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Californians Split on Immigration: Large Rift Among Democrats

by Mark DiCamillo, Director, *Berkeley IGS Poll*

By a more than two-to-one margin (62% to 30%), California voters do not feel that U.S. borders are secure in preventing people from entering the country illegally. In addition, four in ten voters believe that unauthorized immigrants coming across the border are a major burden to the nation. This compares to 30% who view them as a minor burden and 22% who do not believe they are a burden.

Republican voters, conservatives and voters backing Donald Trump for president overwhelmingly concur that U.S. borders are not secure and consider unauthorized immigrants a major burden to the country. By contrast, the opinions of the state's Democrats, liberals, and those backing President Joe Biden's bid for re-election hold divided views about the security of the border, and pluralities view unauthorized immigrants as a minor burden.

The poll finds less consensus among Californians when asked about the nation's asylum laws that apply to immigrants attempting to enter the U.S. because of persecution in their home countries. While about one in three Californians (36%) view the nation's current asylum laws as too lenient, another 23% believe they are about right, and 22% see them as too restrictive. Voters are also evenly split about whether passing more restrictive asylum laws would be effective in actually reducing the number of asylum seekers showing up at the border.

Partisanship colors perceptions on these asylum-related matters as well. Majorities of Republicans and conservatives believe current asylum laws are too lenient and feel that enacting tougher laws would be effective in stemming the flow of asylum seekers to the U.S. By contrast, most of the state's Democrats and liberals do not view current asylum laws as too lenient and a majority believes that enacting stricter laws would not be effective in reducing the number of these immigrants coming to the U.S. border.

These findings come from the latest *Berkeley IGS Poll* conducted online among a random sample of 8,199 California registered voters January 4-8, 2024, in English and Spanish.

IGS Co-Director G. Cristina Mora notes that "the findings show that immigration is not clear cut even in California, whose reputation as a sanctuary state often colors discussion on the issue. California Democrats appear to be split evenly on border security and only a slight majority even considers the undocumented to be a burden, with most seeing them as a minor burden. Such rifts seem to reflect broader frustrations with the Biden administration, as California pro-immigration Democrats see his

policies as a continuation of the restrictive 'Deporter in Chief' practices of the Obama administration, while more conservative California Democrats call for more Trumpian approaches to the issue."

Most Californians feel the nation's borders are not secure
By a more than two-to-one margin (62% to 30%) the state's registered voters do not feel that U.S. borders are secure in preventing people from entering the country illegally. Likely voters concur by an even larger 65% to 29% margin.

Nearly nine in ten of the state's Republicans and conservatives concur, as do voters who say they prefer Trump over Biden in the upcoming November presidential election. This view is also shared by two-thirds (64%) of the state's No Party Preference voters. By contrast, Democrats and voters backing Biden over Trump in a possible 2024 presidential election re-match are about evenly divided in their views about this. Californians describing themselves as strongly liberal in politics view things differently, with more believing that U.S. borders are secure than are not 54% to 30%.

Majorities of voters across all regions of the state do not think U.S. borders are secure, including 59% of voters in San Diego County, which borders Mexico. Older voters also stand out as a segment more likely to feel that U.S. borders are not secure compared to younger voters.

Table 1
Are U.S. borders secure in preventing people from entering the country illegally?
(among California registered voters)

	Secure %	Not secure %	No opinion %
Total registered voters	30	62	8
Likely voters	29	65	6
Voting preference for President			
Biden	45	46	9
Trump	8	89	3
Undecided	22	55	23
Party registration			
Democrats	44	44	12
Republicans	6	92	2
No party preference	27	64	9
Other parties	25	65	10
Political ideology			
Strongly conservative	8	88	4
Somewhat conservative	9	88	3
Moderate	27	64	9
Somewhat liberal	42	48	10
Strongly liberal	54	30	16
Age			
18-29	39	44	17
30-39	31	57	12
40-49	29	62	9
50-64	26	68	6
65 or older	25	71	4
Race/ethnicity			
White	28	67	5

Latino	32	56	12
Asian/Pacific Islander	33	55	12
Black	28	60	12

Most voters consider unauthorized immigrants to be a burden to the country

Four in ten registered voters (42%) think that the unauthorized immigrants coming across the border are a major burden to the nation. Another 30% view them as a minor burden, while just 22% do not see them as such. Among likely voters 49% consider unauthorized immigrants a major burden.

Republicans, conservatives, and voters backing Trump for president hold strongly to the view that unauthorized immigrants are a major burden. The opinions of the state's Democrats and those backing Biden's re-election bid are again more divided, with about one in five saying unauthorized immigrants are a major burden, two in five describing them as a minor burden, and one in three feeling they are not a burden. Strongly liberal voters hold different views, with 55% believing that unauthorized immigrants are not a burden to the nation.

Older Californians and whites are also more likely than younger Californians and voters of color to view unauthorized immigrants as a major burden to the nation.

Table 2
Are unauthorized immigrants a burden to the country?
(among California registered voters)

	Major burden %	Minor burden %	Not a burden %	No opinion %
Total registered voters	42	30	22	6
Likely voters	49	29	18	4
Voting preference for President				
Biden	21	43	30	6
Trump	79	12	6	3
Undecided	30	28	26	16
Party registration				
Democrats	21	41	32	6
Republicans	84	12	3	1
No party preference	42	30	21	7
Other parties	46	28	21	5
Political ideology				
Strongly conservative	86	7	4	3
Somewhat conservative	74	16	7	3
Moderate	45	31	14	10
Somewhat liberal	16	52	26	6
Strongly liberal	8	34	55	3
Age				
18-29	19	32	42	7
30-39	32	33	29	6
40-49	44	29	18	9
50-64	52	27	13	8
65 or older	56	30	11	3

White	47	32	19	2
Latino	37	26	28	9
Asian/Pacific Islander	37	35	19	9
Black	38	31	20	11

No consensus among Californians when asked to assess the nation's asylum laws

Californians hold mixed opinions when asked to assess the nation's laws about asylum seekers coming to the U.S. The largest proportion (36%) consider current asylum laws as too lenient, while 23% believe they are about right, and another 22% see them as too restrictive. Another 19% have no opinion.

Large majorities of Republicans, conservatives, and voters backing Trump for President believe that the nation's asylum laws are too lenient, with two-thirds or more feeling this way. Opinions are more divided across other political and demographic constituencies, although older voters are more likely than younger voters to think of these laws as too lenient.

Table 3
Views of federal laws relating to people coming to the U.S. seeking asylum
(among California registered voters)

	Too lenient %	About right %	Too restrictive %	No opinion %
Total registered voters	36	23	22	19
Likely voters	40	26	20	14
Voting preference for President				
Biden	18	30	32	20
Trump	67	15	4	14
Undecided	29	16	23	32
Party registration				
Democrats	17	29	33	21
Republicans	70	14	4	12
No party preference	36	23	17	24
Other parties	41	19	21	19
Political ideology				
Strongly conservative	74	11	5	10
Somewhat conservative	64	16	8	12
Moderate	38	24	12	26
Somewhat liberal	12	36	28	24
Strongly liberal	6	24	56	14
Age				
18-29	18	20	34	28
30-39	32	21	27	20
40-49	39	21	22	18
50-64	41	24	15	20
65 or older	45	28	14	13
Race/ethnicity				
White	39	25	21	15
Latino	33	23	23	21

Asian/Pacific Islander	30	23	21	26
Black	33	21	19	27

Divided and highly partisan views about whether passing more restrictive asylum laws would stem the tide of asylum seekers to the U.S.

Voters are evenly split when asked whether they feel imposing more restrictive asylum laws would reduce the number of immigrants fleeing persecution from showing up at the U.S. border. About half (45%) think enacting such laws would be effective, while 42% do not.

Similar subgroup variations are found in answers to this question as to the other questions. Republicans, conservatives, and voters backing Trump for president in 2024 are the most likely to believe that imposing tougher asylum laws would be effective in stemming the tide of asylum seekers showing up at the border. Older voters are also more inclined than younger to feel this way. But Democrats, liberals, and voters backing Biden's re-election bid this year are more skeptical, with majorities believing such laws would not be effective in reducing the number of asylum-seeking immigrants showing up at the border.

Table 4
Would imposing more restrictive asylum laws be effective in reducing the number of immigrants showing up at the border? (among California registered voters)

	Effective %	Not effective %	No opinion %
Total registered voters	**45**	**42**	**13**
Likely voters	47	42	11
Voting preference for President			
Biden	35	52	13
Trump	65	26	9
Undecided	33	41	26
Party registration			
Democrats	34	51	15
Republicans	65	26	9
No party preference	46	41	13
Other parties	46	42	12
Political ideology			
Strongly conservative	70	21	9
Somewhat conservative	63	29	8
Moderate	51	32	17
Somewhat liberal	29	57	14
Strongly liberal	19	70	11
Gender			
Female	43	43	14
Male	47	41	12
Age			
18-29	33	50	17
30-39	39	48	13
40-49	43	43	14
50-64	52	34	14
65 or older	53	39	8
Race/ethnicity			

White	44	46	10
Latino	46	39	15
Asian/Pacific Islander	46	38	16
Black	45	34	21

About the Survey

The findings are based on a *Berkeley IGS Poll* conducted among 8,199 California registered voters January 4-8, 2024, by the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Funding for the poll was provided in part by the *Los Angeles Times*.

Data collection was completed by distributing email invitations to stratified random samples of the state's registered voters. Each email invited voters to participate in a non-partisan survey conducted by the University and provided a link to the IGS website where the survey was housed. Reminder emails were distributed to non-responding voters and an opt out link was provided for voters not wishing to receive further email invitations. Samples of California registered voters with email addresses were derived from information contained on the official voter registration rolls and provided to IGS by Political Data, Inc. To protect the anonymity of respondents, voters' email addresses and all other personally identifiable information derived from the voter listing were purged from the data file and replaced with a unique and anonymous identification number during data processing. In addition, after the completion of data collection, post-stratification weights were applied to the survey data file to align the sample of registered voters to population characteristics of the registered voters statewide and within major regions of the state.

The sampling error associated with the survey results is difficult to calculate precisely because of sample stratification and post-stratification weighting. Nevertheless, it is likely that findings based on the overall sample of registered voters are subject to a sampling error of approx-imately +/-1.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. A more complete description of the survey methods used by the poll can be found on the *Berkeley IGS Poll* website at https://igs.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/survey_methods_of_the_berkeley_igs_poll_updated_1_3_24.pdf

Question wording

How secure do you feel U.S. borders are in preventing people from entering the country illegally?

To what extent do you feel that unauthorized immigrants coming across the border are a burden to the US? In your opinion are they a major burden, a minor burden or not a burden?

U.S. law grants certain rights to people who come to the U.S. seeking asylum because of persecution in their home countries. Do you think current federal laws on asylum are too lenient, too restrictive, or about right?

If the US were to impose more restrictive laws for people coming to the U.S. seeking asylum, how effective do you think this would be in reducing the number of immigrants showing up at the border asserting that they are fleeing persecution in their home countries?

About the Institute of Governmental Studies

The Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) is an interdisciplinary organized research unit that pursues a vigorous program of research, education, publication, and public service. A component of the University of California system's flagship Berkeley campus, IGS is the oldest organized research

unit in the UC system and the oldest public policy research center in the state. IGS's co-directors are Professor Eric Schickler and Associate Professor Cristina Mora.

IGS conducts periodic surveys of public opinion in California on matters of politics and public policy through its *Berkeley IGS Poll*. The poll, which is disseminated widely, seeks to provide a broad measure of contemporary public opinion, and to generate data for subsequent scholarly analysis. The director of the *Berkeley IGS Poll* is Mark DiCamillo. For a copy of the detailed tabulations to this report or a listing of all past poll reports issued by the *Berkeley IGS Poll,* please visit the poll's website at https://www.igs.berkeley.edu/research/berkeley-igs-poll.