Vera Action CATALYZE/CITIZENS PERRY UNDEM

# Campaign narratives on the border and crime

## Analyzing the impact on voters

To: Interested Parties
From: Vera Action and Catalyze/Citizens
Date: June 26, 2024

Vera Action and Catalyze/Citizens commissioned PerryUndem to survey voters across the United States on immigration, the southern border, and rhetoric on crime. This memo highlights key findings from two surveys. One survey was conducted among n = 1,000 registered voters nationwide. A second survey was conducted among n = 1,904 voters nationally and included oversamples for totals of n = 413 Black voters, n = 402 Latina/o/x voters, and n = 396 Asian American / Pacific Islander voters. The surveys were conducted May 10 through 22, 2024 using YouGov's online panel. All polling has many sources of error. We recommend interpreting polling data as "evidence" of what may be rather than a precise reflection of reality.

Following are a summary and key findings.

## Summary

Data from the two surveys suggest Democrats are at a disadvantage on the border because of a communication gap, not a misalignment with voters on values or policy. Republicans are dominating and defining the narrative space. Voters simply aren't hearing from Democrats on this issue, even though many of them align with Democratic messages. The messages matter, however. Republicans paint their opponents as "weak" on the border. Data suggest the temptation to counter with "I'm tough, too" is a losing strategy – and may drive swing voters into their opponents' hands.

Instead, there's a winning frame that can work for Democrats, starting by delivering a strong, affirmative message centered on "safety, security, and stability" for all. Democrats can inoculate against disinformation about "migrant crime" with a humanizing message about the mothers, fathers, children, and grandparents who are fleeing danger, not causing it. Finally, Democrats can go on offense by warning how some candidates are trying to misinform and manipulate voters with scare tactics and rile up extremists, which puts us all in danger.

## Key Findings

**Neither party garners a majority of support on immigration.**
In our survey, 44% of voters say Republicans would do a better job on immigration; 36% say Democrats. Fully 20% say "both" or "neither" party would do a better job. These "both" or "neither" voters are roughly two-to-one more likely to align with Democratic values and messaging on immigration.

**Voters are mostly hearing from Republicans.**
On the issue of immigration, we see a 43-point communication gap: 59% of respondents say they're hearing more from Republicans on the issue v. 16% who say they're hearing more from Democrats (24% say both equally).

Nearly three-quarters (73%) say they've heard about "new migrants to the US committing crime." These voters are five times more likely to be hearing about border-related crime from Republican v. Democratic politicians (54% v. 11%).

**Democrats may benefit from leading a conversation on the topic.**

We conducted an experiment in which half of the survey respondents read a statement from a hypothetical Democratic candidate talking proactively on the issue of immigration (the "treatment" group - see Appendix for text) prior to the full survey. The other half of respondents served as a "control" group and answered benchmark questions before receiving the statement. Data suggest the statement has power. Compared to their counterparts in the control group, after hearing the Democratic narrative:

+ Voters ages 50 to 64 are +17 points more likely to say Democrats are in line with their personal views on immigration. They are +11 points more likely to say they're likely to vote for a Democratic candidate in the future.

+ Suburbanites are +11 points more likely to say Democrats align with their views on immigration and +9 points more likely to say they're likely to vote for Democrats in future elections.

+ Republicans are more likely to say Democrats care about US citizens (+13) and want real solutions (+12).

+ Independents are more likely to believe politicians are spreading fear about migrants and crime (+10).

Additionally, a majority of all respondents say they agreed with the ideas in the statement (62%), felt positive toward the Democratic candidate (55%), and agreed that "some politicians are using scare tactics about new migrants and crime in order to get votes" (68%), including 64% of independents and roughly half of Republicans (48%).

**This statement in the narrative helped inoculate against mis/disinformation about new immigrants:** "Like most of us, the vast majority of migrant families are responsible people. They are mothers, fathers, children, grandparents fleeing danger. Like us, they want safety, stability, and an opportunity for a better life." Conservative respondents and voters ages 50 to 64 who received the narrative were +13 points more likely than those in the control to believe that "migrants are fleeing danger, not causing it."

**A contrasting Democratic response beats a Republican attack in a general head-to-head matchup.**

In a head-to-head test, we explored how two Democratic responses might stack up against a Republican message on the border and crime. Overall, respondents are +8 points more likely to align with the Democrat offering an affirmative, solutions-based approach (54% to 46%) and +2 when a Democratic response contrasts values (51% to 49%). See text on page 5.

**Democrats may lose swing voters when they co-opt conservative messages.**
We also explored whether Democrats appeal to voters when they co-opt some conservative messaging. Interestingly, we find that the "conservative" Democratic message (see Split B on page 6) drives men (-22 points) and independents (-28 points) toward the Republican candidate. However, an alternative message that provides a contrast in values (see Split B on page 6) splits men (-3 points), including independent men (-1), and wins independent women (+9). Overall, the Democratic values contrast wins by +6 (53% to 47%) and the Democratic conservative message loses by -2 (49% to 51%).

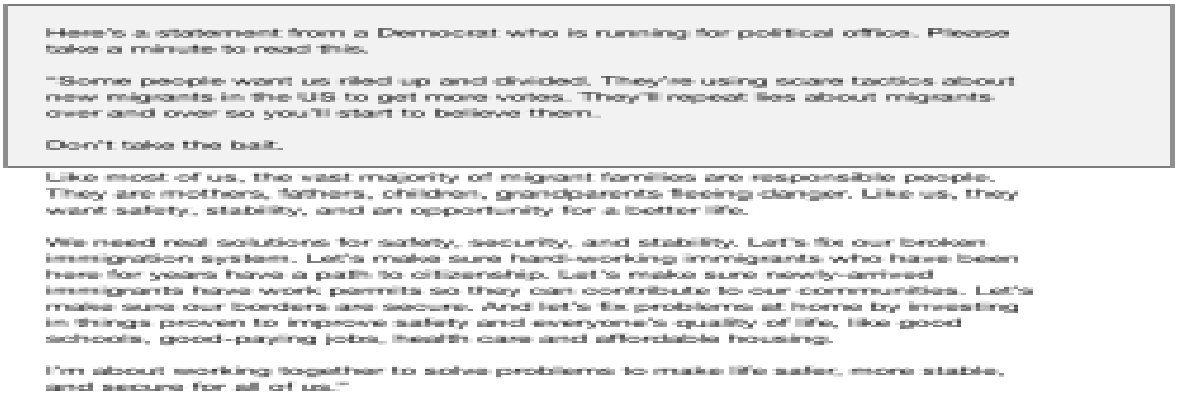
**Safety and security for "all of us" resonates more broadly than an "Americans first" focus.**
Respondents are +9 points more likely to strongly agree that we should work on "making life safer, more stable, and secure for all of us" than "politicians need to take care of Americans first before new migrants" (61% v. 52%).

# Conclusion

As anti-immigrant attacks are on the rise in the 2024 election cycle, candidates and elected leaders have a critical opportunity to counter disinformation efforts and political fear-mongering and move voters on the issue by talking early and often about the issue and grounding their message in the values of "safety, security, and stability for all." Democrats may be tempted to avoid the issue or shift to the right to meet Republican attacks head-on, but these findings suggest that clearly staking out a contrasting message will be more effective.

# Appendix

### Treatment narrative


Here's a statement from a Democrat who is running for political office. Please take a minute to read this.

"Some people want us riled up and divided. They're using scare tactics about new migrants in the US to get more votes. They'll repeat lies about migrants over and over so you'll start to believe them.

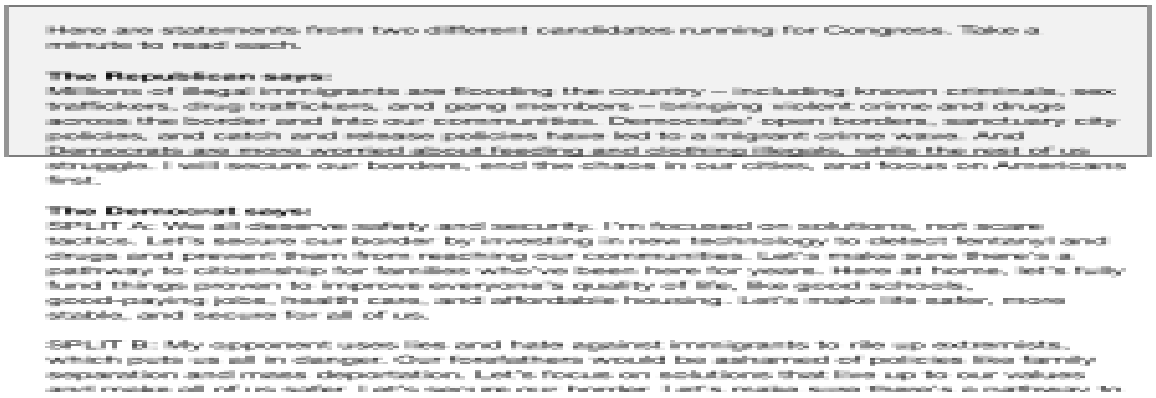
Don't take the bait.

Like most of us, the vast majority of migrant families are responsible people. They are mothers, fathers, children, grandparents fleeing danger. Like us, they want safety, stability, and an opportunity for a better life.

We need real solutions for safety, security, and stability. Let's fix our broken immigration system. Let's make sure hard-working immigrants who have been here for years have a path to citizenship. Let's make sure newly-arrived immigrants have work permits so they can contribute to our communities. Let's make sure our borders are secure. And let's fix problems at home by investing in things proven to improve safety and everyone's quality of life, like good schools, good-paying jobs, health care and affordable housing.

I'm about working together to solve problems to make life safer, more stable, and secure for all of us."

## General head-to-head matchup



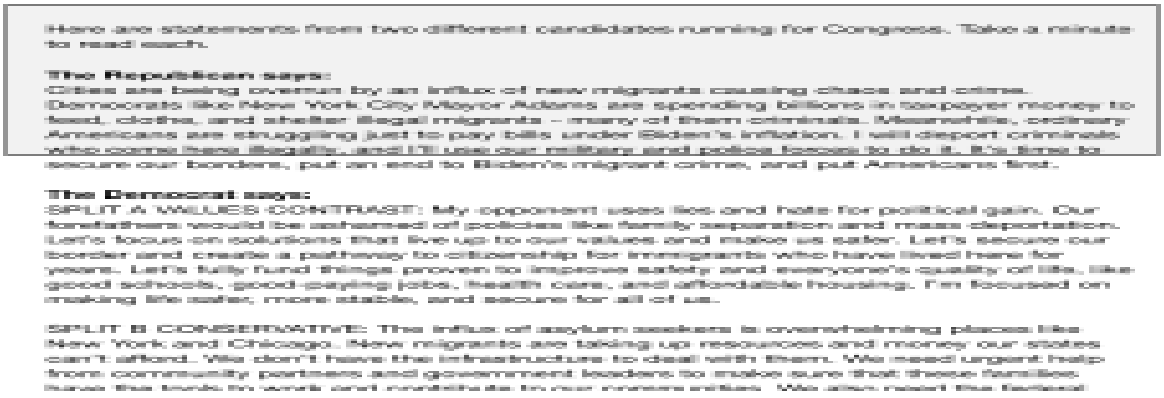
Here are statements from two different candidates running for Congress. Take a minute to read each.

**The Republican says:**
Millions of illegal immigrants are flooding the country — including known criminals, sex traffickers, drug traffickers, and gang members — bringing violent crime and drugs across the border and into our communities. Democrats' open borders, sanctuary city policies, and catch and release policies have led to a migrant crime wave. And Democrats are more worried about feeding and clothing illegals, while the rest of us struggle. I will secure our borders, end the chaos in our cities, and focus on Americans first.

**The Democrat says:**
SPLIT A: We all deserve safety and security. I'm focused on solutions, not scare tactics. Let's secure our border by investing in new technology to detect fentanyl and drugs and prevent them from reaching our communities. Let's make sure there's a pathway to citizenship for families who've been here for years. Here at home, let's fully fund things proven to improve everyone's quality of life, like good schools, good-paying jobs, health care, and affordable housing. Let's make life safer, more stable, and secure for all of us.

SPLIT B: My opponent uses lies and hate against immigrants to rile up extremists, which puts us all in danger. Our forefathers would be ashamed of policies like family separation and mass deportation. Let's focus on solutions that live up to our values and make all of us safer. Let's take an example. Let's make sure there's a pathway to

## Co-opting conservative language match-up



Here are statements from two different candidates running for Congress. Take a minute to read each.

**The Republican says:**
Cities are being overrun by an influx of new migrants causing chaos and crime. Democrats like New York City Mayor Adams are spending billions in taxpayer money to feed, clothe, and shelter illegal migrants – many of them criminals. Meanwhile, ordinary Americans are struggling just to pay bills under Biden's inflation. I will deport criminals who come here illegally, and I'll use our military and police forces to do it. It's time to secure our borders, put an end to Biden's migrant crime, and put Americans first.

**The Democrat says:**
SPLIT A VALUES CONTRAST: My opponent uses lies and hate for political gain. Our forefathers would be ashamed of policies like family separation and mass deportation. Let's focus on solutions that live up to our values and make us safer. Let's secure our border and create a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who have lived here for years. Let's fully fund things proven to improve safety and everyone's quality of life, like good schools, good-paying jobs, health care, and affordable housing. I'm focused on making life safer, more stable, and secure for all of us.

SPLIT B CONSERVATIVE: The influx of asylum seekers is overwhelming places like New York and Chicago. New migrants are taking up resources and money our states can't afford. We don't have the infrastructure to deal with them. We need urgent help from community partners and government leaders to make sure that these families have the tools to work and contribute in our towns safely. We also need the federal