RCP Poll: Voters See Campus Bias, Skeptical of Trump's Tariff Pitch

By Carl M. Cannon & Jonathan Draeger - RCP Staff   April 18, 2025

Although most voters concur with Trump about the ideological bent of institutions of higher learning, they have qualms about the administration's proposed remedies. A plurality of voters, 45%, opposed the administration's suspension of research grants, while 37% supported it. There was similar disagreement with the administration's aggressive moves to revoke foreign students' visas. The administration is locked in a legal fight – and public relations battle – over several students it has moved to deport on the grounds the international students have been agitating in favor of Hamas. These students seem to be doing better in the court of public opinion than in the federal courts, as 43% of Americans oppose the move to revoke visas, with 36% supporting.

However, on the topic of immigration generally, Trump's record is well-liked. According to the poll, 45% approve of how he's handled immigration policy, while only 41% disapprove. This is higher than his overall job approval, which is tied: 44% think he's doing a good job, while 44% disagree.

Similarly, on the "generic congressional ballot" (respondents are simply asked whether they plan to vote for a Democrat or a Republican in the next election) the two major parties are nearly tied, with 40% of voters saying they would support a Democratic candidate while 39% say they'd vote for a Republican. The other 21% are undecided, suggesting that the events unfolding at whirlwind speed during Trump's first 100 days may well decide control of the House and Senate in 2026.

These are the findings of the recent RealClear Opinion Research survey taken April 10-12 of 1,000 registered voters. The survey was directed by Emerson College polling director and professor Spencer Kimball.

"The national survey finds that several of Trump's policies on immigration, higher education funding, and tariffs are popular with his base, disliked by Democrats, and divide independents," Kimball noted. "Independents align with Democrats on tariffs but side more with Republicans on immigration."

This survey comes amidst a high-stakes boxing match between President Trump and Harvard University. Trump is threatening to strip the university of all federal funding and revoke its tax-exempt status unless it complies with a series of demands. These include eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and policies, enforcing viewpoint diversity among faculty, and banning organizations that have engaged in "antisemitic activity since October 7, 2023."

Harvard has responded defiantly, mostly skirting the troubling pro-Hamas activity while vowing not to "surrender its independence or relinquish its constitutional rights." Concerns about political bias on campus have helped drive the current dispute. Last autumn, The Harvard Crimson, one of the university's student newspapers, reported that 94% of political donations from Harvard affiliates, including faculty, administrators, and staff, went to Democratic Party candidates. Harvard is hardly unique. The ideological imbalance in colleges and universities across the United States reflects a broader perception among voters; the latest RealClearPolitics poll found that 50% of voters believe colleges and universities have a liberal political bias, while only 12% believe they lean conservative. Respondents also believe that these partisan leanings are consequential, with 71% saying these schools have a "significant amount" or "fair amount" of influence on social and political attitudes.

Trade and Economy

Despite a turbulent stock market, general angst over what effects tariffs will have – and generally bad press – unemployment remains low, and inflation has dropped since Trump entered office. The upshot is that the president maintains a slight net positive approval (51%-49%) for his handling of the economy.

This is true despite very negative views of his tariff policies, with 59% disapproving and only 41% approving. On this issue, the breakdown is largely partisan, with 85% of Democrats disapproving of the tariffs and 70% of Republicans approving of them. Independents, at least for now, side with Democrats – 64% disapprove.

Democrats, along with most traditional economists, have relentlessly portrayed tariffs as a de facto tax. This message seems to be sticking: 47% said tariffs were more of a tax on U.S. consumers, compared to only 34% who said it was a tax on a foreign country. (Nearly one-fifth of respondents answered "neither.") A similar partisan divide was present in these responses as well, with 64% of Democrats saying that tariffs were more of a tax on U.S. consumers, while 51% of Republicans viewed them more as a tax on foreign countries.

The central argument from the Trump administration's pro-tariff camp is that while prices may rise temporarily, the short-term pain would be offset by the reshoring of jobs and resulting wage increases. However, the RealClearPolitics poll found that these arguments have not resonated with voters: 43% said they expect tariffs to decrease jobs in the U.S., while only 37% expect them to increase jobs. Similarly, 42% believe tariffs will lower wages for U.S. workers, compared to 30% who think they will raise wages.

Other findings in the RealClear Opinion Research survey include the following:

- When the U.S. imposes tariffs on another country, 45% of voters think the American consumer ultimately pays for the tariff, 26% think the foreign country manufacturing the good pays, 22% think the American company importing the good pays, and 8% think the foreign government pays.
- While Trump's approval-disapproval numbers were tied, Elon Musk didn't fare quite as well. The billionaire entrepreneur whom Democrats have demonized over his leadership of the Department of Government Efficiency is underwater, with 40% approving of the job he's doing and 46% disapproving. (Another recent poll from Harvard-Harris found that 62% of Democrats believe they should oppose Musk's effort to reduce government expenditures, and only 38% said "they should join in the mission of cutting government waste.")
- Sixty-five percent of voters are very (35%) or somewhat (29%) concerned about the recent swings in the U.S. stock market, while 35% are not that concerned (24%) or not at all concerned (12%).
- Twenty-nine percent of voters say they have a favorable view of what Trump has called "Liberation Day," when he enacted reciprocal tariffs on major trading partners, while 24% have an unfavorable view of it; 29% are unsure, and 19% have never heard of it.
- A plurality of voters (45%) think visa-holding foreign students should have the same constitutional protections as U.S. citizens, while 38% think they should not, and 17% are unsure.
- A plurality of voters (42%) believe that local U.S. district judges stalling some of Trump's executive orders is a proper use of judicial power, while 36% think it amounts to judicial overreach. Twenty-two percent are unsure.

"Looking ahead to the next midterm elections, traditional voting blocs remain intact, but notable shifts are emerging," said Kimball. "Voters under 40 years old break for Democrats by over 10 points, despite holding a favorable view of President Trump. Those over 70, who split their vote in 2024, continue to be a key swing group. Hispanic voters, who also view Trump favorably, support the generic Democratic congressional candidate by 10 points. If these trends hold, it could benefit Democrats in 2026."

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