

To: Interested Parties
From: YouGov Blue and Vera Action
Re: Congressional Candidate Messaging Experiments
Date: May 14, 2024

On behalf of Vera Action, YouGov Blue recently fielded three message tests comparing different Democratic messaging frames about crime.

In a YouGov survey conducted April 10 to April 12, 2024, on 1,017 registered voters, we [tested](#) how a candidate who delivers a “serious about safety” message tests with and without partisan labels. The poll found no difference when the message was delivered by a Democratic candidate or a nonpartisan candidate, with voters approving a “serious about safety” candidate by 9 points over a “tough on crime” candidate regardless of whether the messages included the candidates’ party affiliations.

In another survey that fielded April 25 to April 26, 2024, on 1,023 voters, we [compared](#) two different Democratic messaging styles against a standard Republican message warning that Democrats want to “defund” the police. The survey found that when facing a GOP attack for being a “defund” candidate or “soft on crime,” a Democratic candidate who responded with a “serious about safety” message performed significantly better than a Democratic candidate who responded with a message accusing the GOP of trying to “defund” law enforcement and side with January 6 insurrectionists. While a Democratic candidate with a “serious about safety” message outperforms the Republican by about 4 percentage points, a Democratic candidate who charges the GOP with trying to undermine law enforcement trails a Republican candidate by about 7 percentage points.

In a third survey, fielded from May 8 to May 10, 2024, we [asked](#) 1,042 voters which party they trusted more to handle issues of crime and safety as well as which party they heard more from on these issues. The results suggest that the partisan trust gap is quite narrow, with 43 percent of voters saying they trust the GOP more on crime compared to 40 percent of voters saying they trust Democrats more. While neither party is above water when it comes to voters’ trust on crime, voters hear significantly more on the issue from Republicans—by a margin of 18 percentage points.

Together, these three surveys suggest that Democrats are in a strong position to message on crime when they carry their own “serious about safety” message, but not when they try to adopt Republican “tough on crime” messaging themselves.

Message Framing Experiment April A:

Testing the Impact of Partisanship on Crime and Safety Messages

In the first message test, respondents were asked to choose between two candidates who had different positions on the subject of crime. Respondents were randomly assigned to see the candidates described as “Candidate A and Candidate B,” or as “The Democratic candidate and the Republican candidate.” Respondents were shown:

Next are some statements you might hear from candidates for public office.

[The Democratic candidate/Candidate A] supports fully funding things that are proven to create safe communities and improve people's quality of life, like good schools, a living wage, and affordable housing, and do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street.

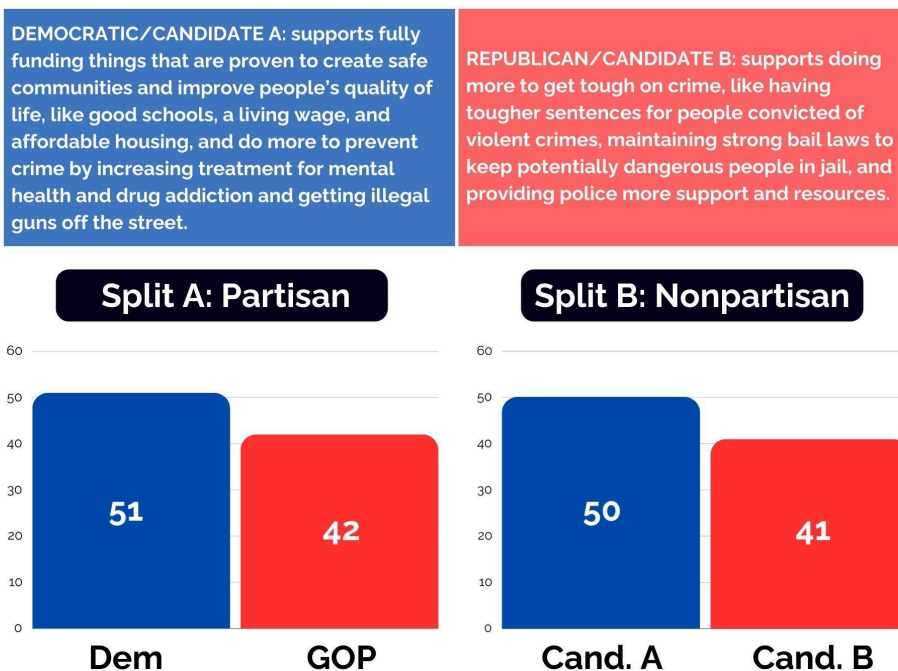
[The Republican candidate/Candidate B] supports doing more to get tough on crime, like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep potentially dangerous people in jail, and providing police more support and resources.

Generally speaking, if the election for these two candidates were held tomorrow, would you support...

Across the full sample, the Democratic candidate/candidate A's position outperformed the Republican/candidate B's position. The following chart shows the vote share for each candidate across both conditions. In the "partisan" condition, where respondents were told they were choosing between a Democrat and a Republican, the Democrat with a "serious about safety" message outperformed the Republican 51 percent to 42 percent. In the "nonpartisan" condition, where these messages were assigned to a "Candidate A" or "Candidate B," Candidate A's "serious about safety" message outperformed the "tough on crime" message 50 percent to 41 percent. The difference between these two results is not statistically significant.

Support for Congressional Candidate

By Partisan/Nonpartisan Messaging Condition



This result suggests that the “partisan cue” on these messages does not change voters’ preferences on their approach to handling crime and safety. Whether they know they’re voting for a “Democrat” or a candidate without a party identification, more voters prefer the “serious about safety” message frame over the “tough on crime” message frame.

Message Framing Experiment April B: Comparing Two Democratic Messages When Responding to “Defund” Attacks

In a second experiment, we compared reactions to two different Democratic messages on crime. We found that respondents reacted more positively to a Democratic “serious about safety” message than to a “tough on crime” Democratic message that accuses the GOP of trying to “defund” law enforcement and siding with January 6 insurrectionists.

The April 25-26 YouGov test randomly assigned respondents to see one of two Democratic messages and a GOP message, and then it asked whether they preferred the Democrat or the Republican. In this message test, respondents received one of two possible Democratic messages, posed against the same Republican message.

Specifically, respondents were asked:

Next are some statements you might hear from candidates for public office.

Both Conditions, GOP “Defund Attack”:

The Republican has said, “The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions surrounding law enforcement. The Defund the Police movement is without a doubt one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation’s history, and Democrats are responsible for it. The hostile climate for police has discouraged proactive police work. We can’t expect the police to keep us safe if we aren’t willing to keep them safe.”

Split A, Dem “Tough on Crime”:

The Democrat has said, “MAGA Republicans are pushing a soft-on-crime agenda to defund the police, pardon violent insurrectionists, and align with convicted criminals. Their extreme agenda seeks to undermine the Justice Department and abolish the FBI. I support increasing funding for our police departments, while Republicans propose massive cuts to crime-fighting agencies and side with violent January 6 insurrectionists over law enforcement.”

Split B, Dem “Serious About Safety”:

The Democrat has said, “I’m not about scare tactics or slogans, and I’m not afraid to have an honest conversation. We keep expecting police to solve every social problem, from kids skipping school to mental illness to homelessness to gun violence. No one profession can do that. We’re spending \$115 billion a year and putting too much on police departments. It’s time to try out some promising new solutions to lift the burden. It’s time for support and change, not blame.”

Generally speaking, if the election for these two candidates were held tomorrow, would you support...

The Democratic message that focused on calling out scare tactics and investing in comprehensive solutions to prevent crime, respond to crisis, and stop violence outperformed a “tough on crime” message painting Republicans as the “defund” party.

In condition A, the Democratic candidate with a “tough on crime” message loses to the Republican candidate by about 40 percent to 47 percent, while in condition B the Democratic candidate with a “serious about safety” message wins by about 47 percent to 43 percent. With the solutions-focused message, the Democratic candidate gains a net 11 percentage point improvement over the Democratic “tough on crime” message.

The following chart compares differences across both messaging conditions. The difference in Democratic performance between the two conditions is statistically significant.

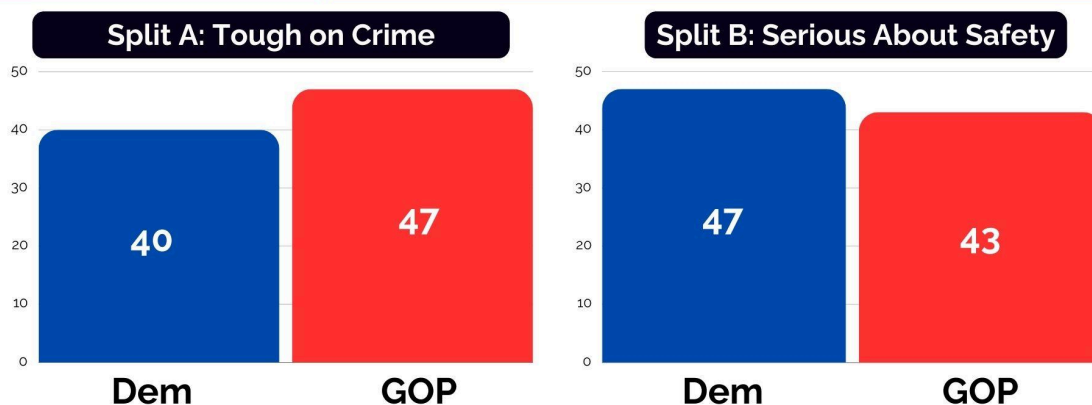
Support for Congressional Candidate

By Democratic Crime and Law Enforcement Messaging Condition

BOTH CONDITIONS/GOP “DEFUND” ATTACK: The Republican has said, “The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions surrounding law enforcement. The Defund the Police movement is without a doubt one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation’s history, and Democrats are responsible for it. The hostile climate for police has discouraged proactive police work. We can’t expect the police to keep us safe if we aren’t willing to keep them safe.”

SPLIT A, DEM “TOUGH ON CRIME”: The Democrat has said, “MAGA Republicans are pushing a soft-on-crime agenda to defund the police, pardon violent insurrectionists, and align with convicted criminals. Their extreme agenda seeks to undermine the Justice Department and abolish the FBI. I support increasing funding for our police departments, while Republicans propose massive cuts to crime-fighting agencies and side with violent January 6 insurrectionists over law enforcement.”

SPLIT B, DEM “SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY”: The Democrat has said, “I’m not about scare tactics or slogans, and I’m not afraid to have an honest conversation. We keep expecting police to solve every social problem, from kids skipping school to mental illness to homelessness to gun violence. No one profession can do that. We’re spending \$115 billion a year and putting too much on police departments. It’s time to try out some promising new solutions to lift the burden. It’s time for support and change, not blame.”



The differences in results are particularly pronounced across gender.

Men favor the Republican candidate 52 percent to 38 percent in the “tough on crime” condition and 48 percent to 43 percent in the “serious about safety” condition. Women are tied at 42 percent in the “tough on crime” condition and prefer the Democratic candidate 51 percent to 38 percent in the “serious about safety” condition. This means that men move about 9 percentage points across messaging conditions (from -14 to -5) while women move about 13 percentage points (from +0 to +13 percentage points) in favor of the Democratic candidate.

This test indicates that Democrats will have more success championing their own unique, comprehensive safety message and agenda than by engaging in a battle with Republicans over who is “tougher” or “softer” on crime.

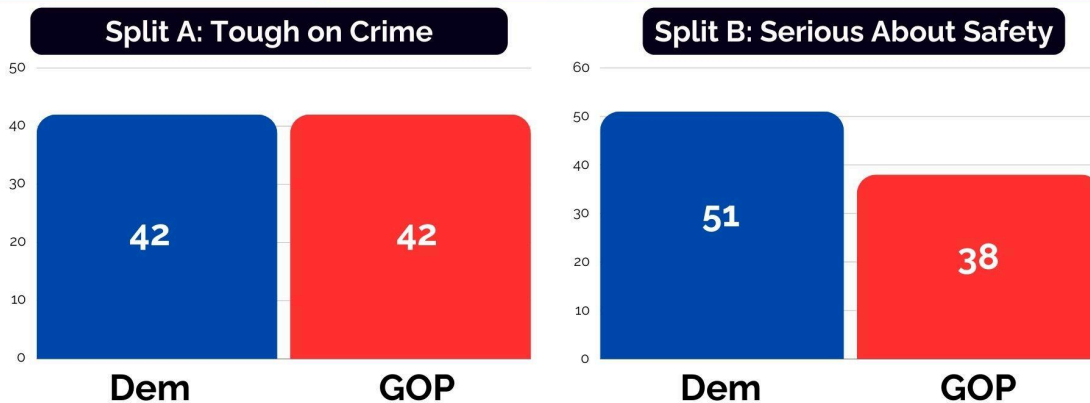
Support for Congressional Candidate among Women

By Democratic Crime and Law Enforcement Messaging Condition

BOTH CONDITIONS/GOP “DEFUND” ATTACK: The Republican has said, “The Left has allowed a culture built on hating the police to drive decisions surrounding law enforcement. The Defund the Police movement is without a doubt one of the greatest dangers to public safety in our nation’s history, and Democrats are responsible for it. The hostile climate for police has discouraged proactive police work. We can’t expect the police to keep us safe if we aren’t willing to keep them safe.”

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Message Framing Experiment May: Comparing Partisan Trust and Volume on Crime

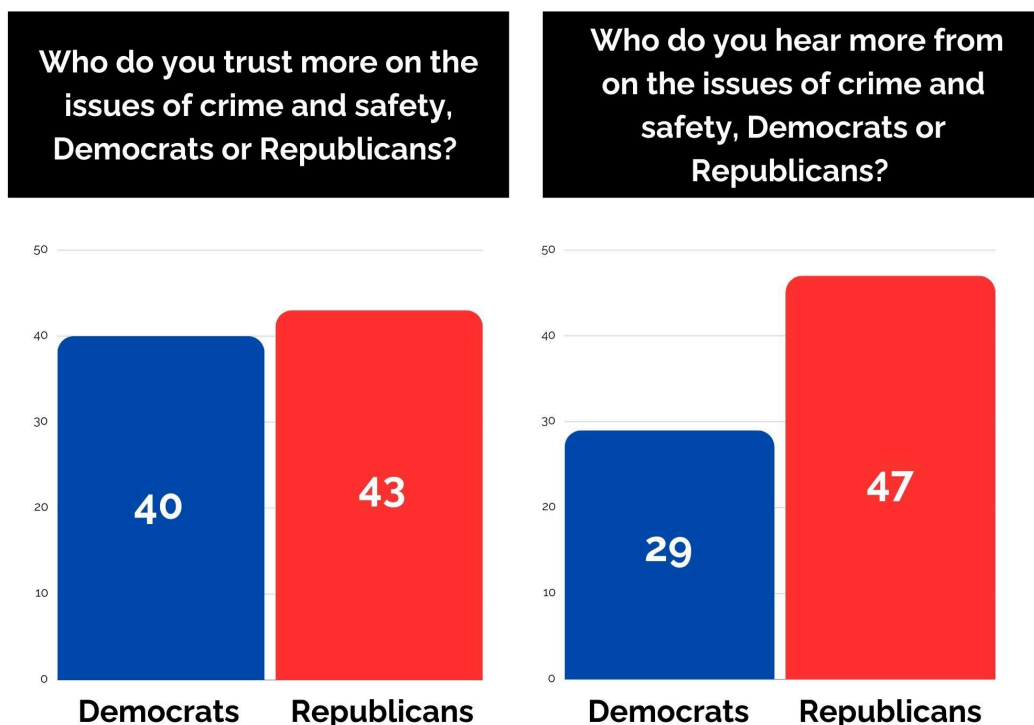
In a third experiment, we asked respondents which party they trusted more to handle issues of crime and safety as well as which party they heard from more on those issues.

While the partisan trust gap was extremely narrow, there was a wide difference in the partisan volume gap:

On the question of, “Who do you trust more on issues of crime and safety [Democrats or Republicans]?” both parties polled below 50 percent, and the difference between parties was just within the margin of error: 43 percent of respondents said they trusted Republicans more and 40 percent said they trusted Democrats more on crime and safety.

However, when asked, “Who do you hear more from on the issues of crime and safety [Democrats or Republicans]?” there was a stark difference: 47 percent of respondents said they heard from Republicans more and only 29 percent said they heard from Democrats more about crime and safety.

These results suggest that the conventional political wisdom, that Republicans are winning on the issue of crime by leaning into “tough” rhetoric, is wrong. In fact, neither party is effectively speaking to voters’ concerns around crime and safety, but Republicans are communicating about these issues at a much higher volume than Democrats. In other words, it is not that “tough on crime” is winning, but that voters hear it much more frequently than anything else. Democrats have an opportunity to flip the narrative and own the issue by defining themselves as “serious about safety” early and often.



Appendix: Survey methods statements

“April A”

This survey is based on 1,017 interviews conducted by YouGov on the internet of registered voters. The sample was weighted according to gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and U.S. Census region based on voter registration lists, the U.S. Census American Community Survey, and the U.S. Census Current Population Survey, as well as 2020 Presidential vote. Respondents were selected from YouGov to be representative of registered voters. The weights range from 0.24 to 5.2 with a mean of 1 and a standard deviation of 0.54.

The margin of error (a 95 percent confidence interval) for a sample percentage p based upon the subsetted sample is approximately 3.5 percent.

“April B”

This survey is based on 1,023 interviews conducted by YouGov on the internet of registered voters. The sample was weighted according to gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and U.S. Census region based on voter registration lists, the U.S. Census American Community Survey, and the U.S. Census Current Population Survey, as well as 2020 Presidential vote. Respondents were selected from YouGov to be representative of registered voters. The weights range from 0.17 to 3.4 with a mean of 1 and a standard deviation of 0.46.

The margin of error (a 95 percent confidence interval) for a sample percentage p based upon the subsetted sample is approximately 3.4 percent.

“May”

This survey is based on 1,042 interviews conducted by YouGov on the internet of registered voters. The sample was weighted according to gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and U.S. Census region based on voter registration lists, the U.S. Census American Community Survey, and the U.S. Census Current Population Survey, as well as 2020 Presidential vote. Respondents were selected from YouGov to be representative of registered voters. The weights range from 0.21 to 3.76 with a mean of 1 and a standard deviation of 0.43.

The margin of error (a 95 percent confidence interval) for a sample percentage p based upon the subsetted sample is approximately 3.3 percent.

In the three surveys, the margin of error is calculated using the formula:

$$\hat{p} \pm 100 \times \sqrt{\frac{1 + CV^2}{n}}$$

where CV is the coefficient of variation of the sample weights and n is the sample size used to compute the proportion. This is a measure of sampling error (the average of all estimates obtained using the same sample selection and weighting procedures repeatedly). The sample estimate should differ from its expected value by less than the margin of error in 95 percent of all samples. It does not reflect non-sampling errors, including potential selection bias in panel participation or in response to a particular survey.