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POLITICS

3 theories for America's anti-immigrant shift

A recent poll suggests a reversal in a decades-long trend of the public warming to immigrants. What's causing the shift?

by **Christian Paz**

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Pro-immigrant activists have seen public opinion shift against their cause, recent polling suggests. Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images



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Six years ago, the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy at the southern border went into effect. Thousands of immigrant families were split up; migrant children were taken and kept separately while their parents awaited prosecution. The images and sounds of caged children stunned the nation, and the outcry was swift: Democrats rallied against then-President Donald Trump, protests swept the country, and public opinion was sharply against Trump's policy. Immigration soared to become a top concern again, and the share of Americans saying immigration was a good thing for the country jumped. That sentiment continued to grow during the rest of Trump's presidency.

Now, things look much different. Americans once again view immigration as the country's single most important problem, but public sentiment appears to have taken a sharp turn to the negative. Polling this spring and summer seems to suggest that a significant share of American voters — not just Republicans — are warming up to the idea of tough-on-immigration policy proposals and rhetoric.

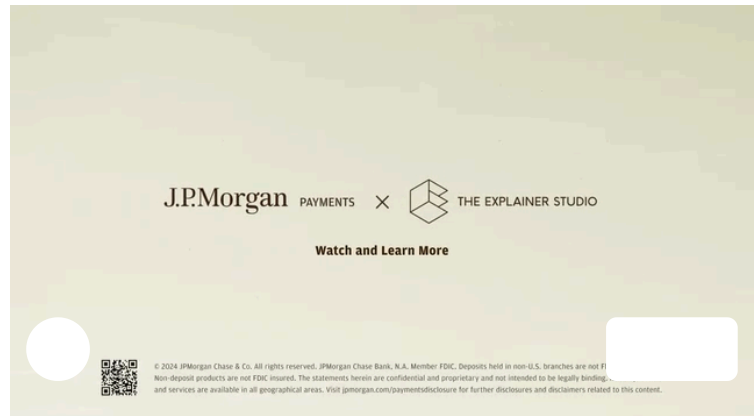
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Numerous polls suggest the American public is souring on immigration, with even Democratic voters showing more interest in Donald Trump's policy proposals for mass deportations. It's a reversal of the public's several-decades-long trend of increasing sympathy and appreciation for immigrants. This piece lays out three reasons for this surprising trend in public opinion.

According to Gallup, 2024 is the first time since 2005 that most of the public have wanted less immigration, and this year marks the largest share of Americans feeling resistant to immigration since 58 percent said so in 2001.

And those shifts are happening across party lines: Gallup notes in its most recent public opinion report that the desire to decrease immigration has jumped 15 percentage points among Republicans, 11 points among independents, and 10 points among Democrats — the group most supportive of immigration.

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An Axios poll from April suggested 42 percent of Democrats would support mass deportations of undocumented immigrants. Other polls have also found an anti-immigrant shift in the public's mood. Gallup's long-term tracking poll, which has been running since the 1960s, shows a more general decline in the share of Americans who want to increase rates of immigration or keep them the same.

Conversely, the portion of Americans who want to decrease immigration has spiked: 55 percent of Americans feel this way, up from a low point of 28 percent in 2020.

This shift against immigration is happening even as the general American consensus has been moving in favor of immigrants over the last few decades. In 1994, for example, 63 percent of Americans believed that immigrants were a “burden” to the country; only 31 percent said immigrants strengthen the country, according to Pew Research Center data. By 2019, those dynamics had flipped: 62 percent of Americans

believed immigrants were an asset to the nation; only 28 percent thought they were a burden.

Now, with the public seemingly lurching to the right on immigration, politicians are moving accordingly. There's been a rightward pivot by Biden and congressional Democrats, and Trump — who built his first campaign on demonizing immigrants (and particularly immigrants of color) — has stepped up his constant attacks on the Biden administration's immigration policy.

So what explains the American public's souring mood on immigrants and immigration?

Though there are no simple answers, pollsters and immigration researchers offer a few explanations that can be roughly sorted into three theories.

The first theory centers the role of elected officials — specifically Republicans, and more specifically Trump. As Republicans left power and shifted into opposition mode, they've refocused attention on immigration as a threat to American identity.

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Other experts argue the economy — particularly inflation and the public’s “scarcity mindset” — has made more Americans critical of immigration. When the public feels as though the economy is booming and there’s plenty to go around, they feel more open to sharing that wealth. But when people perceive the economy to be tenuous, like after the pandemic when inflation took off, Americans feel more hesitant to share with outsiders.

A third group argues that the anti-immigrant turn is being driven by concerns about the rule of law and social disorder. This theory posits that the post-pandemic surge in crime, combined with heightened media coverage of disorder in public, prompted greater concerns from Americans about security and quality of life — concerns that were then also applied to the border and people trying to cross it without documentation.

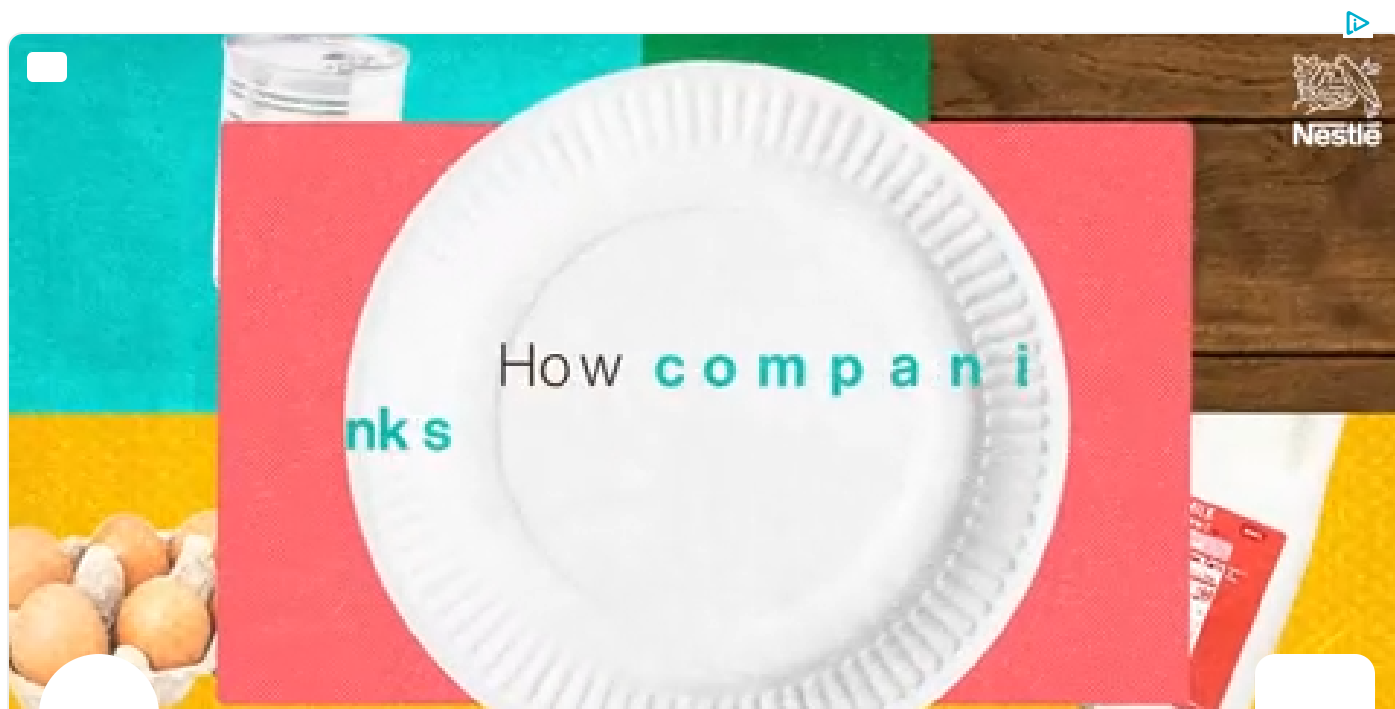
Theory 1: It’s the politicians

Trump’s first presidential campaign — starting quite literally with his announcement speech — was built on demonizing immigrants and claiming that open borders were destroying America. But that created a rhetorical tension once he took office, as he had to claim that the problem was rapidly improving thanks to his new anti-immigration measures.

Since Joe Biden took office, he has pledged a more open, humanitarian approach to immigration and border politics. He paused construction on a border wall; he issued new protections for DACA recipients, and sent a new immigration bill to Congress. He essentially sought to create the sharpest contrast possible with Donald Trump’s legacy.

That shift, however, created the perfect opportunity for Republicans, led by Trump, to once again cast immigration and immigrants as a threat to American identity. The surge in illegal border crossings and legal asylum seekers that followed the pandemic — as well as this liberalizing of migration policy — were fodder for the fear-mongering and exploitation of racial and social fears. And right-wing politicians and commentators have routinely played up this threat, unifying immigrant-skeptical Americans.

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The lead-up to the 2022 midterms and the 2024 campaign so far provide evidence of this shift. While the 2020 campaign centered on the pandemic and the economy, once Biden took over, Republican candidates across the country shifted into talk about “open borders.”

For example, the pro-immigration groups America’s Voice and Immigration Hub in 2021 tracked an increase in mentions of the terms “Biden-Harris border crisis” and “mass amnesty” in paid advertising, as well as increased anti-immigrant discourse online. Once the midterm season picked up, more Republican campaign ads began to mention immigration negatively — about one in five ads in March 2022, for example. And in 2024, Republican candidates (most visibly Donald Trump) have also stepped up talk of immigrant “invasions.”

Trump’s more recent framing of illegal immigration as “poisoning the blood of our country” is a key example of this more vitriolic talk of immigrants. And it fits into a longstanding history of American xenophobia; immigration scholars consider this kind of discourse a direct appeal to “in-groups”: existing communities that define themselves against “out-groups” like immigrants, and exploit suspicion and bigotry.

Still, this theory can't fully explain the shift in negative sentiment since the pandemic. Republican politicians (including, famously, Trump) and right-wing media have previously led other cycles of outrage and panic over migration, "caravans," and the southern border. Immigration was a key campaign point for Republicans during the 2018 midterms, but support for immigration continued to rise.

Theory 2: It's the economy

When Americans feel good about their financial security and the health of the national economy, they also feel good about immigrants and immigration. That's the lesson from the last few decades of Gallup polling, according to Jeff Jones, one of Gallup's data and public opinion experts.

"We saw some declines around the Great Recession — favorable percentages were in the 50s — and then in 2018 and 2019, opinions were quite positive," Jones told me. In fact, both Republicans and Democrats were more positive about immigration during that time.

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But after the pandemic and its ensuing inflation and interest rate hikes, economic sentiment took a nosedive, and anti-immigrant sentiment began to pick up as well.

These more recent swings also show up in a few of Gallup's other tracking polls. When asked whether immigrants have a positive or negative effect on job opportunities, taxes, or the economy in general, negative sentiment tended to increase in the lead-up to the Great Recession but recovered after. A similar dynamic emerged before and after the pandemic: 43 percent of respondents said immigrants had a positive effect on the economy, while 31 percent said it had a negative effect. By 2023, respondents were nearly evenly divided: 39 percent to 38 percent.

But economics alone don't explain recent twists. Both economic conditions and sentiment about the economy have been improving more markedly over the last year, but the public's anti-immigrant shift has been accelerating. Clearly, something else is happening here.

Theory 3: It's the "law-and-order" mindset

Matthew Wright, a University of British Columbia political scientist who studies immigration, suggests a third complementary explanation: a renewed public desire for "law-and-order" policies prompted by the pandemic-era rise in crime and the Biden-era increase in border-crossing attempts.

Compared to the lull in rates of immigration during the pandemic, the surge in border crossings in the last three years was unprecedented, overwhelming what federal and local officials have been able to manage. That volume has resulted in dramatic scenes at the border, in border communities, and in big cities, where many asylum seekers have been moved.

Wright suggests that a good chunk of Americans feel conflicting emotions that conflate illegal immigration, asylum seekers, and immigration in general with a sense of public disorder. They are torn between having sympathy for immigrants in general and feeling worried about public safety, order, and the rule of law. And they combine their feelings about the border with their attitudes about crime and governance.



“In terms of what people are concerned about, the way I read these figures and these trends is that they’re mainly concerned about illegal immigration, and they’re mainly concerned about the border,” Wright said. “There’s something to be said for people being seriously uncomfortable with the idea that their country doesn’t have a border, that the border is not something we can enforce.”

Gallup polling also provides some clues of shifting sentiment here: In 2023, 47 percent of Americans said they believed immigrants had a worsening effect on crime in the US, up from 42 percent in 2019. And the share of Americans who say they personally worry a “great deal” specifically about *illegal* immigration has steadily increased since 2020 — from 32 percent in March 2020 to 48 percent in March of this year.

To Wright, these findings complement other polling that shows a confounding mix of opinions on immigration. A not insignificant number of voters hold both these more critical views of immigration as well as generally open views: positive toward refugees, favoring reform of legal migration, and supporting pathways to citizenship for those already here.

This law-and-order theory suggests that these voters can hold competing ideas in their minds: not opposing migration, but wanting it done in an orderly manner. This theory also explains why Trump and Republicans may have a unique opening this year — to activate both nativist and bigoted attitudes in some voters, as well as to exploit fear of “chaos” and bad management.

“They can use a very simple message to capture different kinds of people: They can capture both the prejudicially motivated person and the pure law-and-order guy — that person is not expressly racist, necessarily, but values order in society,” Wright said.

Update, July 12, 10:40 am ET: *This story, published May 24, has been updated to include new Gallup polling on the American public’s sentiments toward immigration.*

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