

FOR RELEASE JUNE 28, 2018

# Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration Into the U.S.

*Many unaware that most immigrants in the U.S. are here legally*

**FOR MEDIA OR OTHER INQUIRIES:**

Carroll Doherty, Director of Political Research

Jocelyn Kiley, Associate Director, Research

Bridget Johnson, Communications Associate

202.419.4372

[www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)

**RECOMMENDED CITATION**

Pew Research Center, June, 2018, "Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration Into the U.S."



## About Pew Research Center

Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It does not take policy positions. It conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. The Center studies U.S. politics and policy; journalism and media; internet, science and technology; religion and public life; Hispanic trends; global attitudes and trends; and U.S. social and demographic trends. All of the Center's reports are available at [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org). Pew Research Center is a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts, its primary funder.

© Pew Research Center 2018

# Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration Into the U.S.

*Many unaware that most immigrants in the U.S. are here legally*

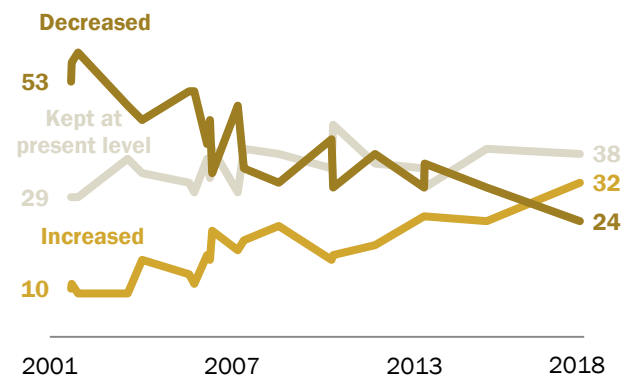
While there has been considerable attention on illegal immigration into the U.S. recently, opinions about legal immigration have undergone a long-term change. Support for increasing the level of legal immigration has risen, while the share saying legal immigration should decrease has fallen.

The survey by Pew Research Center, conducted June 5-12 among 2,002 adults, finds that 38% say legal immigration into the United States should be kept at its present level, while 32% say it should be increased and 24% say it should be decreased.

Since 2001, the share of Americans who favor increased legal immigration into the U.S. has risen 22 percentage points (from 10% to 32%), while the share who support a decrease has declined 29 points (from 53% to 24%).

## Since 2001, decline in the share saying legal immigration should be decreased

% who say that legal immigration into the United States should be ...



Notes: Don't know responses not shown. Trend data includes surveys conducted by CBS/New York Times; see topline for details. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The shift is mostly driven by changing views among Democrats. The share of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents who say legal immigration into the U.S. should be increased has doubled since 2006, from 20% to 40%.

Republicans' views also have changed, though more modestly. The share of Republicans and Republican leaners who say legal immigration should be decreased has fallen 10 percentage points since 2006, from 43% to 33%.

Still, about twice as many Republicans (33%) as Democrats (16%) support cutting legal immigration into the U.S.

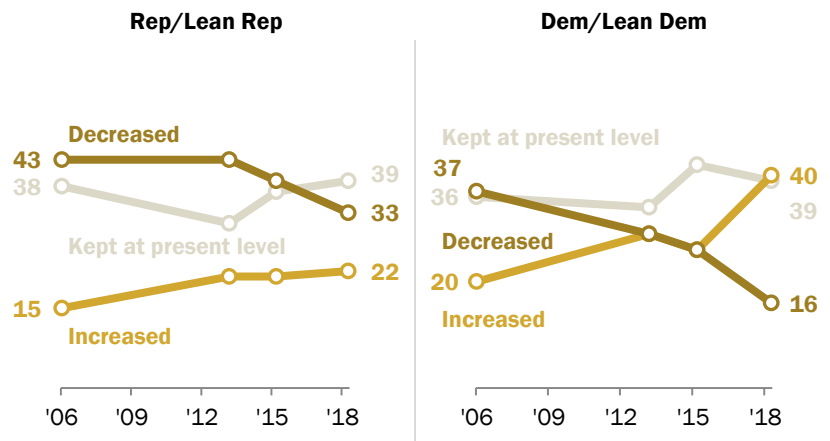
The new survey, which was largely conducted before the crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border involving immigrant children being separated from their parents, finds deep and persistent partisan divisions in a number of attitudes toward immigrants, as well as widespread misperceptions among the public overall about the share of the immigrant population in the U.S. that is in this country illegally:

**Fewer than half of Americans know that most immigrants in the U.S. are here legally.** Just 45% of Americans say that most immigrants living in the U.S. are here legally; 35% say most immigrants are in the country illegally, while 6% volunteer that about half are here legally and half illegally and 13% say they don't know. In 2015, the most recent year for which data are available, [lawful immigrants accounted for about three-quarters of the foreign-born population in the United States.](#)

**Most feel sympathy toward unauthorized immigrants in the U.S.** Nearly seven-in-ten (69%) are very or somewhat sympathetic toward immigrants who are in the United States illegally. That view has changed little since 2014, when a surge of unaccompanied children from Central America

## Growing share of Democrats support increased legal immigration into the U.S.

% who say that legal immigration into the United States should be ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

attempted to enter the U.S. at the border. An overwhelming share of Democrats (86%) say they are sympathetic toward immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally, compared with about half of Republicans (48%).

### Fewer say granting legal status to

**unauthorized immigrants is a “reward.”** Just 27% of Americans say that giving people who are in the U.S. illegally a way to gain legal status is like rewarding them for doing something wrong. More than twice as many (67%) say they don’t think of it this way. Since 2015, the share saying that providing legal status for those in the U.S. illegally is akin to a “reward” for doing something wrong has declined 9 percentage points. (*Americans also broadly support granting legal status to immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally as children.*)

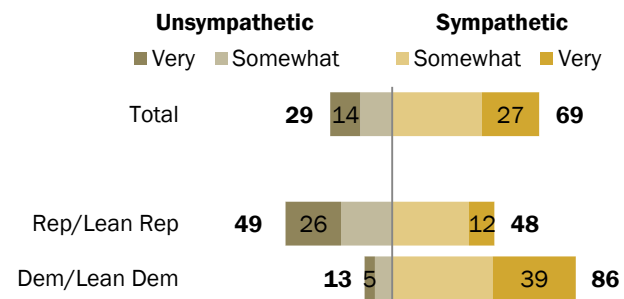
**Most Americans do not think undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit serious crimes.** Large majorities of Americans say that undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. are not more likely than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes (65% say this) and that undocumented immigrants mostly fill jobs citizens don’t want (71% say this). These opinions, which also are divided along partisan lines, are virtually unchanged since 2016.

### Most people who encounter immigrants who do not speak English well aren’t bothered by this.

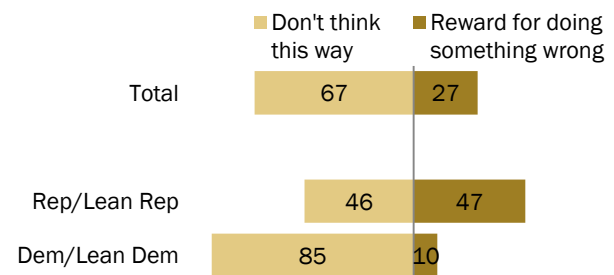
Most Americans say they often (47%) or sometimes (27%) come into contact with immigrants who speak little or no English. Among those who say this, just 26% say it bothers them, while 73% say it does not. The share saying they are bothered by immigrants speaking little or no English has declined by 12 percentage points since 2006 (from 38% to 26%) and 19 points since 1993 (from 45%).

## Republicans are split in their views of undocumented immigrants

% who say they feel \_\_\_ toward undocumented immigrants in the United States



Giving way to legal status for those who came to the U.S. illegally like a reward for doing something wrong? (%)



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Many overestimate the share of the immigrant population that is in the U.S. illegally

A majority of Americans are unaware that most immigrants in the United States are in this country legally. Overall, 45% know that most immigrants in the U.S. are here legally.

Somewhat more give incorrect answers: 35% say most are here illegally, 6% say about half are here illegally and half legally and 13% do not give a response.

According to [estimates by Pew Research Center](#), legal immigrants made up about 75% of immigrants living in the United States in 2015, the most recent year for which data are available.

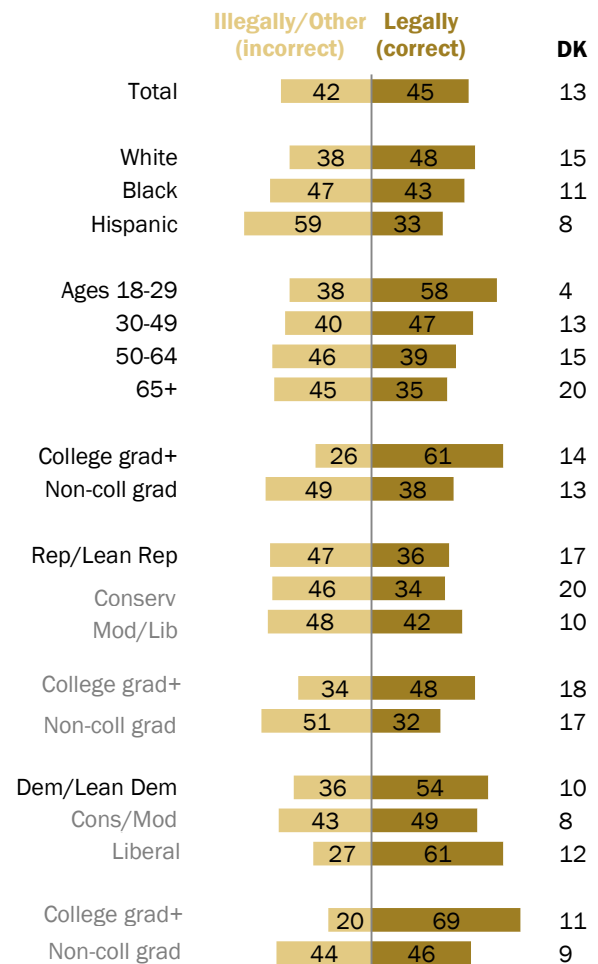
There is a stark education gap in views of the legal status of most immigrants in the U.S. About six-in-ten (61%) of those with at least a college degree know that most immigrants are living here legally. In contrast, only about four-in-ten (38%) of those with no college degree know this.

Younger people also are more likely to say that most immigrants living in the U.S. are here legally. Nearly six-in-ten (58%) of those ages 18 to 29 say this is the case, while only about a third (35%) of those 65 years and older say the same.

Perceptions of the relative number of immigrants who are in the U.S. legally versus illegally are divided along party lines as well. Overall, 54% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents believe that most

### Fewer than half know that most immigrants in the U.S. are here legally

*% who think most of the immigrants who are now living in the U.S. are here ...*



Notes: Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. 'Illegally/Other' includes 35% who say that most immigrants in the U.S. are here illegally and 6% who volunteer that about half are in the U.S. illegally and half legally. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

immigrants are living here legally, while about a third (36%) of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say this.

Within both parties, those with four-year college degrees are more likely than those without a college degree to believe that most immigrants living in the U.S. are in this country legally (48% vs. 32% for Republicans; 69% vs. 46% for Democrats). Still, college-educated Democrats are 21 points more likely than college-educated Republicans to say most immigrants living in the U.S. are here legally.



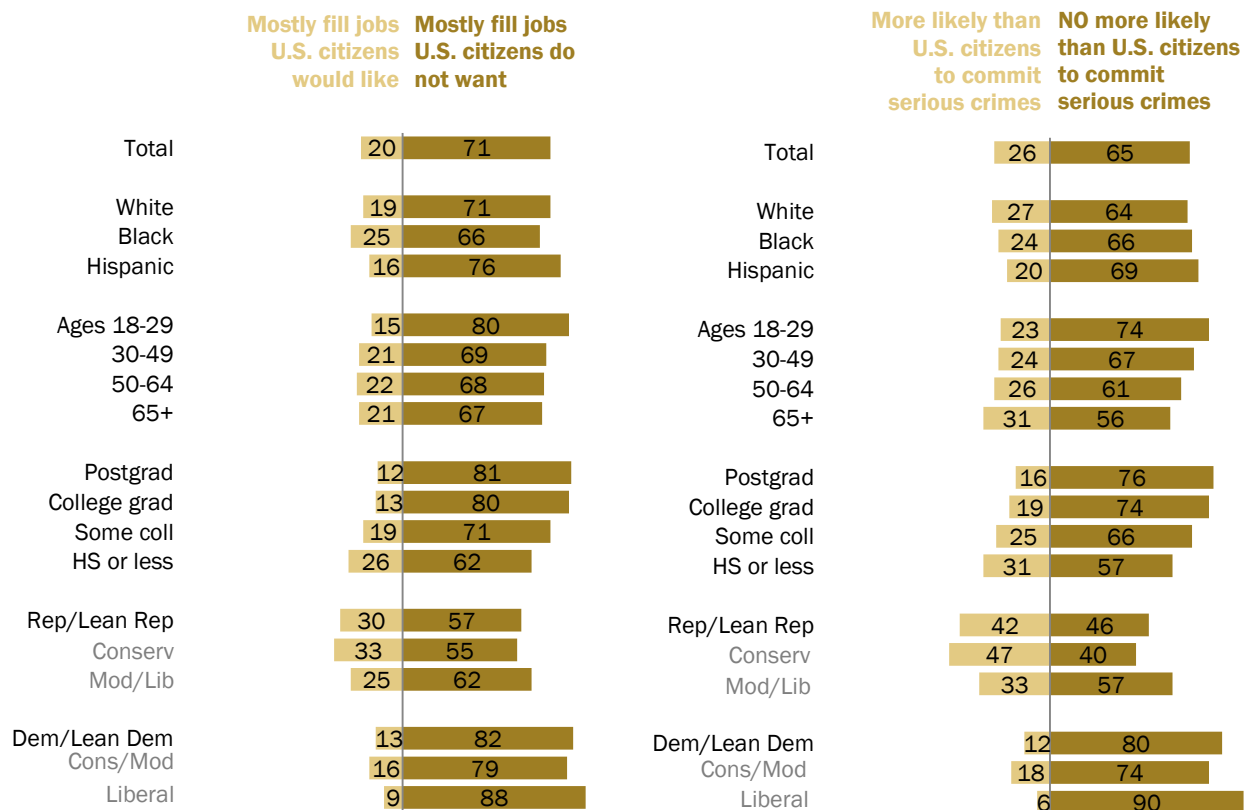
## Most Americans do not think undocumented immigrants take jobs U.S. citizens want or are more likely to commit serious crimes

Most Americans continue to express positive views of undocumented immigrants when it comes to their impact on jobs and crime in the United States.

About seven-in-ten Americans (71%) say that undocumented immigrants living in the United States mostly fill jobs that American citizens do not want. Nearly as many (65%) say undocumented immigrants are not more likely than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes.

### Democrats overwhelmingly say undocumented immigrants are no more likely than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes; Republicans are divided

*% who say undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. ...*



Notes: Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Opinions on both measures are little changed [since 2016](#).

Across nearly all demographic groups, majorities say that undocumented immigrants do not have negative effects on job availability for U.S. citizens and serious crime in the country.

About eight-in-ten Democrats and Democratic leaners (82%) say undocumented immigrants do not take jobs that American citizens want. By comparison, a smaller 57%-majority of Republicans and Republican leaners take this view.

Republicans are divided over whether undocumented immigrants are more likely than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes: 42% say they are more likely to commit serious crimes, while 46% say they are not. A large majority of Democrats (80%) say that undocumented immigrants are not more likely than citizens to commit serious crimes.

Among Republicans, more conservatives (47%) than moderates and liberals (33%) associate undocumented immigrants with an increased likelihood of serious crime.

There is a relationship between knowledge about the legal status of most immigrants in the country and attitudes about whether undocumented immigrants are more likely than American citizens to commit serious crimes.

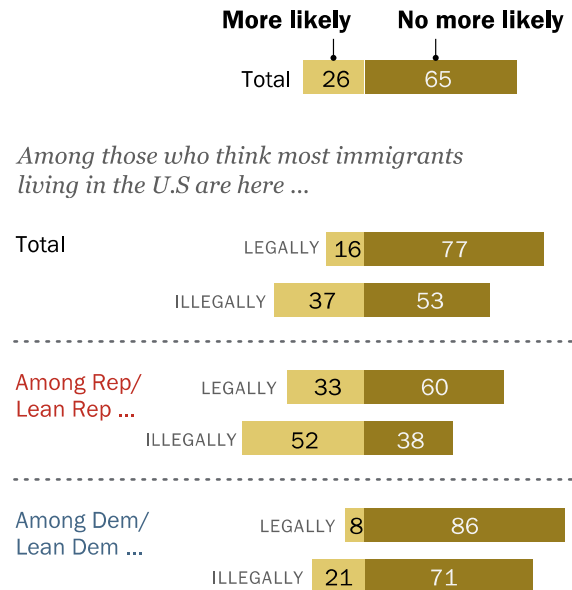
Among those who know that most immigrants in the U.S. are here legally, a large 77%-majority says that undocumented immigrants are no more likely to commit serious crimes than American citizens. By contrast, a smaller share of those who think most immigrants are here illegally (53%) say undocumented immigrants are no more likely to commit serious crimes.

This relationship is seen within both parties. Among Republicans and Republican leaners, most of those who believe the majority of immigrants are in the U.S. legally (60%) think undocumented immigrants are no more likely to commit serious crimes than American citizens. Among Republicans who incorrectly think most immigrants are here illegally, 52% say undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit serious crimes, compared with 38% who say they are not.

Among Democrats and Democratic leaners, 86% of those who know most immigrants are here legally – compared with 71% of those who think they are here illegally – say that undocumented immigrants are not more likely than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes.

## Views of undocumented immigrants and crime linked to knowledge about the immigrant population

*% who say undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. are \_\_\_\_\_ than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes*



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Declining share of public says providing legal status for unauthorized immigrants is like a ‘reward’ for wrongdoing

Since 2015, the share of Americans who say granting legal status to immigrants who came to the U.S. illegally is like “rewarding” them for wrongdoing has declined.

Currently, 67% of Americans say they do not view granting legal status to immigrants in the U.S. illegally as a reward, while just 27% say it amounts to a reward to unauthorized immigrants for doing something wrong.

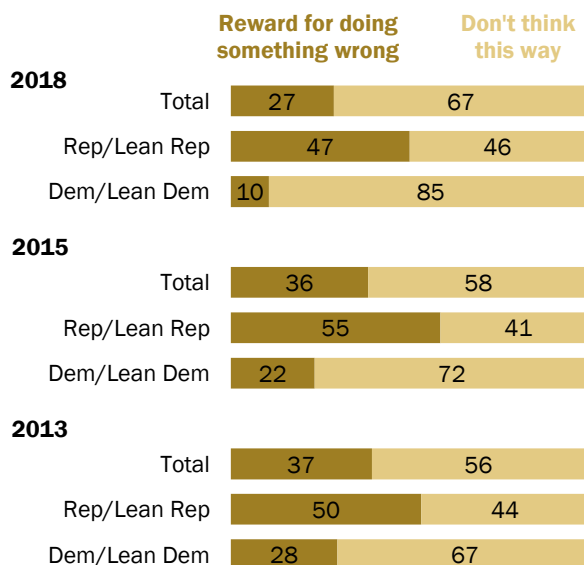
In both 2015 and 2013, larger shares of the public (36% and 37%, respectively) said granting legal status to immigrants in this country illegally was like a reward for wrongdoing.

Since 2013, the share of Democrats and Democratic leaners who say giving legal status to unauthorized immigrants is like rewarding them for doing something wrong has declined by 18 percentage points, from 28% to 10%.

Among Republicans and Republican leaners, 47% say providing legal status would be like rewarding them for doing something wrong; 55% said this in 2015, and 50% expressed this view five years ago.

### Partisan divide on whether granting legal status to people in U.S. illegally is like ‘rewarding’ them for wrongdoing

*% who feel that giving people who came to U.S. illegally a way to gain legal status is like a ...*



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

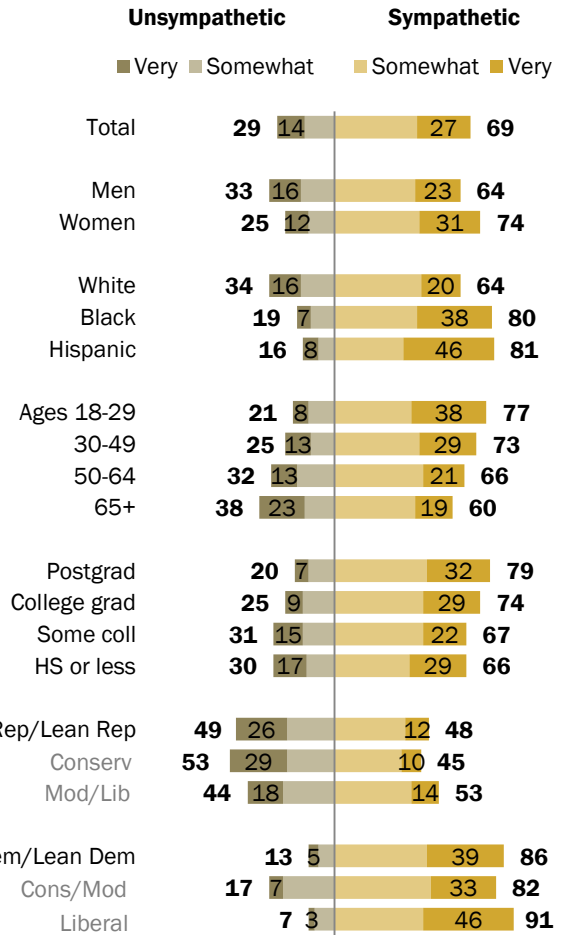
The share of Americans who express sympathy for immigrants in the U.S. illegally has remained fairly steady in recent years. Currently, 69% say they are very sympathetic (27%) or somewhat sympathetic (42%) toward immigrants in the U.S. illegally. Just 29% are very (14%) or somewhat (15%) unsympathetic toward them.

While majorities across nearly all demographic groups have at least some sympathy for unauthorized immigrants, young people are more likely than older adults to express sympathy for them. And blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to have sympathy for people in the U.S. illegally.

Republicans are divided: 48% say they are very or somewhat sympathetic toward unauthorized immigrants, while 49% say they are very or somewhat unsympathetic. Among Democrats, 86% are sympathetic and just 13% are unsympathetic.

### Most Americans have sympathy for immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally

% who say they are \_\_\_\_ toward immigrants who are in the United States illegally



Notes: Don't know responses not shown. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Views of legal immigration into the U.S.

Over the past decade, opinions about levels of legal immigration into the United States have changed among members of both parties, especially among Democrats. Currently, 40% of Democrats and Democratic leaners say that legal immigration into the U.S. should be increased, 39% say it should be kept at its present level and 16% say it should be decreased.

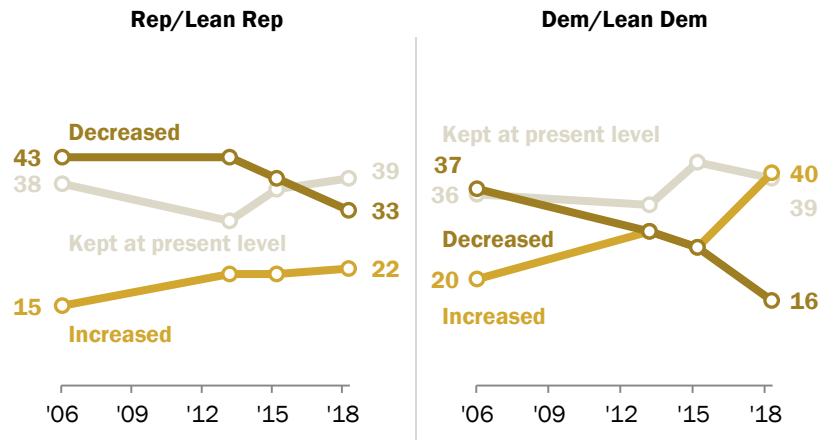
In 2006, just 20% of Democrats favored increasing the level of legal immigration into the U.S.; as recently as three years ago, 26% of Democrats favored this.

Opinions have changed more modestly among Republicans: The share supporting decreasing the level of legal immigration has declined 10 percentage points since 2006 (from 43% to 33%), while the share favoring increased legal immigration has risen from 15% to 22%.

Still, a larger share of Republicans currently support decreasing (33%) rather than increasing (22%) legal immigration into the U.S. (39% say it should be kept at its present level). Among Democrats, more than twice as many support increasing (40%) rather than decreasing (16%) legal immigration (39% of Democrats also want to keep it at its present level).

### Growing share of Democrats favor increasing legal immigration into the U.S.

% who say legal immigration into the United States should be ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Democrats are internally divided about legal immigration. Liberal Democrats are 19 percentage points more likely than moderate and conservative Democrats to support increasing legal immigration into the U.S. (50% vs. 31%).

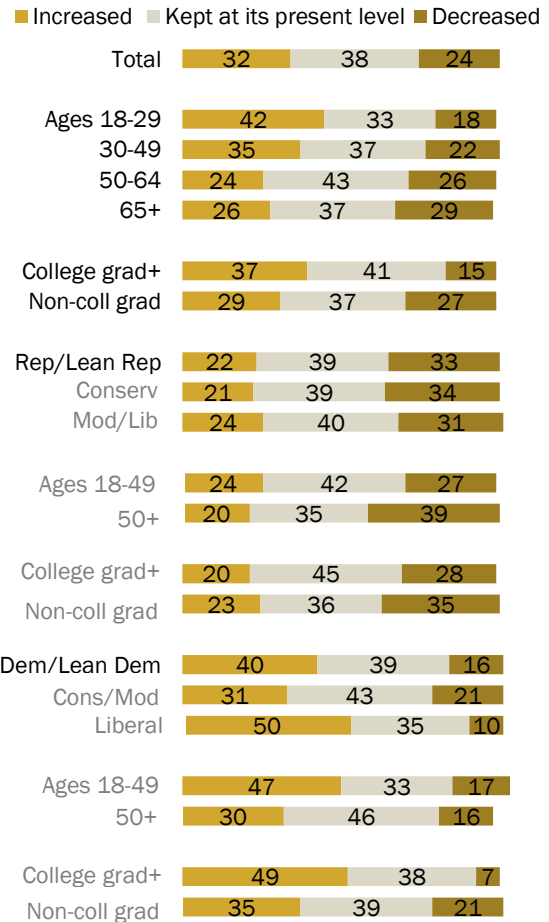
And while nearly half of Democrats under age 50 (47%) favor increasing legal immigration, 30% of those 50 and older say the same.

Among Republicans as well, there are age differences in views of legal immigration. Among Republicans 50 and older, 39% support cutting back on legal immigration, compared with 27% of younger Republicans. In contrast with Democrats, however, there are no significant ideological differences among Republicans in these opinions.

There also are educational differences in both parties in views of legal immigration. Nearly half of Democrats (49%) with at least a four-year college degree favor increasing legal immigration, compared with 35% who do not have a four-year degree. Among Republicans, those who do not have a college degree are somewhat more likely than those who do to favor cutting legal immigration into the U.S. (35% vs. 28%).

### Democrats ideologically divided over increasing legal immigration to the U.S.

*% who say legal immigration into the United States should be ...*



Note: Don't know responses not shown.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Comparing today's immigrants with those who came in the early 1900s

Most people say that today's immigrants are either about as willing to adapt (32%) or more willing to adapt (26%) to the American way of life compared with immigrants who came to the United States in the early 1900s. Fewer (36%) say today's immigrants are less willing to adapt.

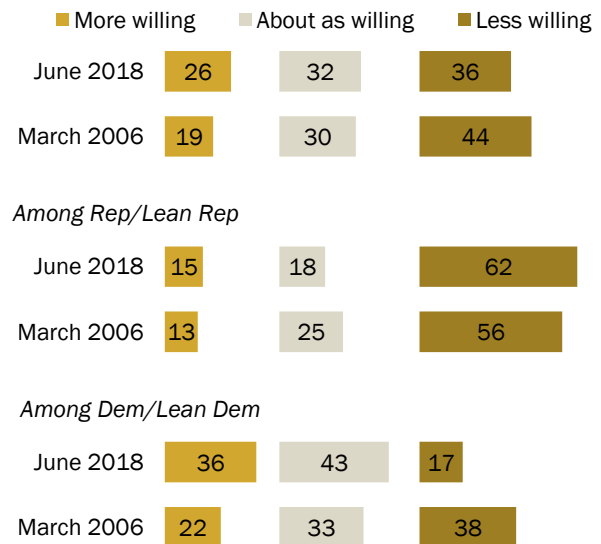
Like other attitudes about immigrants and immigration, views on the willingness of immigrants to assimilate have grown more positive over the past decade, with the biggest change occurring among Democrats.

The share of Democrats and Democratic leaners who say immigrants are less willing to adapt has declined from 38% to 17% since 2006. A larger share of Democrats (79%) say immigrants are about as willing to adapt or more willing to adapt than did so 12 years ago (56%).

Conversely, a larger share of Republicans and Republican leaners (62%) say today's immigrants are less willing to adapt than did so in 2006 (56%).

### Wider partisan gap on willingness of immigrants to adapt to U.S. way of life

*% who say that compared to the immigrants of the early 1900s, today's immigrants are \_\_\_ willing to adapt to the American way of life*



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



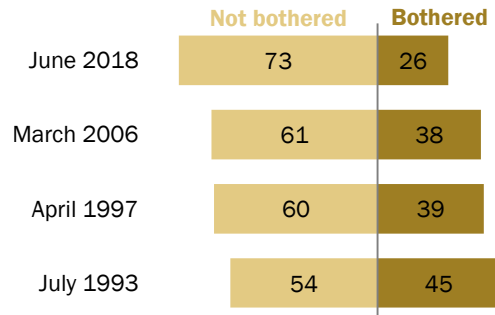
## Fewer are bothered by contact with immigrants who speak little English

Most Americans say they often (47%) or sometimes (27%) come into contact with immigrants who speak little or no English. These views have not changed much since 2006, though in the 1990s fewer said they often interacted with immigrants who struggled to speak English (29% in 1993).

Among those who often or sometimes have contact with immigrants who speak little or no English, fewer say this bothers them today (26%) than did so in 2006 (38%) or in the 1990s.

### Fewer who encounter immigrants who speak little English are bothered by this

*Among those who often/sometimes come into contact with immigrants who speak little or no English, % who say they are \_\_\_ by this*



Notes: Don't know responses not shown.

July 1993 data from Gallup.

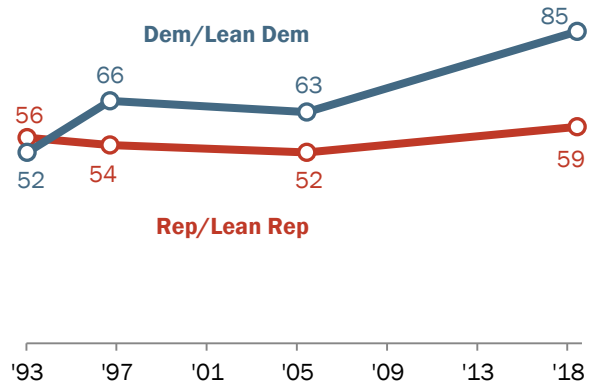
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Among Democrats who encounter immigrants who speak little or no English, the share saying they are not bothered by this has increased from 63% to 85% since 2006. About six-in-ten Republicans (59%) say they are not bothered; 52% said this 12 years ago.

### Partisan differences in shares saying they are not bothered by immigrants who speak little or no English

Among those who often/sometimes come into contact with immigrants who speak little or no English, % who say they are not bothered by this



Notes: Don't know responses not shown.

July 1993 data from Gallup.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Acknowledgements

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals:

### Research team

Carroll Doherty, *Director, Political Research*

Jocelyn Kiley, *Associate Director, Political Research*

Alec Tyson, *Senior Researcher*

Bradley Jones, *Research Associate*

Baxter Oliphant, *Research Associate*

Hannah Fingerhut, *Research Analyst*

Hannah Hartig, *Research Analyst*

Amina Dunn, *Research Assistant*

John LaLoggia, *Research Assistant*

Claire Sukumar, *Intern*

### Communications and editorial

Bridget Johnson, *Communications Associate*

### Graphic design and web publishing

Alissa Scheller, *Information Graphics Designer*

## Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on telephone interviews conducted June 5-12, 2018 among a national sample of 2,002 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (502 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 1,500 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 998 who had no landline telephone). The survey was conducted by interviewers under the direction of Abt Associates. A combination of landline and cell phone random digit dial samples were used; both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Respondents in the landline sample were selected by randomly asking for the youngest adult male or female who is now at home. Interviews in the cell sample were conducted with the person who answered the phone, if that person was an adult 18 years of age or older. For detailed information about our survey methodology, see <http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/u-s-survey-research/>.

The combined landline and cell phone sample is weighted using an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and nativity and region to parameters from the 2016 Census Bureau's American Community Survey one-year estimates and population density to parameters from the Decennial Census. The sample also is weighted to match current patterns of telephone status (landline only, cell phone only, or both landline and cell phone), based on extrapolations from the 2016 National Health Interview Survey. The weighting procedure also accounts for the fact that respondents with both landline and cell phones have a greater probability of being included in the combined sample and adjusts for household size among respondents with a landline phone. The margins of error reported and statistical tests of significance are adjusted to account for the survey's design effect, a measure of how much efficiency is lost from the weighting procedures.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

---

*Survey conducted June 5-12, 2018*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Unweighted sample size</b>	<b>Plus or minus ...</b>
Total sample	2,002	2.6 percentage points
Rep/Lean Rep	836	4.0 percentage points
Dem/Lean Dem	964	3.7 percentage points

---

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Pew Research Center undertakes all polling activity, including calls to mobile telephone numbers, in compliance with the Telephone Consumer Protection Act and other applicable laws.

Pew Research Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization and a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts, its primary funder.