

# Owning the Immigration Deal



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## Takeaways

- Immigration is a high-salience issue for voters, and Democrats are under water on it.
- The Senate bipartisan border deal is popular, and if Democrats own it, they can flip the script with skeptical voters while keeping their base intact.

- While Republicans start with a 15-point advantage on their approach to immigration and the border, a Democratic offensive strategy touting the deal completely erases that edge.

Congressional Republicans have refused to take yes for an answer on the border, and it is clear their party is going all in on attacking Democrats on immigration in 2024. There's a reason for it: voters are very concerned about chaos at the border and don't trust Democrats to fix it. But the announcement of a bipartisan deal in the Senate and Republicans' decision to tank it have opened a crucial moment of opportunity for Democrats to reset the debate. We worked with Lake Research Partners to conduct a poll of 1000 likely voters in battleground congressional districts, with an oversample of 150 Latino likely voters. The data spell out a clear path for how Democrats can go on offense on immigration and the border, shifting the political dynamic ahead of November.

## **Democrats start in a hole on immigration.**

While the terrain is mixed in these battleground districts, Democrats start out essentially tied on the generic ballot vote (42% D to 43% R), with Latino voters favoring congressional Democratic candidates by 14 points. But when it comes to the issue of immigration, the picture gets much bleaker. At first blush, voters say Republicans have a better approach on immigration and the border by 15 points (47% to 32%), and Independents say the same by 24 points (40% to 16%). For those who answered the most intensely, 39% say Republicans have "a lot better" approach, while only 17% say the same of Democrats. Among Independents, those numbers are 28% versus a measly four percent. Even among Latino voters, Trump's party has an edge, with 39% saying Republicans have a better approach compared to 37% for Democrats.

Part of why voters side with Republicans on this issue is that they think Republicans are the ones who care about it. By 14 points, voters say Republicans are more focused on passing laws to reform immigration and secure the border (47% to 33%). Independents trust both parties less to focus on the issue, but they still give Republicans a 10-point edge (32% to 22%). Latino voters think Republicans are more focused on the issue too, though by a slightly smaller margin (42% to 36%). While these numbers are concerning, they are also the crux of the opportunity: in a moment when leading Democrats have acknowledged the problems on the border and negotiated a solution, they can shift this perception if they own the deal.

## **Voters like the deal, both as a whole and individual components.**

While the bipartisan Senate border deal is almost certainly dead legislatively, that doesn't mean it has to be dead politically. If Democrats own the deal and use it to demonstrate they care about this issue, are invested in restoring order to the border, and are championing a real solution to do so, they can show they're the ones who are taking voters' concerns seriously.

Across the board, there is strong support for the components of the Senate deal—even among the Democratic base. Seven in ten voters want to give the President emergency powers to temporarily close the border if it gets overwhelmed (72%), raise the requirements for those seeking asylum (69%), require mandatory detention of single migrant adults (71%), and invest \$20 billion in new security and personnel at the border (73%), and eight in ten want to give agencies new powers to disrupt the opioid and fentanyl supply chains (82%). Each of those policies gains support from at least two-thirds of Democrats, except mandatory detention, which clocks in at 56% among that group. And Latino voters concur, three-quarters on closing the border when the system is overwhelmed, 82% on raising asylum requirements, 70% on mandatory detention, and 77% on investments in both border security and

fentanyl. Across the board, both swing and base voters are remarkably aligned in favor of the big security components of the deal.

## Support is high for bipartisan border deal components

	Overall	Dems.	Ind.	Latinos
New federal powers for drug enforcement	82	87	79	77
Guaranteed legal counsel for unaccompanied children	74	94	64	82
Mandatory detention for single adults	71	56	75	70
Removes migrants without valid asylum cases	67	56	67	66
Emergency powers to temporarily close border	72	78	73	75
Temporary work permits for asylum seekers	65	94	60	73
Invests in border security	73	78	76	77
Raises asylum requirements	69	67	63	82
New family and work visas	65	89	70	75
Allows some migrant families to stay in the country	62	87	64	69
Emergency funding for affected states and cities	50	87	40	53
Builds more detention centers	41	46	39	39

Source: Third Way and Lake Research Partners conducted a national online survey of 1,000 likely 2024 battleground district voters from February 15–22, 2024.



It’s not just the tough on the border policies that voters like—they also understand that a major piece of restoring order must be providing orderly pathways for people to come to this country in other ways. Sixty-five percent support the plank of the deal that would create 250,000 new family and work visas over the next five years for people to enter and stay legally, and the same number support giving work permits to migrants waiting for their case to be heard. Six in ten support allowing some migrant families to stay in the country and be monitored to ensure they make their court appearances, and nearly

three-quarters believe we should provide legal counsel to all unaccompanied children. Not surprisingly, support for each of those policies among Democratic and Latino voters is even higher, and at least 60% of Independents are on board as well. Again, there's strikingly little daylight between base voters and those in the middle on these details.

Only two components of the Senate deal that we tested garnered more mixed reactions. Providing emergency funding to states and cities to provide shelter and services to asylum seekers gained 50% support—a majority, but driven by Democratic voters, with Independents opposed. And building more detention centers so fewer migrants need to be released was even less popular, under water with Democrats, Independents, and Republicans, with Latinos opposing that idea by 15 points. As Democrats own the deal, they should avoid highlighting those specific pieces.

Hearing that this deal was bipartisan also buoys support, though mentioning President Biden's involvement drives those numbers down a bit. Overall, it's clear that the Senate deal has broad and deep appeal, and when added up together as a single proposal, voters in battleground districts support it by 38 points (63% to 25%). Independent voters favor it by 30 points, and there is no evidence of backlash from the base, as Latino voters favor it 75% to 20%, and Democrats do 85% to 8% (a whopping 77-point margin). Even Republican voters support this deal by seven points, despite the fact that Republican elected officials have decided to tank it.

When told that Donald Trump opposes the border security deal and now it has no path forward, a plurality of Republicans say that makes them feel good because they don't want it to pass. But they're the only ones: Independents say they feel bad about that fact because they want it to pass (by five points), as do Democrats (by 65 points) and Latino voters (by 15 points).

# Going on offense with the deal completely erases Republican's advantage.

Knowing the depth of support for the components of the bipartisan Senate border deal, it's obvious that Democrats should embrace it and go on offense on immigration. They've got a solution on the table to restore order to the border, and Republicans refuse to take yes for an answer. We tested a variety of ways to frame this scenario and pitted them against each other, and three messages rose to the top as the best reasons to support a Democratic candidate among battleground district voters. These ways to describe and own the deal emphasize both parts of it, not just the security pieces, acknowledge current chaos and the need to restore order, and focus on creating an efficient system to process cases in a fast, fair, and final way moving forward.

- The best performing message overall was this: “The Democrat says we need to **fix our broken border**. Nearly every Democrat and Republican agrees we have a problem. The Democrat is **willing to compromise** on some things to **restore order at the border** and help local communities.” Seventy-five percent of voters said it was most likely to make them support that candidate when compared to other descriptions, including 70% of Independents, 72% of Democrats, and 78% of Latinos.
- Emphasizing the need to enforce US law also worked well: “The Democrat says this deal is **tough and fair**. If you cross the border unlawfully, **there are consequences**. If you can **make your case to stay under U.S. law**, you can do so through a system that is **fast, fair, and final**.” Seventy-three percent of voters, 72% of Independents, 65% of Democrats, and 74% of Latinos ranked that message as most likely to make them support the candidate that embraced it compared to other framings.

- Fixing the system while protecting migrants was also popular. “The Democrat says this is an important step to **protect migrants and asylum seekers**. This deal will provide humanitarian aid to asylum seekers, **ensure cases are processed more quickly**, and **create legal pathways** so migrants can work and support their families” appealed as a first choice to 72%, 72% of Independents, 81% of Democrats, and 76% of Latinos.

The second step after going on offense is to hit Republicans for their blatant admission that they’d rather play politics than solve the problem. We tested the following attack: “Republicans are not serious about addressing problems at the border. Republicans are ruthless, and they demanded a deal. But now that we have one, they would rather vote no and play politics with our border security than take yes for an answer.” Fifty-seven percent of voters, including 69% of Independents, said it raised doubts about supporting Republicans in Congress, with 42% saying those doubts were serious (and more than half of Independents).

Adding Trump to the mix bumped the topline numbers a bit, though that was driven almost entirely by movement among Democrats, who likely hate Trump more than they love a deal. When voters were told “MAGA Republicans are weak and have been ordered by President Trump to vote no. Instead of solving our border crisis, they would rather take orders from Trump and get nothing done,” 60% said it raised doubts for them (44% serious), including 57% of Independents (34% serious). That level of concern was 12 points lower for Independent voters than the prior argument (69% v. 57%), and 18 points lower when it came to serious concerns (52% v. 34%). For voters in the middle, focusing on the substance of the obstruction, not the Trump lackey angle, was more effective at raising concerns about Republicans.

After voters hear Democrats go on offense owning the deal and are reminded that Republicans walked away, the latter’s advantage on the issue almost completely dissipates. **A sample that began giving Republicans a 15-point advantage on having a better approach to immigration and the border ends**

essentially tied (Republicans up two points, but within the margin of error). Independents, who said at the outset that Republicans had a better approach on immigration and the border by 24 points, side with Democrats by seven after hearing them own the deal. And Latino voters go from leaning toward Republicans by two points to siding with Democrats by 13 on the issue.

**Support for Democrats’ approach grows after hearing about the border deal**

	Overall	Ind.	Latinos		Overall	Ind.	Latinos
Democrats – a lot better	17	4	20	Change after messaging →	+8	+3	+6
Democrats – somewhat better	15	12	17		+3	+11	+7
Democrats – total	32	16	37		+11	+14	+13
Republicans – somewhat better	8	12	11		+2	-4	-2
Republicans – a lot better	39	28	28		-3	-14	-1
Republicans – total	47	40	39		-1	-18	-3

Source: Third Way and Lake Research Partners conducted a national online survey of 1,000 likely 2024 battleground district voters from February 15-22, 2024.



# Conclusion

The mandate is clear. Democrats must take this moment to lean into the issue of immigration, acknowledge the problems, embrace and own the solutions on the table, and remind voters that they gave Republicans what they asked for, and they balked. If you want to restore order at the border, Democrats are ready and willing to do what is necessary. Their Republican counterparts are offering only continued chaos. If they take this opportunity in front of them and act now, Democrats have a chance to make their immigration deficit disappear.

TOPICS

**IMMIGRATION 97**