Even after four years of mismanagement and dereliction of duty by the Trump Administration, there are significant challenges in public perception and messaging for Democrats and President Biden when it comes to managing the border. Based on a three-phase research project, including qualitative, quantitative, and online, phone, and text-to-online surveys that Third Way and Lake Research Partners conducted in the Fall of 2019, we suggest the Administration consider the following guidance when talking about their current approach to the border, asylum, and our ongoing commitments to Central America.

**Emphasize the Legal Process and Efforts to Improve Order at the Border.**

Americans are beleaguered when it comes to the border and immigration. Yet they still are apprehensive around language that appears to relinquish control of our border—a notion with which Democrats are too closely associated. Messages emphasizing an orderly and legal process to vet asylum cases goes a long way in reassuring Americans to stand with our commitment to asylum. Discussing a fair and efficient process for those seeking asylum reinforces to Americans that Democrats are following our laws and managing the border in a competent and safe manner.

Moreover, when talking about those making their case, it is best to emphasize the legal process of asylum. Saying “people seeking asylum” or “people making their case for asylum” resonates far more that saying “asylum seekers” or “asylees”. The former reiterate that asylum is part of the legal process in our immigration laws and that people are making their cases through an orderly process.

**Asylum and Keeping Families Together are Fundamentally Popular.**

Nearly 7 in 10 voters (68%) believe that asylum is a good thing for the United States, including 30% who think it is a very good thing. We also see little disparity between Independent voters and the overall electorate, with 67 percent of Independents saying asylum is good for the county. Moreover, voters vehemently oppose any policy that comes close to family separation, with 46% saying the “family should be allowed to remain together living in the United States with regular supervision by a caseworker until their asylum case is heard.” A quarter said families should be detained together (27%). Only four percent believe they should be separated, and 15% believe they should be sent home entirely. Despite all of Trump’s bruising rhetoric, Americans abhor any policy or approach that might take a child from his or her family.

These strong public perception foundations are encouraging, but we also found the
Voters are Still Skeptical of Democrats and Worry about Open Borders.

Even after years of draconian and failed policies at the border, we found that the Trump Administration and Republicans still held an advantage compared to Democrats on the border and asylum. Respondents in swing Congressional districts said they thought Trump and Republicans were the ones who had a plan to get the situation at the border under control by 25 points more than Democrats. Additionally, Republicans had a 31-point advantage with those voters in thinking they were the party that wanted order at the border—which is fundamentally what voters are seeking.

These presumptions were rebuttable, however, when Americans heard messages from Democrats that focused on ensuring an orderly and controlled approach to the border that also reflects our values as a nation. Americans are not interested in the harsh and cruel policies of the past Administration, but they still harbor some concerns that Democrats support open borders or decriminalization of border crossings. The best messages inoculate against these concerns. Voters view the border as consistently chaotic and are genuinely unsure of who is to blame for past or current trends there. More importantly however, many are eager and ready to put the chaos and divisiveness of the past Administration behind them for good. This leaves a clear opening for the Administration to win over skeptics if it can make clear it has the policies to restore orderly stewardship of our Southern border.

Assisting Central America is Good Policy but Doesn’t Sway Americans.

We also found that talking about aid to Central America as the main policy solution for the border surge was the least persuasive message out of everything we tested. To be clear, it is certainly part of the correct policy toolkit Democrats and the Biden Administration should utilize to improve conditions in the Western Hemisphere, but it did not resonate with voters, who were much more interested in hearing about an orderly process for people to make their cases for asylum. Voters either see aid to Central America as disconnected from the pressures that drive those to apply for asylum or they are yet to be convinced that it can work in stemming the flow. Either way, it is the weakest part of Democrats’ argument to voters.

Suggested Messaging

We’ve seen far too much chaos and not enough order at the border. Draconian detention cages and separating families does not work. There is no strength in chaos and fear. We are focused on getting more judges and caseworkers to hear the asylum cases so that those with real safety concerns can make their case according to our country’s laws. And we are focused on strong monitoring of those who do stay, ensuring they appear at their court date and keeping families together so no one goes missing.
Democrats know we need to create a fair and orderly immigration process that upholds our values and respects all families no matter what they look like or where they come from. We can't let fear divide us. Together, we can create an immigration system that strengthens our country by ensuring that people who move here to make a better life for their families can follow our laws and contribute to our communities.