



IMMIGRATION

# Support for Reform, Not a Wall

By Brian Katulis, Peter Juul, and John Halpin

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The Trump administration has instituted major changes to the U.S. immigration system since 2017.<sup>1</sup> These have included policies to effect sharp cuts to legal immigration; multiple versions of a travel ban designed to prevent nationals from mostly Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States; reductions in refugee admission caps to their lowest levels since the U.S. resettlement program began in 1980; large-scale workplace raids; broadened deportations of longtime residents who have no criminal histories; a policy of separating thousands of children from their parents at the border; the wasteful deployment of U.S. military personnel to America’s southern border; and the transfer of \$3.6 billion in military construction funds—and plans to transfer \$3.6 billion more—to build a wall on that border that his current chief of staff once called “absurd and almost childish.”<sup>2</sup>

## Views of American voters

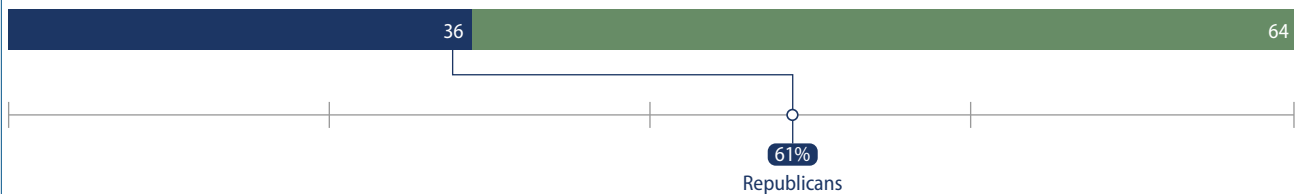
### Comprehensive reform finds broader support than economic aid in tackling the issue of illegal immigration, but majorities support both

Share of respondents, by political affiliation

Q. "For each pair, please tell me which statement comes closer to your own view, even if neither is exactly right." (Split sample tests below)

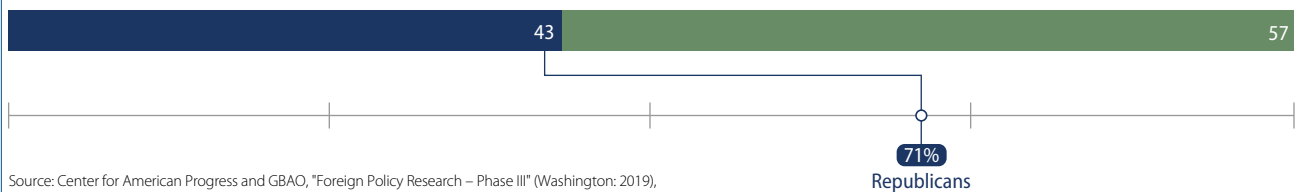
The United States should create strict border controls, starting with a massive border wall, and punish Mexico with tariffs or other financial penalties if they don't do more to stop the flow of illegal immigrants.

The United States should pass comprehensive immigration reform, providing a safe, legal, and managed path to citizenship for people who are willing to work, pay taxes, and help contribute to the future of our nation.



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To reduce the migration of people to our border, the United States should do more to help nations such as Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras fight the drug dealers, gangs, corruption, and widespread poverty that lead people to abandon their homes and seek a better life in the United States.



Source: Center for American Progress and GBAO, "Foreign Policy Research – Phase III" (Washington: 2019), available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/07/29142002/FP-condensed.pdf>.

- **Deep partisan divides on immigration as a security priority.** Overall, more than one-third, or 35 percent, of American voters see illegal immigration as one of the top three foreign policy issues facing the country over the next five years—the third-highest issue after protecting the country against terrorists such as the Islamic State group (ISIS) and al-Qaida (40 percent) and protecting jobs for American workers (36 percent). Republicans overwhelmingly drive this concern, with two-thirds, or 64 percent, saying it should be a top priority versus one-third, or 34 percent, of independents and just one-tenth, or 10 percent, of Democrats. Overall, older generations of American voters support hard-line positions on immigration compared with their younger counterparts.
- **Strong support for sensible and effective policy alternatives to the wall.** Most American voters oppose building a wall and punishing Mexico and instead prefer fixing the U.S. immigration system to create lawful pathways to enter the country and contribute to U.S. society as well as providing help to Central American nations to improve their safety and prosperity at home and alleviate the causes of forced migration. Two-thirds, or 64 percent, of voters support legislative reform to build a fair, humane, and workable immigration system over building a wall. Support for aid to Central America also receives strong majority support: Significantly more than half (57 percent) of Americans back aid versus the slightly more than 4 in 10 (43 percent) who support building a wall.

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## Key points

- Immigration remains a signature issue for the Trump administration, but its policies are out of step with most American voters, who don't see it as high a priority as either President Donald Trump or his conservative nationalist base does. Moreover, they disapprove of Trump's handling of immigration by a 10-point margin, and they favor policy alternatives to his proposed border wall by wide margins.
- The Trump administration's decision to cut U.S. aid to Central American nations will not to help stem migration from those countries and is likely to worsen the conditions driving migration in the first place, as a majority of voters recognize.
- None of President Trump's core immigration policies—the border wall, threats of tariffs against Mexico, and the unnecessary deployment of the U.S. military to the border—have accomplished their stated objectives and offer a poor substitute for policy alternatives that voters actually want, such as reforming U.S. immigration laws to build a system that is fair and humane and that actually works.

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## The progressive policy alternative

- 1. Restore the rule of law through a fair, humane, and workable immigration system.** American voters widely prefer reforming U.S. immigration laws to provide a safe, legal, and managed path for people who are looking to contribute to the future of this country over President Trump's regressive immigration policies and inflammatory rhetoric that are only making it harder to reach real solutions.
- 2. Mitigate causes of forced migration from Central America.** The United States should invest in efforts to mitigate and manage migration in Central America responsibly rather than cut off economic assistance as the Trump administration has done.
- 3. Coordinate with other nations to manage regional migration.** Migration from Central America isn't just an issue for the United States; it affects other nations, such as Mexico. A regional approach to migration requires constructive engagement with Mexico as well as with international financial institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank.

Most voters favor reforms to America's immigration system to make it more fair, humane, and workable. But President Trump's immigration policies and rhetoric draw significant support from conservative nationalists and make it harder for the American people to get the immigration reform they want.

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*This information is based on a national poll of 1,200 registered voters conducted July 10 to 14, 2019, by the Center for American Progress and GBAO. It is also informed by a series of focus groups, qualitative interviews, and a national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted February 25 to March 3, 2019. Polling results are on file with the authors.*

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## Endnotes

- 1 For further reading on this topic, see Dan Restrepo, Trevor Sutton, and Joel Martinez, "Getting Migration in the Americas Right: A National Interest-Driven Approach" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/06/24/471322/getting-migration-americas-right/>; Dan Restrepo, Michael Werz, and Joel Martinez "Preserving and Strengthening the U.S.-Mexico Relationship" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2017), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/01/30/297187/preserving-and-strengthening-the-u-s-mexico-relationship/>; Tom Jawetz, "Restoring the Rule of Law Through a Fair, Humane, and Workable Immigration System" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2019/07/22/472378/restoring-rule-law-fair-humane-workable-immigration-system/>.
- 2 Robert L. Tsai, "Trump's Travel Ban Faces Fresh Legal Jeopardy," *Politico*, March 27, 2019, available at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/27/trump-travel-ban-lawsuit-supreme-court-unconstitutional-226103>; Daniel Trotta and Mica Rosenberg, "New Trump rule targets poor and could cut legal immigration in half, advocates say," Reuters, August 12, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-benefits/new-trump-rule-targets-poor-and-could-cut-legal-immigration-in-half-advocates-say-idUSKCN1V219N>; Deirdre Shesgreen and Courtney Subramanian, "Trump administration to slash admission of refugees fleeing war, violence and persecution," *USA Today*, September 26, 2019, available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/09/26/trump-administration-sets-lowest-cap-ever-admission-refugees/2274379001/>; Dianne Gallagher, Catherine E. Shoichet, and Madeleine Holcombe, "680 undocumented workers arrested in record-setting immigration sweep on the first day of school," CNN, August 9, 2019, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/08/us/mississippi-immigration-raids-children/index.html>; Dara Lind, "Beyond family separation: Trump's ongoing war on asylum, explained," Vox, August 6, 2019, available at <https://www.vox.com/explainers/2018/8/6/17501404/trump-asylum-separate-legal-definition>; Alan Gomez, "ICE sets record for arrests of undocumented immigrants with no criminal record," *USA Today*, March 21, 2019, available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/03/21/ice-sets-record-arrests-undocumented-immigrants-no-criminal-record/3232476002/>; Tara Copp, "Deployments to US-Mexico border straining Marine Corps, commandant warns," *Military Times*, March 21, 2019, available at <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/03/21/border-ops-straining-marine-corps-commandant-warns/>; Andrew Kaczynski, "Mick Mulvaney in 2015: Trump's views on border wall 'simplistic,' absurd and almost childish," CNN, December 21, 2019, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/21/politics/mulvaney-on-trump-in-2015/index.html>; Nick Miroff and Josh Dawsey, "Trump officials considering plan to divert billions of dollars in additional funds for border barrier," *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2019, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/trump-officials-considering-plan-to-divert-billions-of-dollars-in-additional-funds-for-border-barrier/2019/09/19/52897dce-d652-11e9-9610-fb56c5522e1c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/trump-officials-considering-plan-to-divert-billions-of-dollars-in-additional-funds-for-border-barrier/2019/09/19/52897dce-d652-11e9-9610-fb56c5522e1c_story.html).