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What Do Voters Want from VP Harris on Immigration?



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Immigration is one of the most pressing issues this election season, and it has long been a weakness in voters' minds for Democrats. For the past few decades, voters have consistently trusted Republicans more to handle immigration and the border. But new data shows that Vice President Harris and Democrats have an opportunity to flip the script and show they're the ones that are serious about restoring order at the border. We worked with Lake Research Partners to conduct a poll of 800 likely voters in battleground states, with an oversample of 100 Latino likely voters, to understand where the parties and their standard-bearers stand on immigration and the border as the election approaches. The results show a clear path forward to define Vice President Harris in a positive light and erode Republicans' historical advantage on these issues.

Harris starts behind on the border.

Immigration and the border are incredibly pressing issues for voters, and they're not quite sure yet whether they can trust Vice President Harris to tackle them. Voters on average ranked the importance of immigration at 7.5 out of 10, with Latino voters ranking it even higher at 7.9. And when asked which candidate has the better approach on immigration, Trump starts ahead by 13 points (53% to 40%), with nearly half of voters thinking his approach is "a lot better." His advantage on immigration is 10 points higher than his performance in the horse race, which had him winning by three points in this survey. (Note: Our sample swayed a little more conservative than the electorate in these battleground states. Most national ballots show a tighter race.) Trump also leads among Latino voters on having a better approach to the issue by 13 points (51% to 38%). In addition to preferring Trump's approach to the border and immigration, voters also think he's more focused on these issues than Vice President Harris by 18 points (55% to 37%), with half of voters saying he is "much more focused" on them. A majority of voters worry at the outset that Vice President Harris isn't serious about reforming our immigration system and securing the border, ranking her a 4.0 out of 10 on that measure. Latino voters rank her similarly low at 3.9 out of 10 to start.

Democratic policymakers and candidates have often talked about migration as a humanitarian issue, but most voters don't see it in that light. When asked if immigration and the border are primarily a security and safety issue, a humanitarian issue, or resource issue, 45% of voters say it's a safety and security issue, while only a third say it's a humanitarian issue. We saw similar sentiments among Latino voters, with 43% saying immigration is a safety and security issue and 37% calling it a humanitarian issue. While the majority (60%) of Democrats see immigration as a humanitarian issue, Independent voters see it as a safety and security issue by 23 points.

When it comes to their perceptions of Vice President Harris on the issue, voters are initially concerned that she'll be more liberal than President Biden on immigration. In fact, they voice more concern about that possibility than they do about former President Trump killing the bipartisan border bill by four points (49% to 45%). Latino voters were more concerned about Harris being too liberal than about Trump killing the deal by nine points (48% to 39%). Voters want common sense reforms that secure the border and make their communities safe, and they need reassurance that Vice President Harris won't tack to the left of Biden on immigration.

The Harris immigration message hits the sweet spot for voters.

Over the last few weeks, the Harris campaign has been highlighting the Vice President's credentials and her support for the bipartisan border deal, and our survey finds this is exactly what voters want

to hear. We tested a variety of different messages on immigration, and three rose to the top as the most compelling reasons to support Vice President Harris for President.

Establishing Harris's credentials. As they get to know the Vice President, voters want to hear about the work she's done that's relevant to how she'd approach this issue. One of the best testing messages in our survey highlighted her record. "Kamala Harris was a prosecutor who sent sex offenders to prison and an Attorney General who held big banks accountable. She was a border state prosecutor who went after drug cartels, smugglers, and gangs. She will hold bad actors accountable for creating chaos at the border so we decide who comes into our country." Sixty-one percent of voters chose this message as a reason they'd be most likely to support Harris for President. And talking about her prosecutorial background didn't turn off base voters—63% of Black voters and 67% of Latino voters chose this message as a reason they'd be most likely to support her. In fact, this was the second-best performing message among Latino voters in the survey. And emphasizing her law enforcement credentials didn't turn off base voters; in fact, 88% of Democrats said this statement made them more likely to support Harris.

Touting Harris's support for the bipartisan border bill. Voters were also persuaded by hearing about the VP's commitment to enacting the Senate's bipartisan deal. We tested the following message: "Kamala Harris is serious about addressing the border crisis. She wants to sign the toughest bipartisan border deal in history that would add thousands of more border patrol agents, invest billions to fight fentanyl and drug cartels, and shut down the border if our agents get overwhelmed." Sixty-five percent of voters chose this message as a reason they'd most likely support Harris; it especially resonated with Black voters (68%) and Independent voters (73%). It also tested well among Latino voters (62%), though it wasn't the most compelling message among that voter group. Talking about the bipartisan bill did not turn off Democrats, with 87% saying her support of the deal made them more likely to support Harris. And while voters prefer a positive message focused on Harris's support for the bipartisan bill, it also helped Democrats on the issue to hit Trump for killing it for political reasons.

Talking about reforming the system. The most compelling message overall was the following: "Harris will restore order at the border and modernize our broken system so it works for America. She also supports comprehensive immigration reform that includes an earned path to citizenship. Already she has helped protect undocumented spouses of US citizens and doubled the number of asylum cases heard each week." Seventy percent of voters chose this message as a reason they'd most likely support Harris, making it the top performing message we tested. It scored similarly high among Black (72%) and Latino (73%) voters, as well as voters identified as "vulnerable" (70%) and "persuadable" (69%). As we've seen across our research this cycle, voters are very eager to support a candidate who is serious about this issue and willing to do what's needed to restore order at the border and end the chaos.

These three pieces can be the building blocks of a persuasive message defining Vice President Harris on immigration and the border with voters. Messages focused on addressing the root causes of migration and improving international relationships and collaboration performed well, but they weren't as convincing as the three messages noted above.

Some other messages fell flat with voters in our survey:

- **Leading with Biden-Harris accomplishments on the border.** Including accomplishments in a message can often be helpful, but voters care more about the future than the past on this issue right now.
- **Going straight to attacking Trump.** Messages that attacked Trump but failed to define Harris on immigration didn't test as well. Voters want to know what Vice President Harris's agenda is for immigration and the border and how it differs from Trump's.
- **Trying to "out tough" Republicans.** Comparing the Biden and Trump Administration's records on deportations and fentanyl seizures proved to be the least effective message overall, with just 37% saying it made them much more likely to consider voting for Harris. Voters don't believe Democrats can out tough Republicans, and it damaged support among base voters to emphasize deportation numbers.

Defining the Vice President erases Trump's advantage.

After hearing more about Vice President Harris's approach on the issue, voters shifted in her direction in a major way. Trump started with a 13-point advantage when asked whose approach they favored, but he ended with just a 1-point advantage, within the margin of error and smaller than his margin in the horse race in the survey. Latino voters similarly went from favoring Trump's approach by 13 points to advantaging him by just 1 point. These messages even shored up confidence among base voters, increasing support for Harris's approach by 19 points among Democrats. Voters identified as "persuadable" Harris voters went from favoring Trump's approach on immigration and the border by 32 points to favoring Harris's by 38 points, a whopping 70-point swing. Throughout the survey, Vice President Harris also gained significant ground on focus and seriousness around these issues. On focus, Trump went from an 18-point advantage to a 4-point advantage. Among Latino voters, Trump started with an 11-point advantage and ended with a 9-point deficit, a 20-point swing. Harris started at a 4 on seriousness and ended at 5.2, with Latino voters giving her a slightly higher 5.6. It is clear that when voters hear what the Vice President has to say, their concerns around these issues can be allayed.

Support for Harris's immigration approach grows after going on offense.

	Overall	Ind.	Latinos		Overall	Ind.	Latinos
Harris	40	25	38	Change after messaging →	47	32	45
Trump	53	66	51		49	58	46

Source: Third Way and Lake Research Partners conducted a national online survey of 800 likely 2024 battleground state voters from August 19–26, 2024.



Conclusion

For decades, immigration has been a vulnerability for Democrats. But our current political climate has created an opportunity for Vice President Harris and Democrats to redefine themselves on immigration and erase Republican's advantage on the issue. The Vice President can appeal to persuadable voters by continuing to carry an immigration message that establishes her credentials as a border state prosecutor, touts her support for the bipartisan border bill that Trump killed, and lays out her vision for reforming our immigration system.