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The Morning

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By David Leonhardt

Good morning. We're covering Americans' views on immigration — as well China's population, Yemen and New York City's snow.



Border fencing in El Paso, Texas. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

A 2024 vulnerability

I keep a running list of issues on which either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party is out of step with public opinion.

For Republicans, [abortion now tops my list](#), followed by [Donald Trump's attitudes toward democracy](#). For Democrats, I think immigration policy has moved to the top of the list.

In a newsletter last week, I described [the shift in the Democratic Party's immigration policy](#) over the past decade. Before Trump ran for president, Democrats tended to combine passionate support for many forms of immigration with a belief in strong border security. But Trump's harsh anti-immigration stance pushed the party toward the opposite end of the spectrum.

Today, many Democratic politicians are willing to accept high levels of undocumented immigration and oppose enforcement measures that the party once favored. Some Democrats, especially on the left, argue that the government doesn't even have the power to reduce migration much.

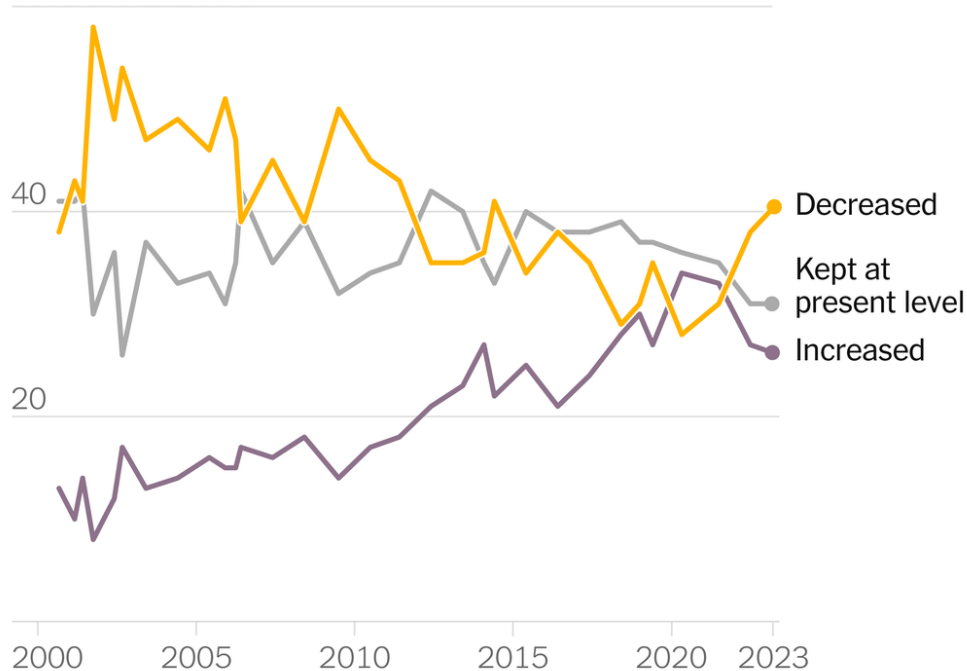
This shift has created political vulnerabilities for Democrats — because most Americans are closer to the party's old position than to its new one. Today, I'll walk through public opinion on the issue.

‘A serious problem’

The first thing to know is that views on immigration aren't static. During Trump's presidency, Americans became more favorable to immigration, evidently in reaction to Trump's opposition to it. Consider this: By the end of his presidency, the number of Americans who favored increasing immigration exceeded the number who favored decreasing it for the first time in six decades of Gallup polling.

Should immigration be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?

60% of U.S. adults



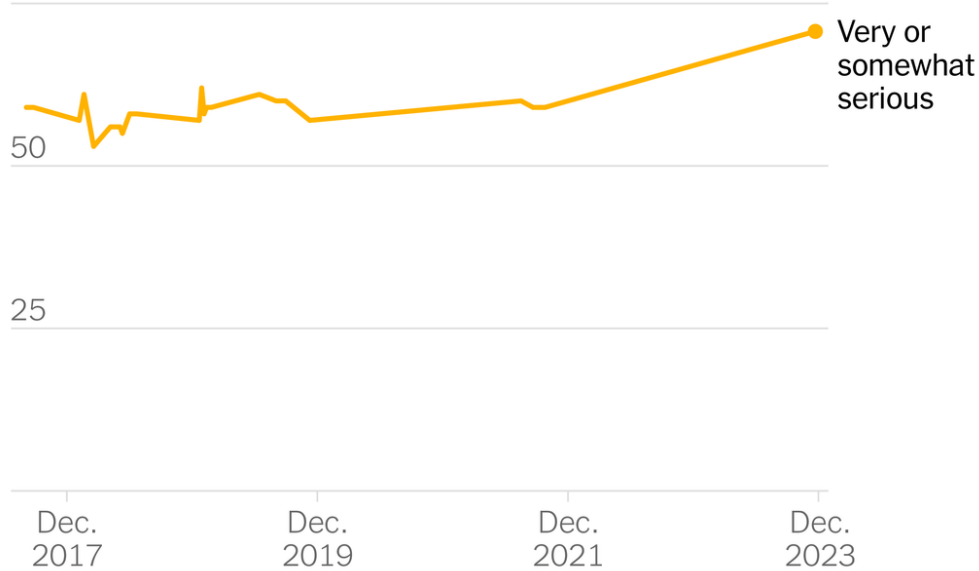
Source: Gallup | Latest data is from a June 2023 survey of 1,013 U.S. adults.

That trend has since reversed, as you can see in the chart. The biggest reason seems to be a surge of illegal immigration during President Biden's term. One cause of that surge has been the Biden administration's approach. Many would-be migrants now believe — correctly — that so long as they can reach U.S. soil, they will be able to stay for years.

In response, the number of Americans who say that illegal immigration is a serious problem has risen, according to YouGov:

How serious a problem is illegal immigration in the U.S.?

75% of U.S. adults

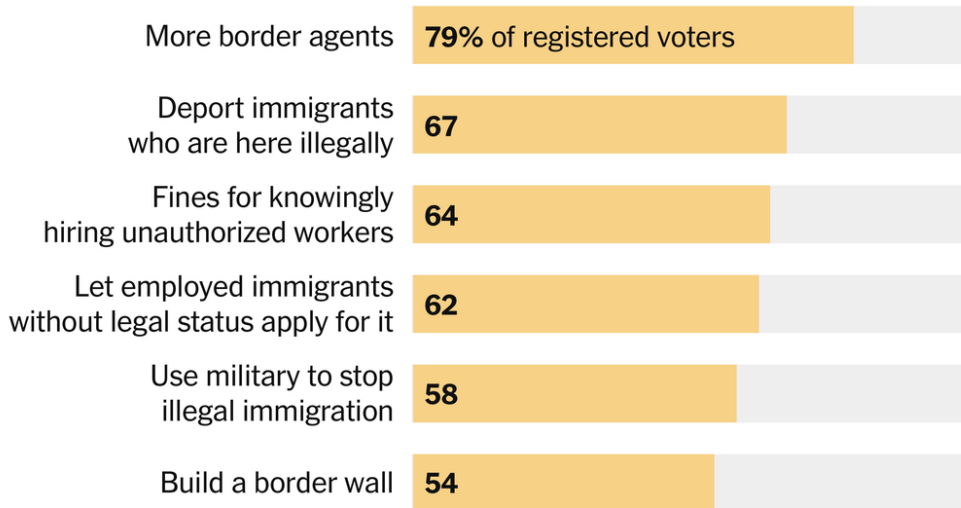


Source: YouGov | Latest data is from a December 2023 survey of 1,000 U.S. adults.

To reduce these migration flows, congressional Republicans are [pushing for new border policies](#). Democrats often criticize the proposals as extreme, but many are quite popular. Polls frequently find majority support for a border wall, for instance, especially when the question doesn't mention Trump's name. In a recent New York Times/Siena College survey of six battleground states, 53 percent of respondents favored a wall, compared with 44 percent who opposed one.

A recent Fox News survey (and, yes, other pollsters respect Fox's polling) found majority support for several other enforcement measures, too:

Support for various border policies

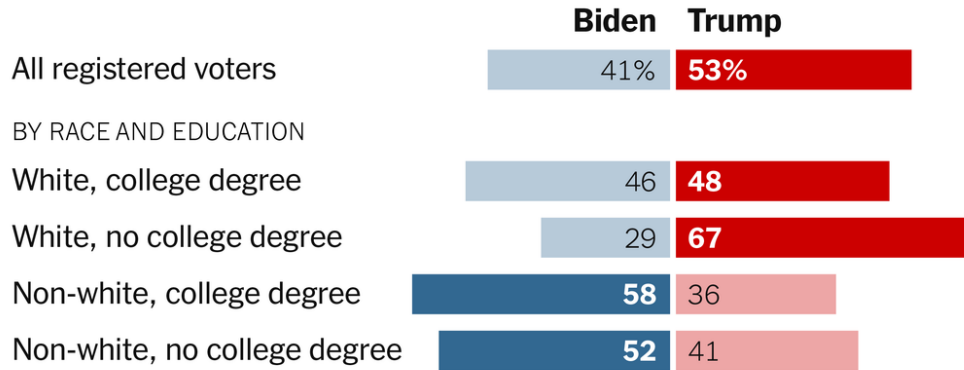


Source: Fox News poll of 1,007 registered voters in December 2023.

I don't mean to suggest that the Democratic Party's shift on immigration is simply about Trump. It's part a larger story — namely, [the class inversion of American politics](#), in which the Democratic Party increasingly reflects the views of socially liberal professionals. On immigration, these affluent, highly educated voters tend to favor more open policies, while working-class voters prefer less immigration.

Race plays a nuanced role in these views. White voters do tend to be more skeptical of immigration than Asian, Black and Hispanic voters. But a large chunk of voters of color, especially working-class voters, also favor tighter border security than many leading Democrats do. Immigration appears to be one reason, among many, that Biden's support among voters of color [has deteriorated](#).

Who do you trust to do a better job on immigration?



Source: NYT/Siena College poll of 3,662 registered voters in six battleground states in October/November 2023.

During the past few years — as Democrats have changed their approach to immigration — Republicans have made gains with Asian, Black and Hispanic voters. Some of the biggest gains have come in the border areas of Texas ([as this Times map shows](#)). Among Hispanic voters, illegal immigration is one of the Democratic Party’s weakest issues, along with crime and the economy, a Times poll in 2022 found; the party’s strongest issues include abortion, climate, student debt cancellation and Trump’s criminal charges.

Democrats assumed that a more open immigration policy would help increase their support among voters of color. Instead, the opposite has happened.

The rule of law

Even with all their current concerns, Americans are not opposed to immigration. Most say that legal immigrants [strengthen the country](#), and many believe the U.S. should remain a haven for people fleeing repression. But most Americans also think that the country’s immigration laws should mean something and that citizens of other countries should not be able to enter this country simply because they want to.

Today’s Democratic Party is often uncomfortable taking a firm position on immigration. As a result, the issue has become a problem for Biden’s re-election campaign — and an advantage for Trump.

Related: Migrants in New York camped in snow, [waiting for identification cards](#) they hoped would help them find work.