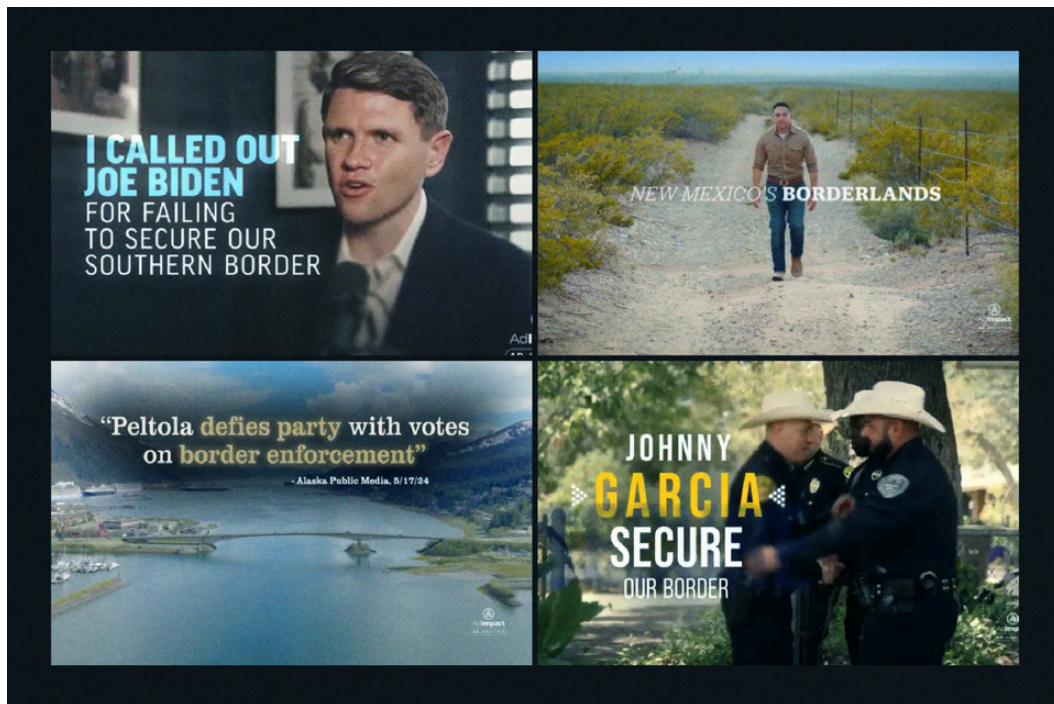


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Battleground Democrats Aren't Ducking the Immigration Fight

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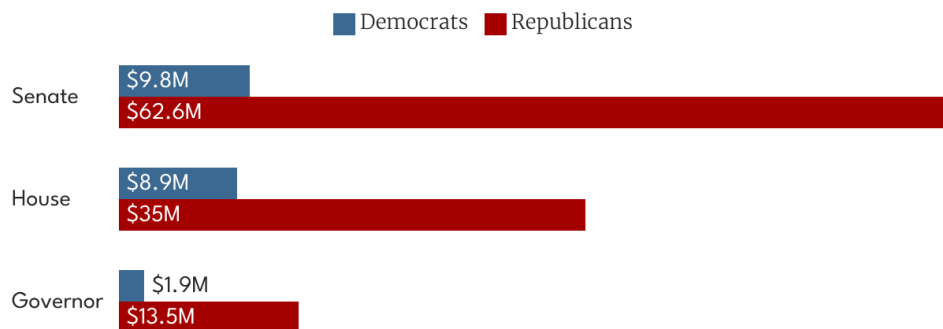
In 2006, Republicans facing a hostile midterm environment tried to use immigration to shift attention away from an unpopular war, corruption, and a souring economy. House leaders staged 21 field hearings against the “Reid-Kennedy amnesty bill” and ran ads claiming Democrats wanted “Social Security for illegal immigrants.”

It didn’t work. Democrats gained 31 House seats and six Senate seats. Exit polls showed voters cared about illegal immigration, but a majority also supported giving undocumented immigrants a chance to apply for legal status. They wanted a solution, not just another attack.

It’s 2026 and Republicans are running the same play. They have spent \$111 million on immigration ads in battleground House, Senate, and gubernatorial races over the last six weeks, more than five times the \$20 million Democrats have spent on the issue, according to a Third Way analysis of AdImpact data.

Republicans Outspending Democrats On Immigration Ads

Immigration-related ad spending in battlegrounds, Sept. 1 to Oct. 11, 2026



Source: Third Way analysis of AdImpact data



While Trump may have used immigration and border security to drag Biden and Harris down in 2024, his mass deportations have scrambled the politics today. In new Third Way polling, 58% of battleground-state voters disapprove of Trump’s immigration enforcement, and 53% view ICE unfavorably to 39% favorably. Yet, rejecting Trump isn’t the same as trusting Democrats. In presidential battleground states, Democrats trail on handling border security by 30 points, and voters’ most common complaint of Democrats is that they are

“too soft.” That trust gap is why Democratic candidates can’t afford to leave the issue uncontested.

Democrats may be spending less on immigration ads, which ranks lower on voters’ top priorities this cycle, but a growing group of candidates are taking Republicans on directly, making the case for secure borders, public safety, legal pathways, and basic decency. Here are some of them:

Senate Races

James Talarico, Texas

Ken Paxton’s first big immigration attack featured Talarico saying the border should be like a front porch with “a giant welcome mat out front.” The ad cut him off before the rest of the line: “and a lock on the door.” PolitiFact rated it mostly false.

Talarico leaned in. Calling himself a “Border Security Democrat,” he launched a 750-mile border tour and a plan for more agents, judges, and technology, with ICE focused on serious threats rather than families. Standing with a Republican sheriff who backs his border plan, he said, “Joe Biden and his administration failed us on our southern border.” And two of his newest ads “Checks and Balances” and “Own Words,” lay out his border security stance along with other traditional Texan cultural views.

For Talarico, security and welcome are not opposites: “We need leaders who are going to do both, secure the border and create a pathway to citizenship for the folks who have been here for a long time.” He makes the same case for legal immigration: “We should be stopping illegal immigration, not curtailing avenues for immigrants to legally migrate to America and make our country richer and stronger.”

Josh Turek, Iowa

Before Republicans had even begun attacking Josh Turek on immigration, his campaign went on offense with “I-35,” an ad about “the broken immigration system that both parties have failed to fix.” Turek promises to work with anyone to fix it, “including President Trump,” and notes he voted with Republicans to arrest and deport criminals. He also backs earned citizenship and opposes masked ICE agents. Turek’s message is clear and simple: you can deport criminals and still give longtime immigrants a shot at becoming Americans.

And in his latest ad, Turek uses law enforcement validators who say, “We know Josh Turek’s record...Josh broke with his party and voted with Republicans to support law enforcement and crack down on illegal immigration...He’ll go after drug traffickers to stop the flow of fentanyl. When it comes to keeping Iowans safe, we trust Josh Turek.”

Roy Cooper, North Carolina

Republicans have spent millions trying to cast Roy Cooper as soft on crime and immigration for vetoing bills requiring sheriffs to carry out ICE detention requests. Cooper’s answer was that the mandates forced sheriffs “to do the job of federal agents.”

His ad, “What’s True,” opens with fact-checkers calling the attacks “false.” And Cooper has turned the argument back on Michael Whatley, Trump’s hand-picked candidate: Cooper backed “the toughest border security bill in decades,” the bipartisan 2024 measure Trump killed. Whatley, he says, “helped torpedo” it. In a state Trump carried by 3 points, Cooper has a healthy, consistent lead, and the main Senate Republican super PAC has canceled its planned ad spending for Whatley.

Adam Hamilton, Kansas

Adam Hamilton isn’t waiting to be called an open-borders Democrat. His ad “Both Extremes” says “the far left pushes socialism and open borders,” while GOP Sen. Roger Marshall “gives us higher gas and grocery prices.” Hamilton calls immigration under Biden “a disaster,” but he says it isn’t better under Trump.

He backs secure borders and ICE enforcement focused on serious criminals, plus year-round agricultural visas and a path to legal status for farmworkers already here. When ICE operations disrupted schools, businesses, and meatpacking plants in southwest Kansas, Marshall called on ICE to coordinate with local officials, acknowledging “mass disruptions.” In deep-red Kansas, it is the Republican who is now playing defense.

Mary Peltola, Alaska

No Going Back, a super PAC linked to Trump’s MAGA Inc., has spent millions attacking Mary Peltola. One of its ads accuses her of backing “amnesty to criminal illegals” and promises that Sen. Dan Sullivan will “rapidly remove the criminals.” The ad leaves out her record: in 2024, she voted for the Laken Riley Act, for bills to deport immigrants who assault police officers or commit sex crimes, and to condemn Biden’s handling of the border.

Peltola hasn't answered the ad line by line. Instead, she runs as an Alaskan first, and her answer takes in the border: "Forget party, forget politics...I took on Joe Biden to secure the border." She has also turned the Lower 48 label against the crackdown. "What's happening right now in the Lower 48 does nothing to make us safer here in Alaska," she said, calling for "accountability for ICE."



[Click here to view the video.](#)

House Races

Gabe Vasquez, NM-02

Rep. Gabe Vasquez's district takes in all of New Mexico's border with Mexico, and Trump carried it by 2 points. The Democrat's immigration plan begins with a blunt assessment: "Both parties have failed to fix our immigration system for far too long." From there, it gets specific: surveillance technology instead of theatrical wall politics, visas tied to real labor needs, enforcement focused on violent criminals, and earned legal status for people who have "worked, paid taxes, raised families, and followed the rules." Vasquez hits on strengthening border security and working with Republicans to make New Mexico's communities safer in his ad "Borderlands."



[Click here to view the video.](#)

Bobby Pulido, TX-15

Tejano star Bobby Pulido said in his [launch video](#), “Yes, we have to get the criminals out and secure the border, but we can do that without destroying families and our South Texas economy.” He is [just as blunt about both parties](#): “It feels like it went from ‘let ‘em all in’ to ‘kick ‘em all out.’ I don’t think that either one is good. We need immigrants, but everybody always says do it the legal way. We have to actually legislate pathways for that to happen.”

Rep. Monica De La Cruz is feeling enough heat that she is now running [her own ad](#) about getting a man out of ICE custody. Even in a Trump+18 district, a Republican sees a reason to separate public safety from indiscriminate enforcement. Cook now [rates the race a Toss Up](#), and Pulido [leads in recent polls](#).

Johnny Garcia, TX-35

Johnny Garcia, a veteran Bexar County sheriff’s deputy, has [pitched himself](#) as an “old-school, law-and-order” Democrat in a redistricted seat that is Trump+10. He has broken with his party, [saying](#), “Biden got it wrong” on border policy, but Garcia also argues that the Trump Administration’s deportation actions have hurt Texas’s local economy. Garcia has [said](#) that “both parties are to blame” for the broken immigration system, while calling for a both/and approach: comprehensive immigration reform with orderly pathways to citizenship, more funding for immigration courts, restraints on ICE, and a secure southern border.

His ad, “That’s the Job,” puts the border security front and center, talking about “going up against cartels and traffickers,” and closing by saying he will “work with anyone to secure our border” and lower costs.



[Click here to view the video.](#)

Conclusion

Immigration attacks are not going away, but these Democrats are showing how to fight back: lead with order at the border and safety in communities; draw a sharp line against chaotic, indiscriminate enforcement; and make the case for legal pathways and fair treatment for people who have built lives here. This is consistent with Third Way’s recent polling, in which one of the best-testing messages began: “We are a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. Always both.” It drew 80% agreement, including 77% of independents and 82% of Republicans.

That is the lesson for Democrats heading into the 2026 midterms and 2028. Ducking immigration or changing the subject won’t work. Democrats must own the case for order and opportunity—and make Republicans answer for their record of chaos and cruelty.

