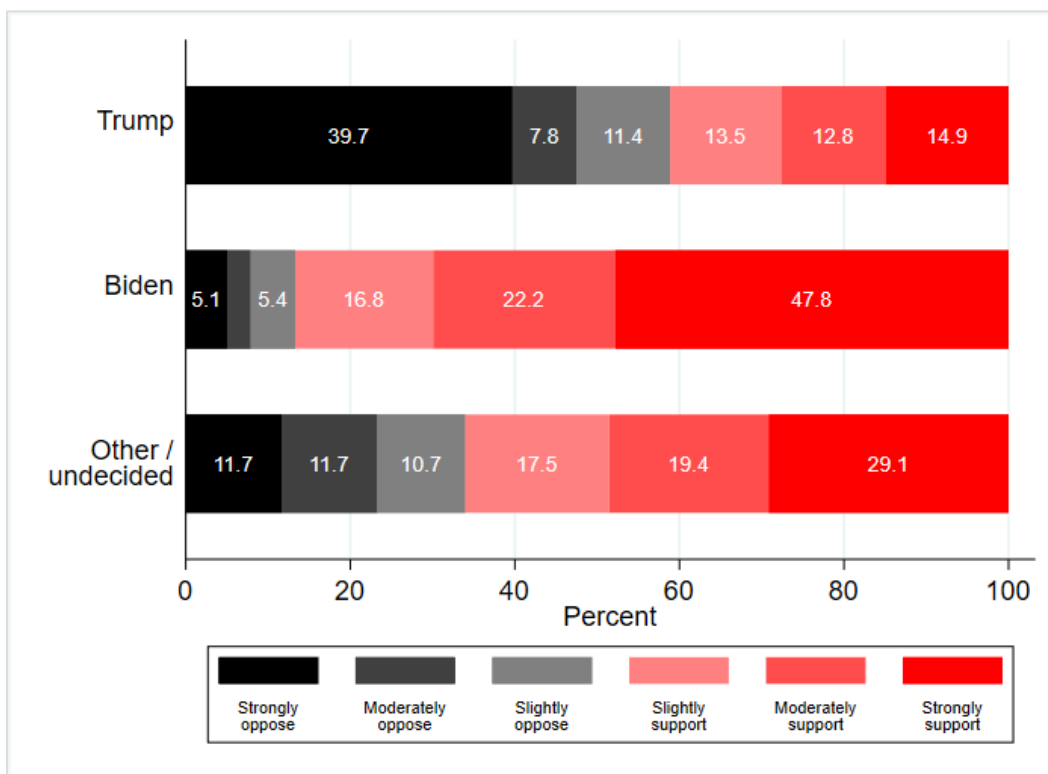


n = 695 (303 Democrats, 230 independents/something else, and 162 Republicans)

⁴ T-tests that compare mean responses among the three questions reveal significant differences in all comparisons ($p \leq 0.001$ in all t-tests).

⁵ 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 political party identification and 2020 vote choice.

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



n = 560 (141 Trump, 316 Biden, and 103 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:

- Democrats, those who do not identify with Democrats nor Republicans, Biden supporters, and those who supported a third-party candidate in the 2020 presidential election or were undecided in presidential candidate choice at the time the survey was administered are very supportive of government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.
 - At the lower end, 66 percent of people who supported a third-party candidate in the 2020 presidential election or were undecided in their presidential candidate choice at the time of the survey expressed support for government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.
 - At the upper end, 87 percent of Biden supporters favor government-funded attorneys for immigrants facing deportation.
- Sizeable shares of Trump supporters (41 percent) and Republicans (45 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 Sacramento metropolitan area who think immigration to the United States should be increased, decreased, or kept the same. The Sacramento 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 Sacramento sample are more or less in line with attitudes across national surveys, where nearly one-third of people in Sacramento think immigration should be decreased, about one-third would like no change to current immigration levels, and a little more than one-third want to increase immigration.

Table 1: Standard immigration question across four surveys

Immigration to the U.S. should be...	Survey			
	Sacramento/Vera	ANES	Gallup	Pew
Increased	39%	32%	34%	32%
Kept the same	34%	38%	36%	38%
Decreased	27%	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.

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	77%
Decreased	40%

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-seven 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 40 percent expressing support.

The findings presented in this report show that most people in the Sacramento metropolitan area support government-funded attorneys in immigration court. Additionally, support may increase when attorneys in immigration court are framed as part of a larger legal representation system for everyone who cannot afford one.