

Immigration in the Midterms: Trump's Wall vs. the Blue Wave



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The first two years of Donald Trump's presidency were filled with terrible policies and self-created crises around immigration. From the Muslim ban and ending DACA to family separation and troops deploying to the border, Americans have endured an onslaught of horrific headlines. The midterm elections were the first national opportunity for voters to make their views clear on Trump's actions.

The GOP thought Trump's rhetoric could build a wall to hold back the blue wave. They seized on calls from a handful of Democrats for policies like abolishing ICE as an opportunity to divert attention from their own deplorable immigration record, and they tried to paint Democrats as the more extreme party. It didn't work, because Democrats championed common ground solutions in key races. Instead of siding with the President and Republicans, voters spoke loud and clear that they want real fixes—not manufactured disasters. Here's what the midterm results tell us about the current politics of immigration.

1. Voters rejected Trump's draconian approach on immigration.

President Trump and his Republican allies made immigration a key issue in the midterm elections and it was their entire closing argument. For them, it was the one thing they wanted front and center in the election, Trump even called it the “election of the caravan,” referring to the asylum seekers traveling through Mexico in October and early November.¹ In the immediate lead up to November 6th, Trump unleashed an onslaught of draconian immigration announcements, including:

- Deploying 5,000 troops to the border to block legal asylum seekers;
- Claiming he would unilaterally end birthright citizenship (which is enshrined clearly in the U.S. Constitution);
- Threatening to increase the number of soldiers sent to the border just days before the election from 5,000 to 15,000;
- Releasing a blatantly racist and fear-mongering ad blaming Democrats for the caravan of asylum seekers and claiming the U.S. was being invaded; and,
- Announcing he would be blocking asylum applications on the Southern border and indefinitely detaining families who apply for asylum.

None of these distractions worked to hold back the blue wave. Democrats picked up 40 seats in the House, 7 Governorships, and 380+ state legislative seats. With immigration in the forefront of the minds of voters, Republicans lost their majority and Democrats won in places they hadn't carried in decades. The midterms were a clear test of Trump's derisive and fear-based immigration rhetoric, and voters resoundingly rejected it.

2. Republicans went all in on Trump's rhetoric.

The President hardly stood alone in his attempt to fear-monger with immigration or paint Democrats as out-of-touch radicals. Republican campaigns and political action groups were all too eager to echo the President's divisive immigration rhetoric. By mid-October, an estimated \$124 million was spent on over 280,000 immigration ads in House, Senate, and gubernatorial races – a fivefold increase from spending on immigration ads in the 2014 midterms.² And most of these ads were run by Republicans, who talked about immigration five times more than Democrats did, deploying a litany of divisive messages against their opponents.

Republican House candidates Wendy Rogers ran an ad in the Arizona 1st district calling the migrant caravan “an illegal immigrant invasion” and asserting that a Democrat House would lead to open borders.³ Numerous ads run by conservative action groups tried to paint Democratic candidates as a danger to American families, like one against Aftab Puraval in the Ohio 1st, calling him “...a risk our families can't take” and saying he was the candidate of “radicals wanting to abolish ICE” (despite the fact that Puraval actually opposed proposals to abolish ICE).⁴ Barbara Comstock's campaign in northern Virginia similarly released an online ad that used an image of school children and said “Jennifer Wexton opposes the removal of criminal alien gang members in our country. She won't keep us safe.”⁵

There was also no shortage of ads insinuating that Democratic candidates supported sanctuary cities and wanted to create safe havens for MS-13, like an ad against Iowa House candidate Abby Finkenauer showing harrowing images of MS-13 members and accusing her of “voting to put criminal illegal aliens back on our streets.” Time and time again, the Republican message told voters to fear for their safety, as countless candidates doubled down on the same divisive tactics used by Trump. Yet this full-scale embrace of

his anti-immigrant rhetoric, Republicans lost the national House vote by six points.

3. Democrats pushed back hard and championed bipartisan, commonsense solutions to fix the broken system.

Across the country, Democratic candidates stood up against anti-immigrant attacks and called for real fixes with mainstream support to our long-broken immigration system. And Democratic candidates weren't afraid to talk about securing our border or to make it crystal clear that we can keep our nation secure without tearing apart families.

- **Xochitl Torres Small** ran in New Mexico's 2nd district, along the Mexican border. She wasn't afraid to talk about the areas on which we need to be tough in immigration, saying "we need secure borders to keep out traffickers and violent criminals." ⁶ She was also clear that a border wall won't solve any of our problems and that true border security relies on "a clear and moral immigration system." ⁷ She won by 1.8 points.
- **Abigail Spanberger**, a former CIA officer, went up against incumbent Dave Brat in Virginia's 3rd district, and he predictably tried to smear her on amnesty and sanctuary cities in a debate. ⁸ Spanberger provided the textbook response: "I used to work every single day to keep the community I lived in safe. For you to allege anything else is frankly comical." ⁹ She won this long-Republican held district by 2 points.

- **Sharice Davids**, the first native-American congresswoman and the first openly-LGBT Kansan representative, ran in Kansas's 3rd¹⁰ She was hit by her opponent for comments she made in an interview about proposals to abolish ICE. Davids decisively pushed back saying in a TV ad, "I don't support abolishing ICE. I do support bipartisan immigration reform, with strong borders and a pathway to citizenship, especially for those who serve in our military."¹¹ She won by an impressive 9 point margin.
- **Collin Allred** ran in Texas' 32nd district on a platform of supporting "a bipartisan solution that keeps our communities safe while building ground for compromise, so that we can finally fix the problems in our broken immigration system."¹² That message for commonsense action by Congress beat incumbent Pete Sessions, a vocal proponent for Trump's border wall, by 6.5 points.¹³

The message on immigration that emanated from these candidates was exactly what voters needed to hear: we should stop playing politics on immigration and support real common ground solutions to fix our system. In an [election-eve poll](#) by Third Way and David Binder Research in the 72 districts considered the House battleground by Cook Political Report, we asked voters what message they were intending to send on immigration with their vote. Seven in ten voters supported solutions (35% for passing comprehensive immigration reform, 20% for keeping families together, and 14% for protecting Dreamers). Just 24% said they wanted to send a message to build a wall (on the other side, only 2% said "abolish ICE"). And 73% of voters said fixing our immigration system should be an extremely or very important priority for the next Congress. Voters from coast to coast saw through the Republican fear tactics and backed Democrats who want to work toward actual solutions to the challenges we face with our broken immigration system.

4. Republicans who distanced themselves from Trump's

divisive rhetoric outperformed Trump loyalists.

Republicans who moved away from Trump's immigration rhetoric and closer to mainstream American views also performed better than many of their loyalist counterparts. Immigration hardliners like Kansas gubernatorial candidate Kris Kobach and Virginia Senate candidate Corey Stewart were resoundingly rebuffed by voters from coast to coast. Going into election night, Republicans held 25 House districts which Hillary Clinton had won in 2016. After the midterms, they held on to just 3 of them. The members who survived in these seats all distanced themselves from Trump's divisive rhetoric.

- **Will Hurd** won a close race in Texas' 23rd district by half a point and was the only Republican on the southern border to win in the midterms.¹⁴ He is a vocal and frequent critic of Trump's immigration and border wall policies, saying that "building a border wall in the middle of desert is a colossal waste of money."¹⁵ In the House, he has been a consistent voice for bipartisan immigration reform and protections for the Dreamers.¹⁶
- **John Katko** was reelected in the Clinton-won district of New York's 24th by a margin of 6 points.¹⁷ In the 115th Congress, he joined the discharge petition revolt among other moderate Republicans last spring to try to force a vote to protect Dreamers.¹⁸
- **Brian Fitzpatrick** won by 2.6 points in Pennsylvania's 1st. He also signed the Dreamer discharge petition and staunchly rebuked President Trump's "inhumane practice of separating children from their parents at the border."¹⁹ He is a frequent proponent for bipartisan reforms to our immigration system.

Even among Republicans who lost, moving away from Trump on immigration was the best strategy. Take Carlos Curbelo, leader of the moderate Republican revolt to protect Dreamers.

He lost in close race by less than 2 points, significantly outperforming Trump ally and Governor-elect Ron DeSantis, who lost the district by 7 points.²⁰ Trump loyalists and immigration hardliners may have won in some of the deepest red districts, but it is clear that in competitive swing districts across the country, Trump's attacks on immigrants were bad politics.

Conclusion

The midterm elections were a clear rebuke of Trump's nativism. After two years of enduring his anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions, voters pulled the lever for candidates that embraced bipartisan, commonsense solutions to fix our broken immigration system. Policymakers across the country should take note.

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