

# WINNING THE IMMIGRATION NARRATIVE TO PERSUADE VOTERS

## INTRODUCTION

When President Biden took office in 2021, the Republican Party made clear they would make immigration, specifically the southern border, a messaging opportunity to undermine and attack the Biden administration and Democrats at large. One Republican strategist [affirmed](#) of immigration as a tool to defeat Democrats electorally, “As an issue, I can’t think of one that’s better.” Today, the GOP strategy hasn’t changed. With one of the most consequential elections just months away, Republicans have repeatedly made clear through their [public opinion research](#) and Senator Rick Scott’s “[Plan to Rescue America](#)” to countless [advertising](#) and [online rhetoric](#) that immigration is their top issue of choice to galvanize their base and persuade the middle.

Contrary to the common misconception that immigration is a third rail issue to pivot away from, Democrats can and should counter Republican immigration attacks and misinformation. Failing to do so allows Republicans and other anti-immigrant groups to define Democrats falsely on the issue, shift vote choice with swing voters, distort the public perception of immigrants, and misinform the public about America’s immigration system. Democrats, regardless of the make-up of their constituency, are positioned to use effective immigration messaging to disrupt the anti-immigrant narrative and persuade the electorate.

Over the past five years, pro-immigrant advocacy groups across the country have invested in comprehensive, innovative research through public opinion surveys, deep canvassing, digital testing and other data-driven analyses. Their research generated a wealth of proven and powerful approaches to immigration messaging on a diversity of immigration topics that demonstrate effective methods to inform and persuade voters and understand and identify key audiences. **The findings of the numerous research projects have been captured by a new guidebook, *The Ultimate Messaging Guide to Winning the Immigration Narrative* – a collection, review, and synthesis of public opinion research on a range of immigration issues.**

Led by the California Immigrant Policy Center and America’s Voice, the messaging guide was made possible thanks to the generosity of 62 organizations, groups, and collaboratives who provided access to more than 100 pieces of their research, and 51 advocates from across every region of the nation who agreed to sit for in-depth discussions and share their knowledge and experiences of changing the narrative on immigration and immigrants. **The following recommendations are based on the *Ultimate Messaging Guide* and prepared by the Immigration Hub to equip Democratic elected officials and candidates with compelling tools and messaging to counter right-wing attacks and persuade or inoculate voters on immigration.**

## MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

When it comes to immigration-related messaging, there are certain principles that hold true regardless of your particular issue, goal, or the audience with whom you are communicating. When we don't take these messaging principles into account while developing messaging, it is often difficult—or impossible—for those we are trying to communicate with to follow our reasoning, connect the problems to solutions, or understand why what we are advocating for matters.

- ▶ **Consider the local dynamics. Keep it local.** Messaging needs to take into consideration the local conditions and history, laws, power dynamics, diverse cultures, and variations among voters who are being messaged. By also elevating local positive immigrant stories or messengers, voters can view their mutual connection and interdependency to their immigrant neighbors.
- ▶ **Lead with the values we share.** Immigration messaging needs to lead with the values we share with voters, and it needs to include those values throughout: (1) Love for family, elders, children, loved ones and community; (2) do no harm (i.e. keep families together); (3) community values (i.e. fairness, looking out for our neighbors); (4) aspirational American values (i.e. hard work, contribution); (5) faith values; and (6) safety.
- ▶ **Frame messaging around values instead of rights.** People first need to be engaged with values and emotion to connect to immigration and immigrants on a human level before they are able to care about legal processes. Leading with rights instead of values can also trigger zero-sum thinking for some voters, generating more emotional distance rather than connection.
- ▶ **Elevate the messengers.** Elevate messengers and use messages that disrupt voters' flawed mental template of immigrants and replace them with more relatable, accurate, nuanced, and empathetic understanding. This is critical to ensuring that voters' perception of immigrants is inoculated against right-wing attacks and can empathize with the issue and individual.
- ▶ **Messaging needs to show, not tell.** Stories stick with people much more effectively than facts on their own. In order to be most persuasive, package data and policy information within personal narratives as much as possible. Data is more "sticky" and memorable when shared in the context of a story that illustrates the point of the data.
- ▶ **Talk about how the current immigration system can be fixed.** When we talk about what is broken, we also need to talk about how it can be fixed. When we talk about what does not work about the current immigration system, we also need to offer solutions and reassurance to our audience that what is broken can be fixed.

## TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

### Define your opponent.

From the "Biden border crisis" to amnesty, Republicans and right-wing operatives have consistently branded Democrats as ineffective in their approach to immigration while pitting them against the interests of American voters. In a [2021 Immigration Hub poll](#), the majority of voters did not know what President Biden stood for on immigration, and thus carried low approval numbers on the issue. The same was apparent in another poll conducted by [EquisLab and BSP Research](#) where majority Latino voters were not clear on Democrats' position on the issue. Without pushback or informing voters of their policy solutions on the issue, Democrats lose ground and allow their opponents to fill in the blanks for voters who are unsure or do not know enough about the immigration system or a Democrat's position.

- **How You Can Counter: Define Republicans.** Remember that voters, especially those conflicted or in the middle, have some of the same questions and concerns raised by your opponents. Make sure that you clearly name the motivations of your opponent—and name how they are different and not shared by our audience. This is because by attacking an opponent and attributing certain attitudes or naming concerns that they raise, you may be indirectly attacking these conflicted voters.

**Example:** *President Biden is acting decisively to put solutions in place that are humane, orderly, secure and reflect American values. As they always do, [Republicans or some politicians] are trying to score political points and block actions to address the border. Democrats are focused on solutions that ensure both order and justice at our border.*

## Disrupt the right-wing narrative against immigrants and the immigration system.

- **Paint a full picture of a person's life or humanity.** Share the story of a local individual or family's life who immigrated to the United States, what their life is like here today, who they are (i.e. a student, father, soccer coach, etc.) and how they contribute to their community.
- **Use terms that humanize the people who are immigrants, refugees, or who are seeking asylum.** Weave phrases such as "a person who is an immigrant," "our neighbor who is a refugee," or "people seeking refuge (or opportunity) in the U.S." in your messaging wherever possible—particularly at the beginning of any message.
- **Show contributions to community and family to underscore voters' mutual connection to immigrants.** Highlight a wide variety of contributions, including people caring for others' children, assisting neighbors, growing food, or volunteering to help newer immigrants get settled. The more that you can show how interdependent voters are to these messengers, the better we can disrupt the opposition's attacks.
- **Help voters realize that they don't understand the system.** Sharing stories that include specific details of the immigration process and individual experiences in a way that shows (rather than lists or tells) the real-life impact of current policies on people who are immigrants. It can also be effective for non-immigrant messengers to model their own learning journey, including phrases like, "I didn't realize that..." or "I was surprised to learn..."
- **Make it local.** Use terms like "immigrant neighbors" or "our friends, neighbors, and coworkers who are immigrants." Feature local non-immigrant messengers together with immigrant messengers talking about their experiences coming to know, learn about, and care for immigrant friends, students, coworkers, and neighbors to help move the topic, and what is at stake, much closer to home.
- **Incorporate basic information and key facts to calm concerns and create openness.** Include information and facts that are compelling for our audience, such as how the path to citizenship is not fast, easy, or accessible for many, and how long-term residents can be deported even after living a good life in the U.S. for many years.

**Example:** *Fair-minded Pennsylvanians might disagree about how Congress should reform our complex and broken immigration system, but we can all agree that our immigrant friends and neighbors shouldn't be separated from their families and sent to a country they don't know over a traffic stop.*

**Example:** *I came to learn that asylum isn't just a political thing for people who speak against their government and need to escape—but that it's actually pretty similar to being a refugee. Asylum seekers at the southern border, like refugees from abroad, are fleeing war, gang violence, genocide, and other atrocities that make it unsafe to stay—they just aren't yet legally recognized as refugees, often because of the politics involved and because the process for applying for asylum is different than for refugee status. As our pastor put it simply, "asylum seekers are refugees—but in some cases our laws just have not caught up to their situations."*

## Talk solutions.

Current examples of 2022 GOP ads show Republican candidates using messaging tactics to exacerbate voters' concerns over the immigration system and anxieties over local public safety and the economy. Take, for instance, Texas Governor Abbott's [latest ad](#) where he claims, as he rides a gunboat, that he'll secure the border and keep fentanyl off the streets while Democratic candidate Beto O'Rourke is supportive of "open borders". An effective counter to this ad must include both a rebuke that paints Abbott's motivation (i.e. playing games, using fear to distract voters) and what solutions and values the Democrat stands for on the issue. Research of both public opinion polling and ad testing shows that Democrats must address immigration - not pivot or ignore the issue - to demonstrate their position and rebuttal to their opponent through their values and their plan to fix it.

- **Acknowledge the moment we are in.** Reassure voters that you are engaging in this work with a clear awareness of the current realities in the United States. Show that proposed policy solutions are realistic by sharing a few details that recognize the moment we are in as a nation.
- **Connect the dots between harm and hope.** Use plain language and embed simple facts about immigration policy into storytelling to paint a clear and easily understood picture of the existing harms and barriers that the current system is imposing. Only then can you effectively connect the dots for voters from the harms to your solutions and how they address these harms.
- **Frame the debate with a proactive vision.** Paint a picture of what you are for—what the world would look like when we accomplish our goals—first, then discuss what we are against.

**Example:** Two ads (1 | 2) tested by the Immigration Hub where both the opponent or problem is acknowledged and solutions are socialized found that these messages were effective in driving up Democratic approval and pro-immigrant sentiment among swing voters in Arizona, Pennsylvania and Florida.

## RAPID MESSAGES PER ISSUE

<b>Jobs and the Economy</b>	<i>What truly hurts our economy is a broken immigration system that is inefficient and doesn't work for people or businesses. Our broken immigration system is hurting our economy by rewarding corporations who hire undocumented workers at low wages in unsafe working conditions, while punishing businesses who follow the rules. Instead, we should fix our immigration system so that there is a working process for people to earn citizenship and work here in a legal, fair, and safe way.</i>
<b>Sanctuary Policies</b>	<i>We all care about the safety and security of our families and communities. Our local governments are already strapped for resources. Repealing our sanctuary law would take away from essential community safety, putting local police at risk of racially profiling individuals and in the position of enforcing immigration laws without the necessary resources, training, equipment, or tools that federal agents have.</i>
<b>Border</b>	<i>Our broken immigration system that has been ignored for too long. President Biden has taken decisive action to create an immigration system that can process migrants who arrive at the border in a fair and orderly way, and treats people with dignity and respect – and always keeps families together. Biden has a plan in place to address the reasons forcing people to migrate and combat corruption, trafficking of weapons and drugs, and human smuggling. Biden is focused on solutions that ensure order and justice at our border.</i>

Welcoming  
Refugees

*At a time of great humanitarian need around the world, the U.S. can be a global leader by welcoming refugees, which demonstrates that we're willing to work together with other governments on some of the world's most complex problems.*

*The U.S. has a robust system to welcome and resettle refugees, with local communities, churches, and nonprofit organizations in every region of the country eager and able to help. With these resources, the U.S. can manage refugees we resettle here and safely welcome more people fleeing danger.*

**CONCLUSION**

What more than four years of research from a collective of organizations reiterates is that Democrats have an advantage to employ forward-thinking immigration messaging to inoculate or counter right-wing attacks and move swing voters in their favor, energize base voters, and ultimately disrupt the cultural and political narrative around immigration. For too long, the immigration narrative has been dominated by culture wars and harmful dialogue, pushing Democrats away from addressing the problem. The bottom line, the majority of the American electorate wants to solve this issue without losing their aspirational values. Democrats can give them a vision for a modern and fair immigration system and set themselves up to deliver transformative policies and move our nation forward.

For more comprehensive messaging guidance, including understanding audiences, messaging principles and communication deep dives into key immigration topics, please contact [research@caimmigrant.org](mailto:research@caimmigrant.org) to request a copy of *The Ultimate Messaging Guide to Winning the Immigration Narrative*.

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