

POLLING Published May 6, 2025 • 8 minute read

Democrats' Immigration Opportunity



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During his first 100 days in office, Donald Trump has taken unprecedented, unconscionable, and illegal actions across a range of issues. Many of the most high-profile and patently unconstitutional among them have focused on immigration, an issue on which he and his allies believe he has a potent political advantage.

There is no doubt that Trump's edge on immigration played a major role in his victory in 2024, and Democrats have posted a consistent and yawning deficit when it comes to who voters trust to handle the issue for years. But if opponents of Trump's immigration agenda engage wisely in this moment, they may have an opportunity to close that gap and turn the politics of immigration around. By contrast, if they lean into old frames or take unpopular stances, they will strengthen Trump's hand and make it more likely he will succeed in his effort to fundamentally end America's status as a nation of immigrants. We conducted a poll of registered voters nationally and in battleground House districts,

working with Normington Petts, to understand the landscape in these first few months of Trump 2.0 and map out the most effective path to push back.

Democrats start with a big problem.

While some recent public polls have shown evidence of a potential softening of approval around Trump's handling of immigration, he and his allies started with a mammoth lead that will take time to erode. In our poll, Democrats started with a 30-point deficit when voters were asked which party they trusted to handle immigration, which grew to a whopping 41 points when it came to border security specifically. Those numbers clocked in as the lowest trust level on any issue we tested, three times as big as the trust gap on inflation and four times as big as the gap on the economy. When it came to Trump specifically, the immigration and border security trust gaps were slightly smaller than they were with the Republican party generally, but only by a tick or two, leaving him with 26-point and 34-point advantages, respectively—despite his extreme rhetoric and actions.

Democrats Have a 30-Point Deficit on Immigration



Source: Normington Petts and Third Way conducted a survey of 800 general election voters from March 12-19, 2025. The confidence interval was +/- 3.5 percentage points.

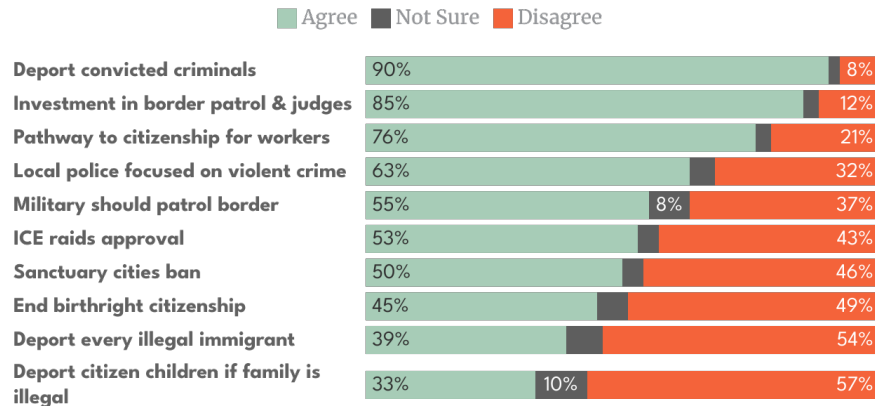


Overall, 76% of voters said illegal immigration is a problem, and when asked whether they'd prefer a federal immigration policy that was "too harsh" or "too compassionate," a solid 55% chose the former.

Voters are extremely cross-pressured.

While voters consistently say they trust Republicans over Democrats to handle immigration and the border, when you dig into the details, the picture becomes more complicated. Some of Trump's proposals and actions garner extremely high marks, with a staggering 90% of voters agreeing that "We should deport any immigrant who is convicted of a violent crime." Others have solid majority support, with 55% saying "We should send the US military to the southern border to protect it" and 53% saying they personally "approve of the ICE raids to find and deport illegal immigrants that were ordered by President Trump."

Support for Various Immigration Statements



Source: Normington Petts and Third Way conducted a survey of 800 general election voters from March 12-19, 2025. The confidence interval was +/- 3.5 percentage points.



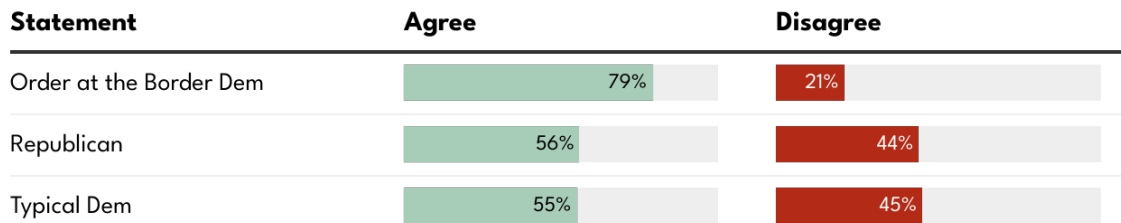
But some of the policies and approaches championed by Trump’s opponents gained similarly high approval numbers. A full 85% of voters agreed that “We need to restore order at the border by adding more border security agents and immigration judges and investing in technology to improve the detection and confiscation of illegal drugs like fentanyl,” a position many Democrats have been touting loudly ever since Trump killed the bipartisan border deal negotiated in the Senate last Congress. And a supermajority (75%) agreed with the following formulation, which has been a refrain for many Democrats for years: “We need to establish a pathway to citizenship for hardworking immigrants who have been living and working here for years, even if they came here illegally. If they have a job, pay taxes, and have not committed a crime, then we should find a way for them to stay.”

Even on politically fraught topics like “sanctuary cities,” voters were more likely to agree with Trump’s opponents that “Local law enforcement should be focused on enforcing local laws and protecting our communities from violent crimes, not enforcing federal immigration laws” (63%) than his allies who say “We should strip all federal funding from cities and towns that refuse to cooperate with immigration enforcement” (50%). And on some of the harshest positions Trump has taken, the public simply isn’t with him: only 45% agreed we should end birthright citizenship, a mere 39% said we should deport every immigrant who came to America illegally, and a paltry 33% thought we should deport American citizen children if their parents are here illegally. The only policy that tested as low as deporting citizen kids was decriminalizing border crossings, which also only appealed to 33% of voters.

Democrats have an opportunity to connect.

Given these underlying dynamics and the complex landscape of public opinion around these issues, some of the arguments Democrats have been using to push back against Trump and articulate their own views simply don’t work. But there were other approaches that showed serious promise in this political moment to shift the tides with voters.

Immigration Statements Popularity



Source: Normington Petts and Third Way conducted a survey of 800 general election voters from March 12–19, 2025. The confidence interval was +/- 3.5 percentage points.



The argument that “Trump’s mass deportation plan would mean losing thousands of workers in agriculture, construction, and health care, and that will cause prices to increase” rang true to a solid 56% of voters, even before folks have had time to witness the full impact of his actions. And 55% believe “It is wrong that Trump is deporting people to countries that they are not from, like the Iranian family he deported to Panama.” By contrast, arguing that Trump is actually deporting people at lower rates than the Biden administration simply wasn’t believable, and accusations of Republicans playing politics with the issue rather than solving the problem also weren’t persuasive. In fact, the highest-testing message in our survey gave Trump and his allies credit before pivoting to what is left to be done: 58% of voters agreed “Our southern border is now secure, so Republicans should work with Democrats to fix the broken immigration system.”

It is deeply evident throughout our survey that it matters how Democrats talk about these issues. We offered respondents two different versions of a Democratic message, along with that of a typical Republican. **The latter boasted stronger support, both nationwide and in battleground Congressional districts, than a typical Democratic approach:**

Democrats in Congress say people fleeing violence and poverty have a legal right to seek asylum in the United States. They are just searching for a better life, and we should welcome them with compassion and dignity. We need to reform our immigration system to be more humane and welcoming and make it easier for people to immigrate to the United States and provide a pathway to citizenship for those who are already here embedded in our communities.

But a stronger Democratic message emphasizing order at the border roundly bested the Republican attack:

Democrats in Congress say that illegal immigration is a problem. They say we are a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. We need to restore order at the border and urge immigration judges to process cases so we can decide who can come into our country and send home those who are not eligible under US law. We also need to deport illegal immigrants who have been convicted of violent crimes and create pathways to legal status for people who have been contributing to our communities for years and have a US citizen spouse and children

That formulation garnered 79% support, 23 points higher than Trump’s typical message. And among those who heard that version and were then asked which party was better on immigration, Democrats *beat* Republicans by two points (four in battleground districts). In the battleground districts, those who heard the soft Democratic version gave Republicans a 14-point edge, and their initial generic ballot numbers supporting Democrats fell by three points by the end of the survey.

Immigration Statements Head to Head



Source: Normington Petts and Third Way conducted a survey of 800 general election voters from March 12–19, 2025. The confidence interval was +/- 3.5 percentage points.



While a single message test in a poll is rarely enough to significantly sway votes, this split screen showed real promise. In the battleground districts, voters who heard the order at the border message moved slightly *toward* Democrats on the generic ballot by the end, and their initial trust gaps meaningfully closed, moving from 32 points to 13 points on immigration as a whole and 39 points to 30 points on border security. If that much movement occurred over the course of a survey, it is safe to say those deficits would continue to erode if voters heard Democratic policymakers and candidates consistently delivering an order at the border message.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that immigration will remain a high-profile issue throughout Trump 2.0, and that this President and his allies will overreach in ways that are not supported by most American voters. Democrats have an opportunity to push back on the most egregious actions in a way that alters the politics in their favor, so long as they acknowledge the problem, avoid extreme positions (like opposing the deportation of convicted, violent criminals or decriminalizing border crossings), and articulate their own vision for restoring order at the border and ending Trump's chaos.