MEMO *Published April 20, 2020 · 9 minute read*

How to Navigate the Sanctuary Cities Debate
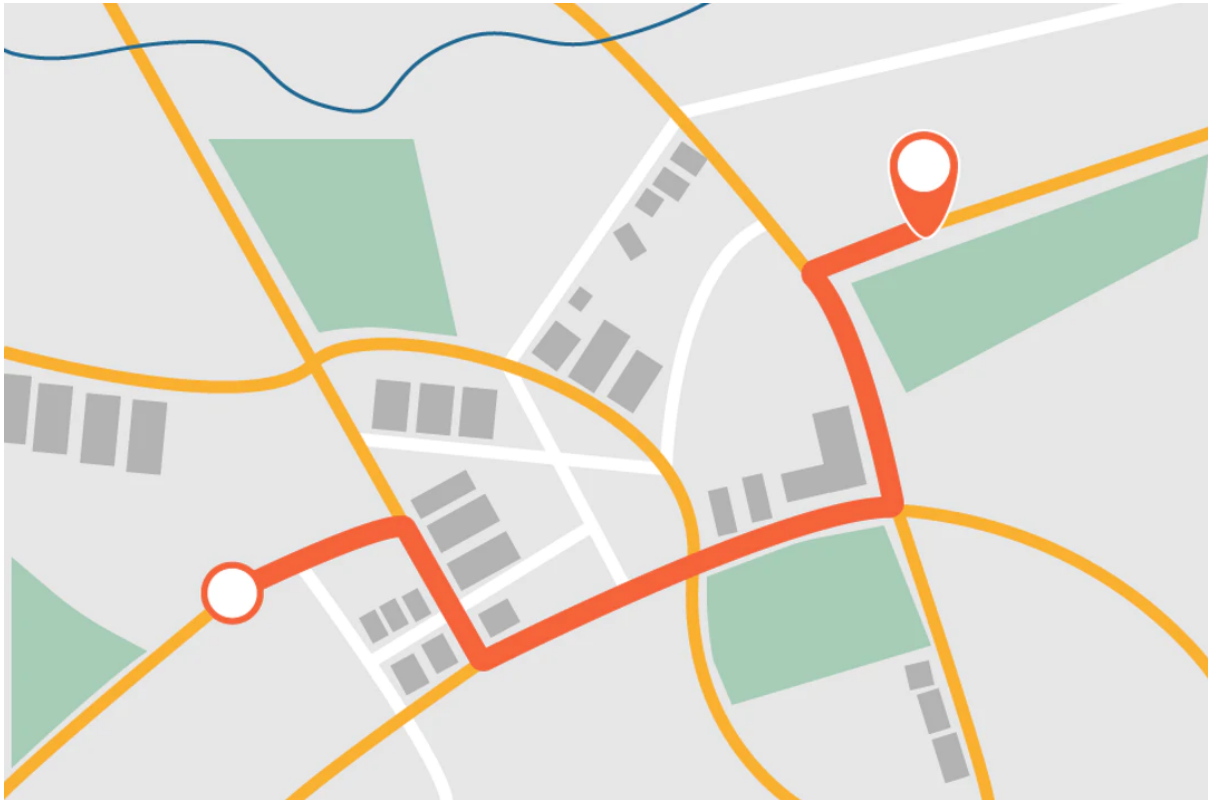
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In past election cycles, Republicans have repeatedly hit Democrats for supporting sanctuary cities, including with some of the most graphic and fearmongering ads in modern political history. President Trump and his allies will undoubtedly double down on these attacks in the 2020 election. To address this continued challenge, Third Way and the Center for American Progress Action Fund conducted both qualitative and quantitative research in the run up to the 2018 midterms to understand how voters in battleground districts and states view issues around sanctuary cities, how these attacks impact their feelings and voting behavior, and what Democrats can do to effectively respond and counter voter concerns. The lessons we learned then and in recent polling on the border and asylum provide a clear path to success for pro-immigrant candidates in 2020.

1. Democrats are a Blank Slate on Immigration.

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Despite the fact that Democrats have long fought for comprehensive immigration reform, most voters say they don't know what the party stands for on the issue of immigration. To the extent that voters do have an impression of Democrats on this issue, they mostly use phrases like "open borders." When asked whether they approve or disapprove of each party's handling of immigration writ large, both parties were under water by more than 20 points, and voters split 50/50 when asked which party's policies concerned them more. Notably, even shortly after the family separation crisis, 51% of voters in these target districts and states said they view Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) favorably, with only 36% saying they have an unfavorable view of the agency. Democrats rate ICE unfavorably by 40 points, but Independent voters are favorable by 16 and Republicans by 62. It's clear on this specific issue that Democratic voters are isolated from where Independent and Republican voters are on ICE.

Further rounds of research Third Way recently conducted on asylum and the border found that the electorate has largely remained in the same place on immigration throughout the Trump administration. Even after years of chaotic policies, many voters in battleground districts still lean towards Trump on security, order, and safety at the border. He has a 44-point advantage against Democrats when asked about who wants security at the border and a 31-point advantage on order at the border in Congressional battleground districts. Similarly, when asked who wants to keep American communities safe, Trump was up 23 points over Democrats in a December 2019 survey of battleground House districts. Democrats have answers to Trump's draconian policies, but so far they aren't breaking through with voters.

2. Sanctuary Attacks Pack a Punch.

We tested the sanctuary city attacks that Republicans have been using verbatim, and they were potent. In a 2018 poll of battleground districts and swing states, Democrats start with a 7 point lead when offered the names of actual House, Senate, or gubernatorial candidates— even in this terrain where Republicans started with a 6 point edge in party identification. But after hearing one attack and looking at one visual/mailer attacking the Democrat candidate on sanctuary cities, that lead disappeared. Forty-eight percent of voters said they would be less likely to vote for the Democrat after seeing the attack. And when asked again about their vote post-attack (but before any rebuttal), the Democratic candidate's 7 point lead flipped to a 4 point deficit. For a single attack, this eleven-point movement is a significant swing. As noted above, this is likely because voters started without much of a notion of what Democrats stand for on immigration, so it is easier for these attacks to stick. It is important to note that the attack had virtually no effect with white college-educated voters and African-Americans. However, there was dramatic movement among groups like white non-college voters (-17), women over 55 (-19) and Independents (-17).

3. The Attack Can Be Neutralized.

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Despite how damaging this initial sanctuary cities attack can be in a vacuum, there are ways to effectively respond to or pre-but them. They require acknowledging voters' underlying concerns and directly addressing them. We identified two distinct strategies that work:

Solutions: The single most effective response was to say that the immigration system is broken because both parties have played politics instead of trying to fix the problem, and to support a bipartisan solution that would secure our border and create an earned pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants if they keep out of trouble, work hard, learn English, and pay taxes. This response picked up a net of 10 points for Democrats and almost completely regained their pre-attack advantage.

Opposing Violent Crime and Bad Actors: The other response that tested well was strongly coming out against any policy that would create safe havens for criminals and gangs or threaten the safety and security of our communities, and emphasizing that anyone who commits a violent crime should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Importantly, this opposition did not even need to reference immigration. This rebuttal, which goes to the heart of the concerns voters voiced about sanctuary cities, netted 6 points for Democrats and was the most effective at actually reducing voters' anxiety about sanctuary cities. It was also particularly successful at gaining back vulnerable voters from states Trump won in 2016. And importantly, neither this nor the solutions message undercut support for Democrats among base voters.

In practice, we saw messages like these deployed effectively in the 2018 midterms. Representative Abigail Spanberger beat back attacks by a Tea Party Trump ally with a strong response: "I do not support safe havens from criminals or gangs. I do not support anything that would make our communities weak or hurt our communities. In fact, I used to work every single day to keep the community I lived in safe. For you to allege anything else is frankly comical." She went on to flip a tough Republican district from red to blue.

Likewise, Representative Xochitl Torres Small won a district on the border that had gone for Trump in 2016 by 10 points by acknowledging our broken immigration system and pledging to fight bad actors. At the start of her 2018 campaign, she proactively put out making the case for "secure borders to keep out traffickers and violent criminals," and "a clear and moral immigration system."

Post-2018, this approach of targeting the true bad actors has remained salient with voters. In our latest research with voters in battleground House districts, this bad actors framework held broad appeal. 70% supported this statement: "We know who the bad guys are—the drug cartels, human traffickers, and other violent criminals. We should focus on fighting them and not targeting families seeking asylum." Critically, this framework was popular with the

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Democratic base (88% support) and independents (72%). And it even made inroads with some Republicans, garnering 57% agreement with that group.

4. Many Commonly Deployed Strategies Were Ineffective.

In addition to identifying two effective approaches, our research also illuminated four significant insights about what doesn't work on this issue:

Opposing sanctuary cities is ineffective. Saying "I oppose sanctuary cities" was less persuasive than directly addressing concerns about violent crime, both when it came to regaining Democratic vote margins and reducing voter concerns about this issue. And to make matter worse, this response also spurred strong backlash from the Democratic base—a problem that was not created by either of the effective responses outlined above.

Explaining is losing. Voters are deeply skeptical of factual statements about sanctuary cities, even when presented with significant evidence. And when they *did* believe facts that were presented about the reality of sanctuary city policies on the ground, it often made them more concerned, not less, about the issue. Candidates should simply not be spending significant time trying to explain sanctuary city policies in detail, persuade voters that they are a good idea, or change their perception of those jurisdictions. It leads to greater confusion and no real electoral gain.

Pivoting to public safety rationales alone does not work. It is not effective to argue that law enforcement shouldn't waste resources chasing down undocumented immigrants who pose no threat. Similarly, saying it is unrealistic to deport 11 million undocumented immigrants also isn't persuasive to voters who are concerned about this issue. Rather, focusing on solutions to our broken immigration system is much more impactful than explaining why sanctuary city policies exist—even if it is tempting to do the latter.

Supporting local law enforcement only works if you pit it against DC. Federalism is not an effective argument on its own, because most voters don't understand the different roles local law enforcement and federal immigration enforcement officials play in the system. They generally believe that local law enforcement should cooperate with federal officials. Support for local law enforcement was more effective when pitted against "Washington politicians dictating how to keep our communities safe"—but even that formulation was less impactful than the strategies recommended above.

The Best Formula

1. *Focus on Solutions:* Our immigration system is broken because both parties in DC are

1. ***Focus on Solutions:*** Our immigration system is broken because both parties in DC are playing politics instead of trying to fix the problem. I support a bipartisan plan to increase border security and create an earned pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants if they keep out of trouble, work hard, learn English, and pay taxes.

2. ***Oppose Violent Crime (not Sanctuary Cities):*** I oppose any policy that creates safe havens for criminals and gangs. I believe that anyone who commits a violent crime in our community should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Conclusion

Even after three years of Trump's cruel and dehumanizing actions on immigration, Democrats are still fighting from behind on the issue in many swing states and districts. Republicans know that sanctuary city attacks work, and that Democratic candidates have often struggled to effectively respond to them. These attacks will likely increase as the election draws near, but they are far from insurmountable. By clearly and concisely addressing voters' concerns, Democrats can effectively pre-but or respond to these attacks, win key races, and be better positioned to offer real solutions on immigration—and so many other pressing issues our country faces.