Creating Immigration Policy that Addresses the Trust Deficit: A New Public Trust Agenda

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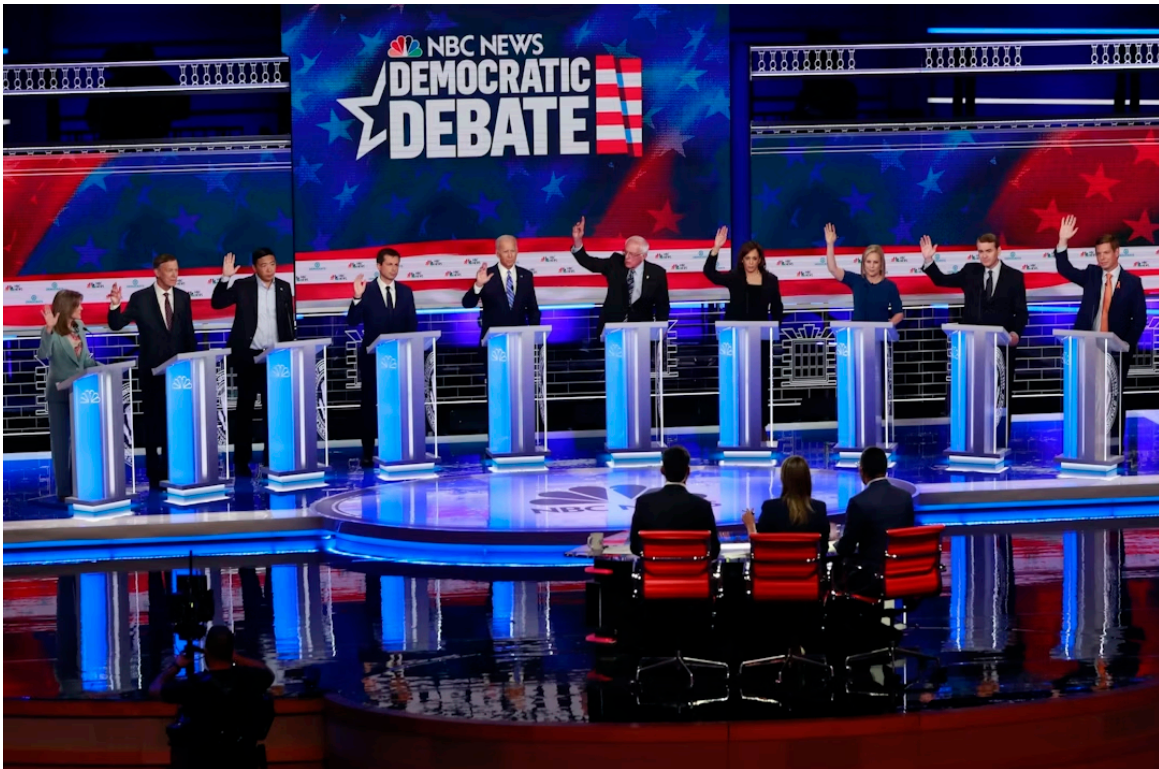
Democrats have not just lost the policy and messaging fights on immigration over the last decade—they've lost something deeper: the public's trust that they can competently govern on this issue. That trust deficit, more than any border surge or errant talking point, is what has put Republicans in the driver's seat. The good news is that trust can be rebuilt—by starting with policies that feature control, accountability, and tangible benefits for American workers, families, and communities.

This memo is the first in a series that will look at the Democrats' challenges on immigration through the lens of public trust and illuminate a path to rebuilding the party's reputation on immigration by placing public trust at the center of both immigration messaging and policymaking.

How Trust Was Lost

Immigration was a crisis-in-waiting when President Biden took office. A global migration surge was already underway, and many took the simple fact of his election as a signal that the US border was open—well before his early actions, like pausing deportations, reinforced that perception. Instead of seizing the moment to demonstrate how a balanced approach could deliver the "safe, orderly, and humane" system they had promised, the Administration stumbled. Infighting, disjointed policies, and inconsistent execution left the public with images that undercut confidence and trust early and throughout Biden's term.

Public trust in immigration rests on consistency, honesty, buy-in from key constituencies, and, most of all, control. Unfortunately, the Biden Administration struggled with all four:

- The Administration's failure to tell a single, cohesive story on immigration and reluctance to speak publicly at a high level about some of its innovative actions created confusion for migrants and the American public;

- When the border was in crisis, the Administration dismissed public anxieties and failed to acknowledge the breadth of the problem;

- Immigration advocates, whose policies shaped many early decisions, were quick to turn against the Administration when disagreement arose, and as the crisis expanded northward, facilitated by politically-motivated bussing, more Democratic officials publicly spoke out against the White House; and,

- The historic numbers at the border, the arrivals from around the world, and the images of cities struggling with integration all signaled anything but control.

Without early-on, aggressive policies or public support to back up their approach on immigration, public trust in the Biden Administration's handling of the issue dropped significantly—32 points over the course of the Administration. Democrats continue to the bear the brunt of that drop today.

President Biden Net Immigration Job Approval
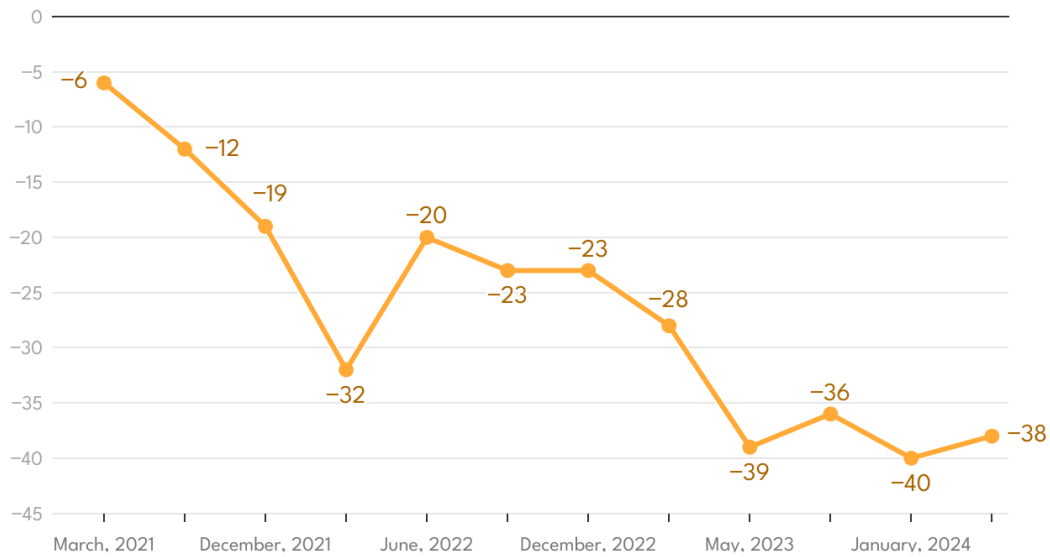
Source: CNN/SSRS surveys, March 2021–January 2025
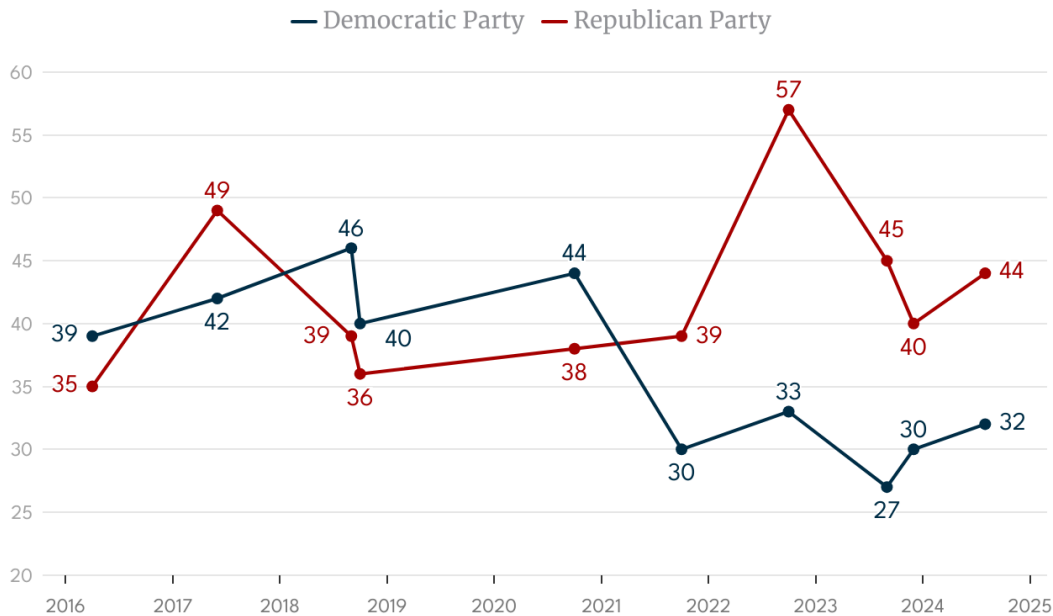
THIRD WAY

It is important to note that while some of the Biden Administration's immigration policies accomplished important and innovative goals, <u>including to lower arrivals at the border</u>, they were either implemented too late, communicated too poorly, or undermined by both, leaving them unable to stop the steady erosion of voter trust on immigration.

Trump's Trust Advantage

It's true that President Trump's numbers have softened, but Americans still consistently trust him and the Republican Party to handle immigration over Democrats.

Which Political Party Voters Trust To Handle Immigration

Legend: — Democratic Party — Republican Party

Source: NBC News, Gallup, Pew Research, YouGov, Third Way/Impact

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Beyond the debate's underlined inherent asymmetries, there are two reasons for the Republican stronghold on voters' trust around immigration management: control and consistency.

Control: Despite using legally-dubious means that are unlikely to hold in the long term, no one can disagree that President Trump has gained control of the southern border in a way that paints a significant contrast to the images that haunted the Biden presidency. Research by More in Common and others has shown that a sense of control is likely the single most important factor in whether a public will trust an immigration system.

Consistency: The President and his Administration don't just have message discipline when it comes to immigration. Apart from notable infractions on some employment-based immigration, they paint a consistent picture across their rhetoric, framing, and policies: immigrants—both legal and illegal—present economic and security threats to the country, and this Administration will do everything in its power to save the American people from those threats. There are plenty of lies and vitriol threaded throughout that throughline, but the President still benefits from consistency and visible proof that he can deliver on his promises.

How Democrats Rebuild Trust

Rebuilding trust does not necessitate enforcement-first policies that amount to Trump-light, nor will it come from Democrats swinging sharply to the left to overcompensate for Trump's cruel

policies. Rather, Democrats must pivot to policies and messages that will rebuild trust with American voters as their explicit goal and guiding light.

- **Control:** The perceived lack of control at the southern border during the Biden Administration was solidified in voters' minds when the Trump Administration took office and seemingly immediately gained control of the border. Democrats need to openly confront the challenges that occurred under the prior Administration and distinguish how they will establish the control that was missing under Biden. However, to avoid the moral, political, and policy pitfalls of an approach that prioritizes control at all costs, these policies must be paired with compassion.

- **Honesty & Accountability:** A governing body's ability to set and meet goals is key to a strategy of establishing and maintaining public trust. While Democrats are not in a position of power that allows them to fulfill public promises on immigration at the moment, they can be honest about the system's current and prior challenges and set out a policy agenda that includes clear, attainable goals and outline a plan to meet them.

- **Meeting Americans Where They Are:** Few Americans perceive a direct benefit from most immigration policies; thus, it is a government process that largely requires public trust in order to receive public support. To win that trust, Democrats must focus on promoting policies that are demonstrably beneficial to the American people. Immigration policies must be tailored to benefit the United States—Americans must be able to hear the policies and immediately, intuitively understand that they themselves would benefit if these changes were implemented.

Third Way's New Public Trust Agenda

In the coming months, Third Way will roll out a "Public Trust Agenda"—a series of immigration policies and approaches designed to instill faith in Democrats' ability to make immigration work for American workers, families, and communities. Each piece will spotlight solutions that could earn public trust by restoring control, proving competence, providing accountability and transparency, and delivering benefits that Americans can see and feel right away. Building trust means showing that Democrats will not just manage immigration but reshape it in ways that clearly benefit the American people—and that results, not politics, will drive our agenda.

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