

# **WE NEED TO BE “SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY,” NOT “TOUGH ON CRIME”:**

Winning the narrative on safety, accountability, and justice

September 2024

# Vera ACTION

# THIS DEFIES CONVENTIONAL POLITICAL WISDOM, BUT "SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY" BEATS "TOUGH ON CRIME"



IN THE 2022 MIDTERMS,

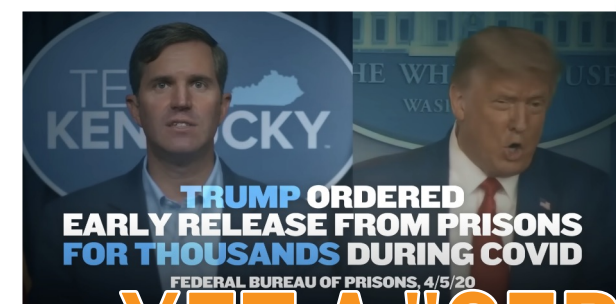
\$157M SPENT ON  
CRIME ATTACK ADS

## Democrats Worry as G.O.P. Attack Ads Take a Toll in Wisconsin

Mandela Barnes, the party's Senate candidate, is now wobbling in his race against Ron Johnson, the Republican incumbent. Democratic nominees in other states face similar challenges.

Share full article 393

Vera ACTION



Political ads spar, claim over Lincoln Park statistics for Baird re-elected Lincoln



## Democrat upsets DeSantis-backed Republican mayoral candidate in Jacksonville

MAY 18, 2023 · 7:19 AM ET

Deegan faced significant challenges during her campaign, with her participation in Black Lives Matter protests being targeted by her opponent and his allies. Local law enforcement warned of potential "radical policies" under Deegan's leadership.



YET A "SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY" MESSAGE DEFEATED A "TOUGH" ONE



More than half of respondents blamed the spike in crime on "too many guns on our streets," 5 points more than the share of voters who said that "defunding of police departments" was a major reason. | Drew Angerer/Getty Images



A woman with curly hair, wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt, is lifting a young child with curly hair and a red headband. The child is wearing a blue and white checkered shirt and dark pants. They are in a bedroom with a white crib and a window in the background. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

SAFETY  
ACCOUNTABILITY  
**JUSTICE**

WHAT DEMOCRATS  
**STAND FOR**

<https://vimeo.com/912348236/4be896715d?share=copy>

# LESSONS FROM THE RESEARCH-OWNING SAFETY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND JUSTICE

## 1. SAFETY

Real solutions that work to prevent crime, respond to crisis, and stop violence.

## 2. ACCOUNTABILITY

Personal responsibility is about repair and changing behavior, not just punishment.

## 3. JUSTICE

A system that works for all by relying less on incarceration and more on the things proven to help communities thrive.

## **TAKEAWAY # 1.**

**Get out in front of the “soft on crime” attack with a strong message about preventing crime, responding to crisis, and stopping violence.**

# VOTERS FAVOR A SAFETY MESSAGE OVER A “TOUGH” ONE

Which statement comes closer to your view about how crime and public safety should be handled?

**Battle ground:**  
55%

**MI:**  
57%

**PA:**  
54%

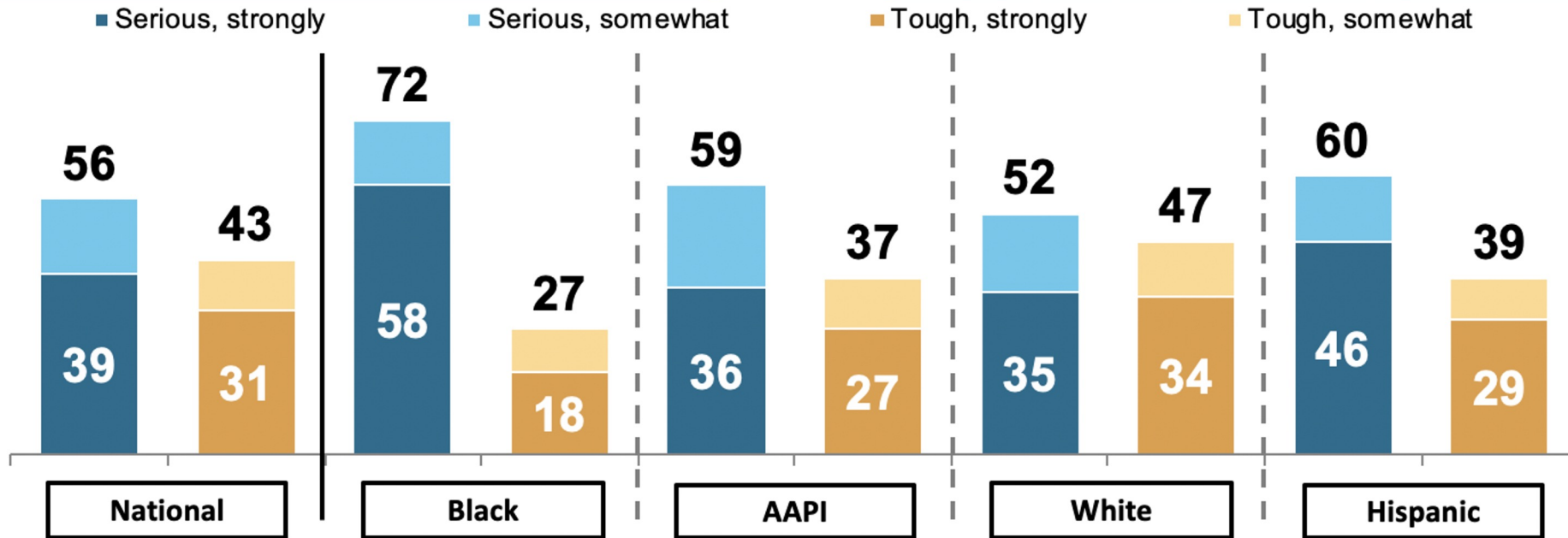
**(SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY)** Fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities and improve people’s quality of life, like good schools, a living wage, and affordable housing, and do more to prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street.

**(TOUGH ON CRIME)** 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.

**Battle ground:**  
45%

**MI:**  
40%

**PA:**  
43%



## **TAKEAWAY # 2.**

**A “serious about safety” message wins over and motivates Black voters and young voters, while holding moderate and older voters.**



# VIRGINIA 2023 AND CLOSE TO \$25M ON CRIME ADS: TESTING TWO “TOUGH” ADS, ONE “SAFETY” AD

#1

GOP candidate touting more funding for police and ‘tough on crime’ approach



**Republican Candidate  
Juan Pablo Segura**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN6zlrXQszE>

#2

Dem candidate touting support for police, police endorsements, and gun control measures



**Democratic Candidate  
Nadarius Clark**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgDu65zyvT0>

#3

Dem candidate touting comprehensive approach and being ‘serious about safety’



**Mock ad for a Democratic  
candidate**

<https://vimeo.com/912348236/4be896715d?share=copy>



# “SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY” BEATS “TOUGH” OVERALL— AND MOTIVATES BLACK & YOUNG VOTERS

Even if none is exactly right, which of these ads is most aligned with your views?

AD # 1:  
GOP  
TOUGH



AD # 2:  
DEM  
TOUGH



AD # 3:  
DEM  
SAFETY



	AD # 1	AD # 2	AD # 3
OVERALL	23%	26%	34%
BLACK VOTERS	6%	36%	47%
LATINO VOTERS	17%	37%	37%
WHITE VOTERS	27%	23%	31%
GEN Z VOTERS	13%	34%	37%
BOOMERS	25%	23%	27%
DEMOCRATIC VOTERS	7%	33%	54%
REPUBLICAN VOTERS	40%	18%	15%
INDEPENDENT VOTERS	21%	28%	29%

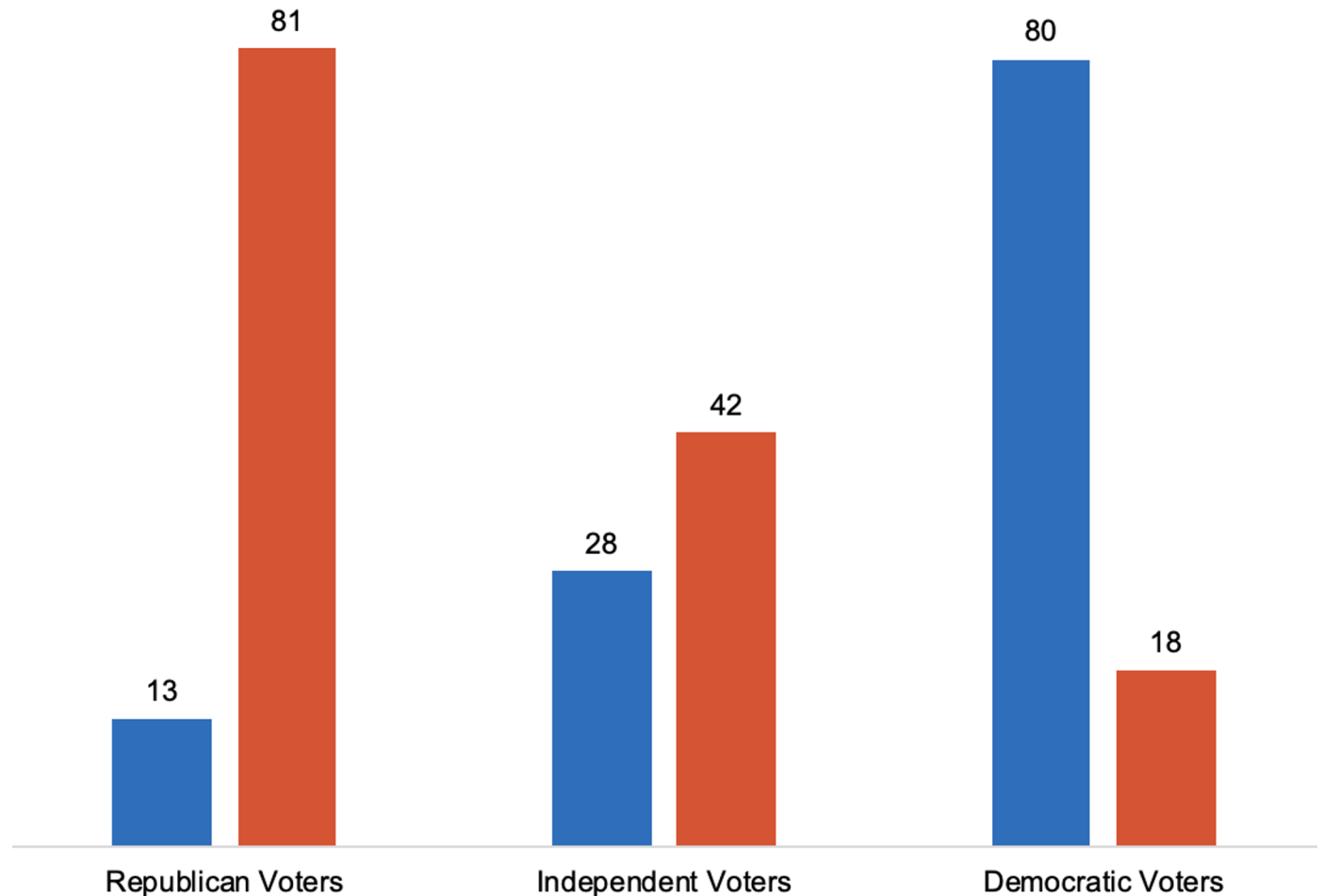
### **TAKEAWAY # 3.**

**Even with independent voters, who trust the GOP more than Democrats on crime, a “serious about safety” message wins them over.**

# IN VIRGINIA, THE GOP HAS AN ADVANTAGE WITH INDEPENDENT VOTERS ON CRIME AND SAFETY...

Which party do you trust more on issues of crime and safety?

■ Trust Democrats  
■ Trust Republicans



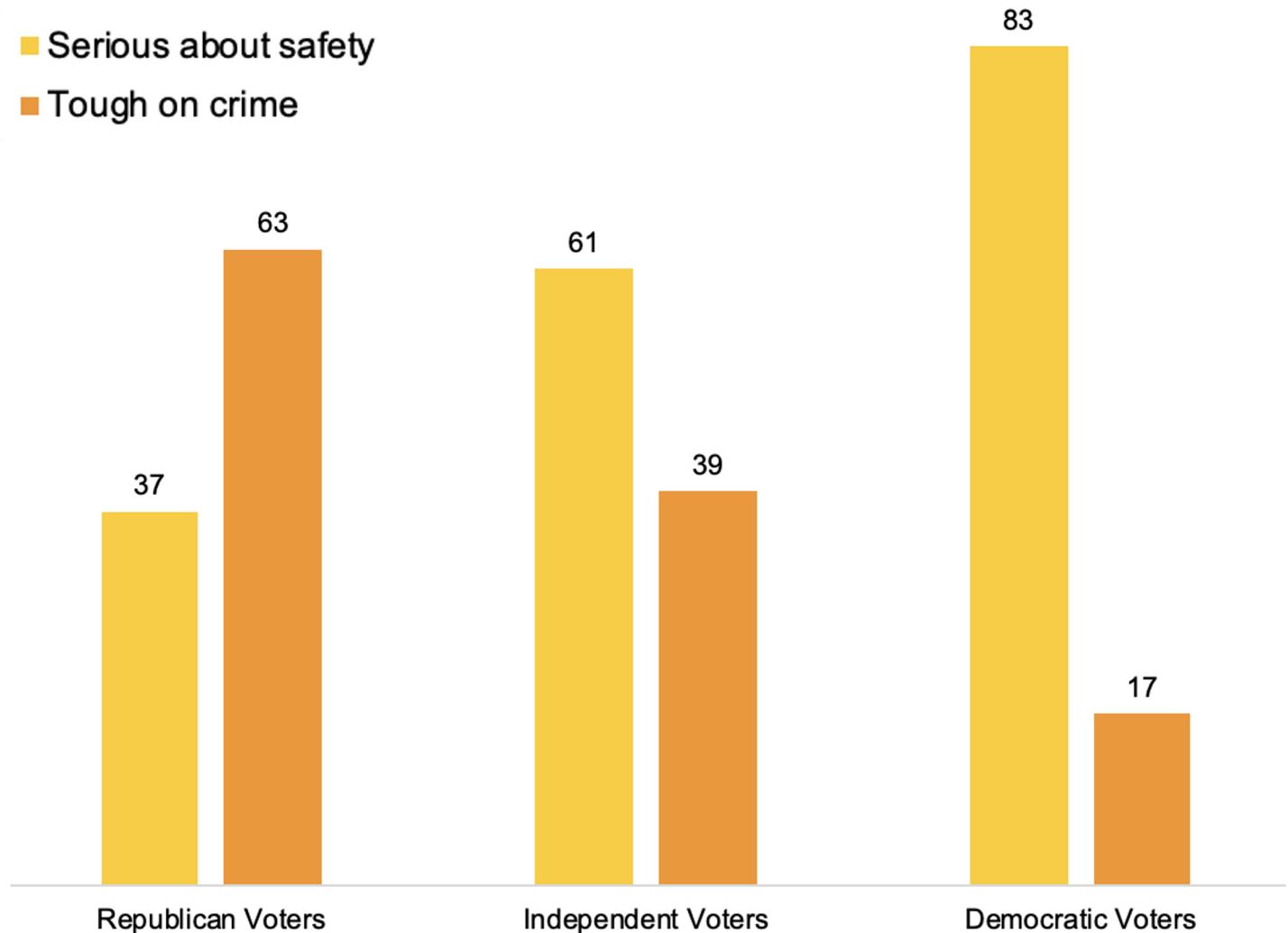
# ...YET VIRGINIA'S INDEPENDENT VOTERS REJECT "TOUGH ON CRIME" BY 22 PERCENTAGE POINTS

## "SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY":

Fully fund things 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.

## "TOUGH ON CRIME":

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.

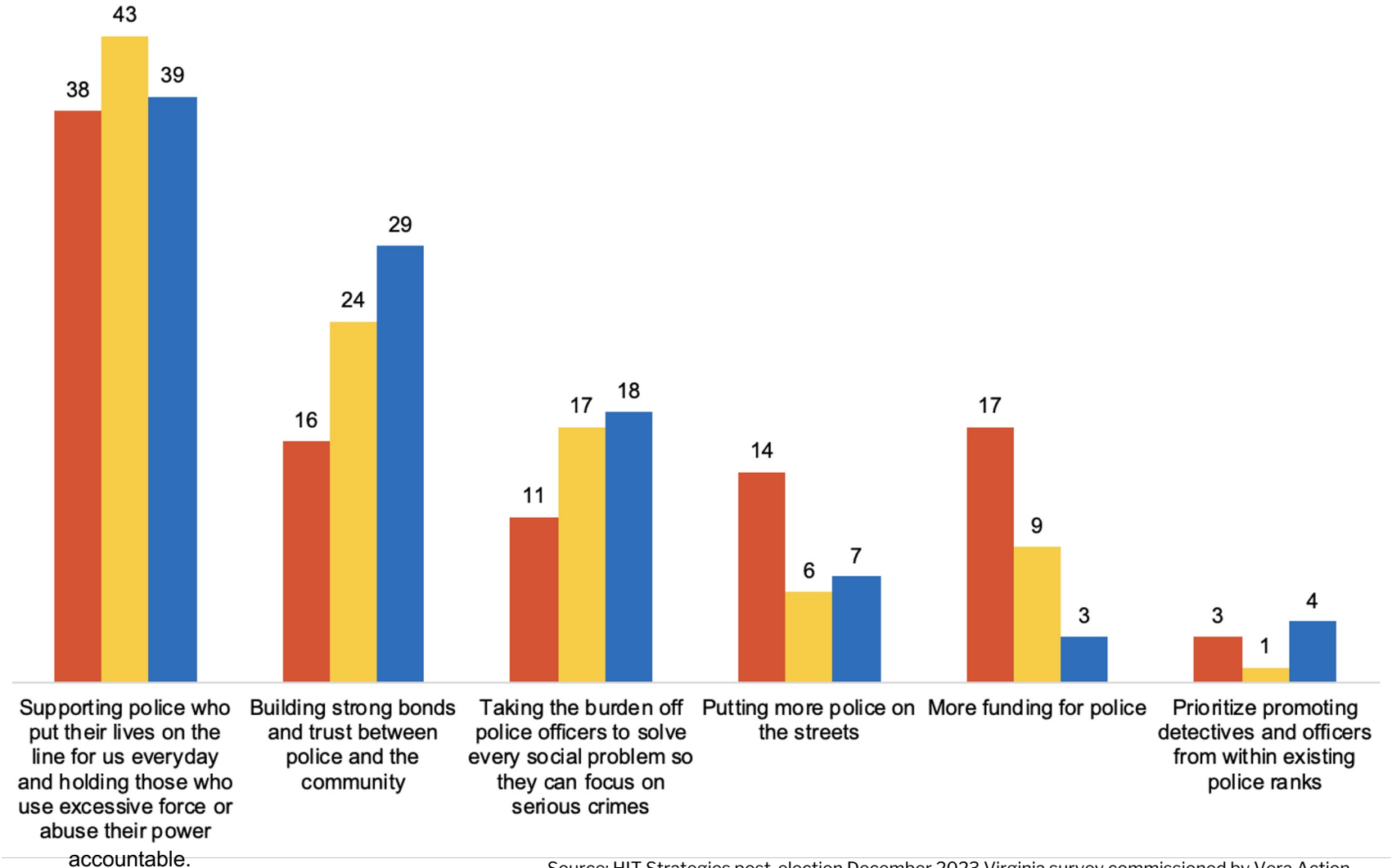




# BY A SIGNIFICANT MARGIN, ALL VIRGINIA VOTERS FAVOR SUPPORT & ACCOUNTABILITY FOR POLICE

What do you want to hear from candidates when it comes to policing?

■ Republican Voters  
■ Independent Voters  
■ Democratic Voters



## **TAKEAWAY # 4.**

**Inoculate against unserious attacks on issues like defund, retail theft, and “migrant crime” with a “serious about safety” response.**

# AGAINST A “DEFUND” ATTACK, DEMOCRATS CAN FLIP THE NARRATIVE TO WIN WITH A “SAFETY” MESSAGE

Next are two statements from two different candidates running for US House of Representatives. **Which do you agree with more, even if neither is quite right in your view?**

**Candidate A:** 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.

42%

**Candidate B:** 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.

58%

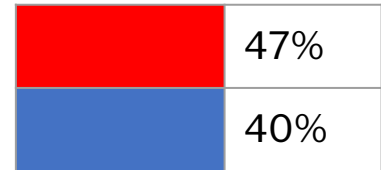
# AGAINST THE SAME ATTACK, A “TOUGH” RESPONSE LAGS WHERE A “SERIOUS” ONE WINS OUT

**GOP ATTACK:** 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.

**DEM “TOUGH ON CRIME”:** 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 side with violent January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists over law enforcement.

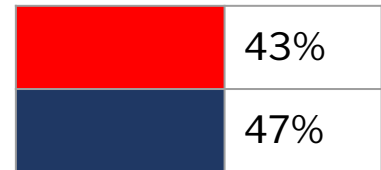
**DEM “SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY”:** I’m not about scare tactics or slogans, and I’m not afraid to have an honest conversation. We keep expecting the police to solve every social problem, from kids skipping school to mental illness to homelessness to gun violence. No one profession can do that. We’re spending \$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.

HEAD-TO-HEAD ATTACK  
V. DEM “TOUGH”



-7

HEAD-TO-HEAD ATTACK  
V. “SERIOUS ABOUT  
SAFETY”



+4



# SIMILARLY, FLIP THE NARRATIVE ON RETAIL THEFT FROM PETTY CRIME TO MAKING COMMUNITIES SAFE

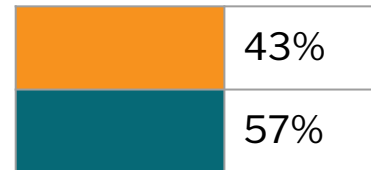
**THE ATTACK:** We can thank woke prosecutors for letting American cities spiral out of control. People are scared to go into stores because of theft and looting. Hardworking employees and business owners are traumatized and scared to go to work.

Organized retail crime is just happening brazenly. Evil is spreading across the country, with thieves taking whatever they want and prosecutors aren't doing a thing about it. In fact, woke prosecutors are against any charges or prosecutions for theft. There are no consequences and that's why criminals are so open, brazen, and violent with stealing. We've got to get tougher on crime. I'll start by making sure every thief is punished to the full extent of the law.

**RESPONSE W/ SAFETY:** My opponent wants to use scare tactics to rile people up to win votes. Here's what I can tell you. We all deserve to live in safe neighborhoods and shop at places in peace. I will work with police to take down organized theft so that our stores don't have to lock up basics like toothpaste and shampoo. Also, some people are stealing out of desperation and poverty because they're in survival mode. Throwing them in jail or charging them with huge fines will not change their behavior. It will just make them more desperate. My focus is on holding people accountable in ways that actually stop the cycle of crime - and make all of us safer.

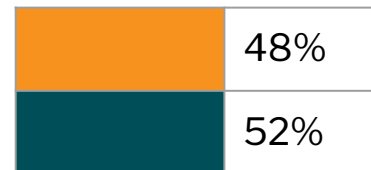
**RESPONSE W/ FACTCHECK:** My opponent wants to use scare tactics to rile people up to win votes. Look at the data. There is not a retail theft epidemic. We should do more to stop theft, but let's tell the truth about the problem and solutions. I will work with police to reduce theft so that our stores don't have to lock up basics like toothpaste and shampoo. Also, some people steal out of desperation and poverty because they're in survival mode. Throwing them in jail or charging them with huge fines will not change their behavior. It will just make them more desperate. My focus is on holding people accountable in ways that actually stop the cycle of crime - and make all of us safer.

## HEAD-TO-HEAD ATTACK V. SAFETY SOLUTIONS



+14

## HEAD-TO-HEAD ATTACK V. FACTCHECK



+4

# WHEN CRIME IS CONFLATED WITH IMMIGRATION, THE “SERIOUS” MESSAGE STILL BEATS THE “TOUGH” ONE

**GOP ATTACK:** 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.

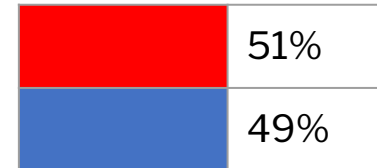
## DEM “TOUGH ON CRIME”:

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 to our communities. We also need the federal government to take action now to increase border security and stop the influx of migrants.

## DEM “SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY, STABILITY, SECURITY”:

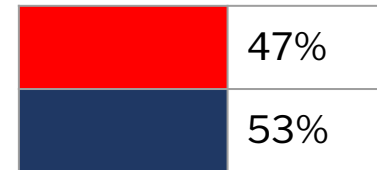
My opponent uses lies and hate for political gain. Bussing migrants across the country is a cruel and political ploy. Let’s focus on solutions that live up to our values and make us safer. Let’s secure our border and create a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who have lived here for years. Let’s 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.

### HEAD-TO-HEAD ATTACK V. DEM “TOUGH”



-2

### HEAD-TO-HEAD ATTACK V. “SERIOUS”



+6

# WITH CRIME-DRESSED-UP-AS-IMMIGRATION ATTACKS, USE AN ANCHOR, THEN INOCULATE AND GO ON OFFENSE



Let's work on making life safer, more stable, and secure for all of us **61** **28** **89**

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 **52** **30** **82**

We need a balanced approach to fixing immigration. We need border security and a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who have been here for many years **45** **34** **79**

Spending taxpayer money to bus migrants across the country is a political tool to get attention and divide us (Split A: n = 960) **44** **29** **73**

Migrant families are mothers, fathers, children, and grandparents who are fleeing danger, not causing it. Like us, they want safety, stability, and opportunity for a better life (Split B: n = 944) **35** **36** **71**

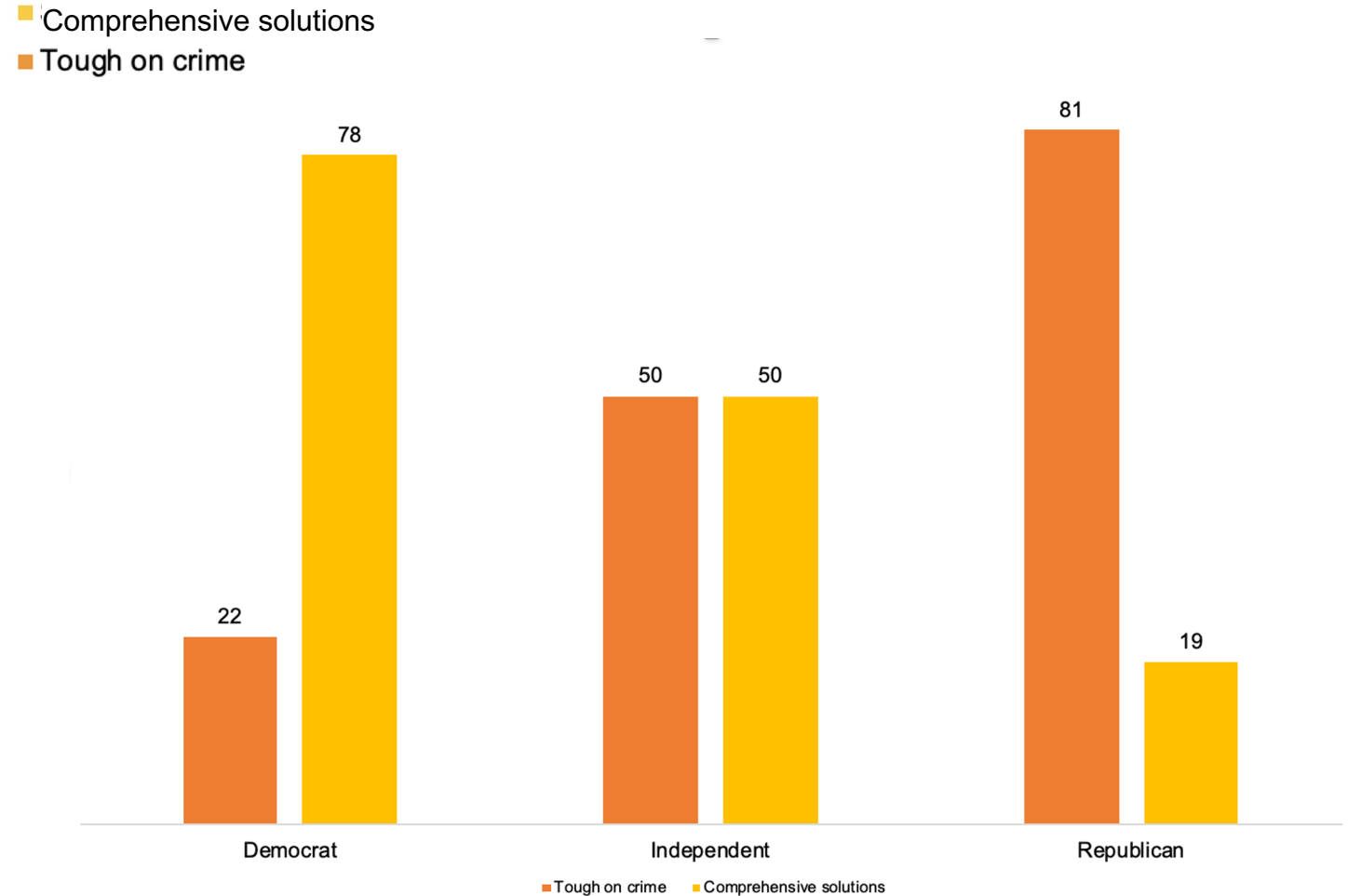
Strongly agree Somewhat agree

	Values contrast	Cons. Dem
Total	6	-2
Democratic women	73	90
Democratic men	82	69
Independent women	9	-25
Independent men	-1	-33
Republican women	-85	-73
Republican men	-87	-89

# ON FENTANYL, COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS WIN OVER DEMOCRATS AND HOLD GROUND WITH INDEPENDENTS

**COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS:** We can't look away from how drugs like fentanyl have devastated too many families. While some politicians are trying to exploit this grave issue, we need real solutions, not more rhetoric. A comprehensive strategy is needed to fight this epidemic. That means investing in new technology to detect fentanyl and drugs to stop them from crossing the border and reaching our communities. Here at home, we should fully fund solutions like overdose prevention centers, mobile treatment programs, and fentanyl test strips. This issue is bigger than politics, and we need to be serious about making us all feel safer.

**TOUGH ON CRIME:** We must actively secure our borders and aggressively target fentanyl dealers. Strong border control and harsh penalties for traffickers are non-negotiable. Politicians have failed to stop the inflow of drugs and are now allowing dangerous drugs to ravage our streets. We're taking a stand – tough on crime, uncompromising at the border. It's time to aggressively defend our nation by mobilizing military personnel and assets as necessary to demolish the cartels in Mexico that send drugs and people into our country. No more leniency; it's time for strength and serious action to safeguard American lives.



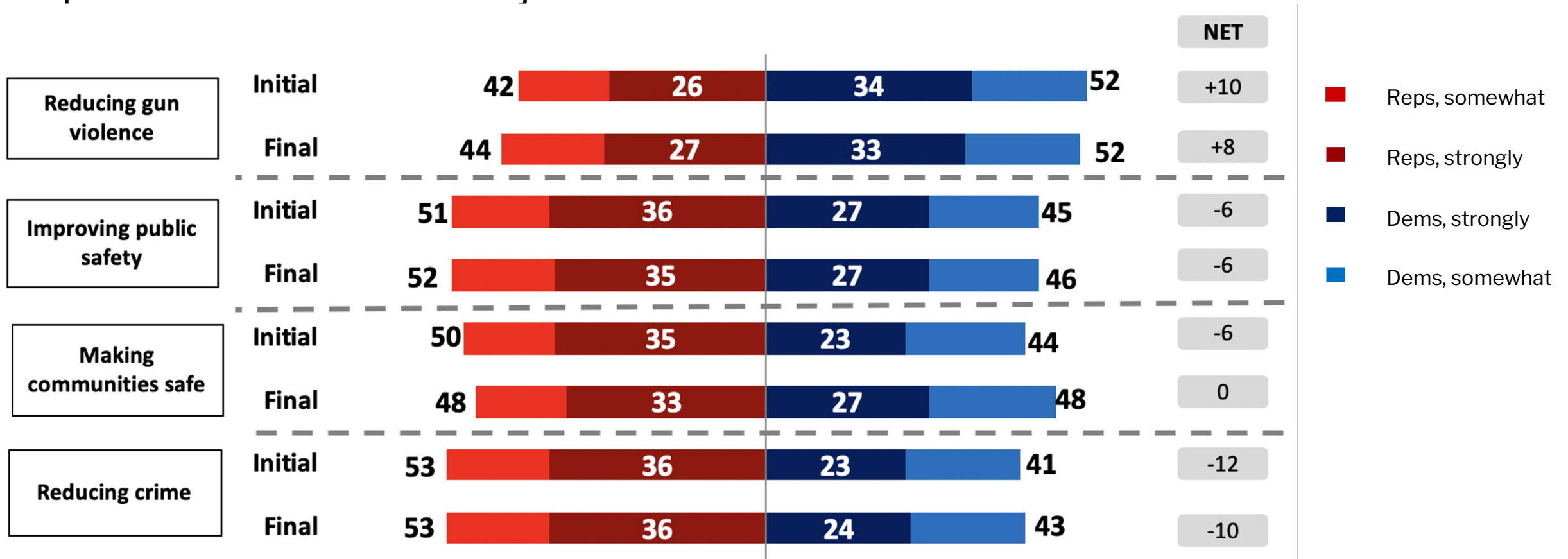


## **TAKEAWAY # 5.**

**“Safe communities”—not crime, gun violence, or public safety—is the messaging frame that moves voters towards Democrats and fills the trust gap.**

# TO CLOSE THE VOTER TRUST GAP, DEMOCRATS SHOULD LEAD WITH SAFE COMMUNITIES—NOT CRIME

For each aspect, do you trust Democrats or Republicans to do a better job?



# AMERICANS FAVOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS FOR SAFETY OVER “TOUGH ON CRIME” MEASURES

Let's say we want to improve crime and safety in communities. Which of these solutions would help?

More likely to be seen as effective:

- Working across party lines toward a common goal of safe communities (63%)
- Increasing access to mental health care (61%)
- Building trust between police and the community (61%)
- Making sure safety, not wealth, determines who stays in jail pending trial (57%)
- Addressing underlying economic conditions (56%)

Less likely to be seen as effective:

- Putting 100,000 more police on the ground to improve safety (43%)
- Harsher sentences and mandatory minimums to keep people in prison (38%)

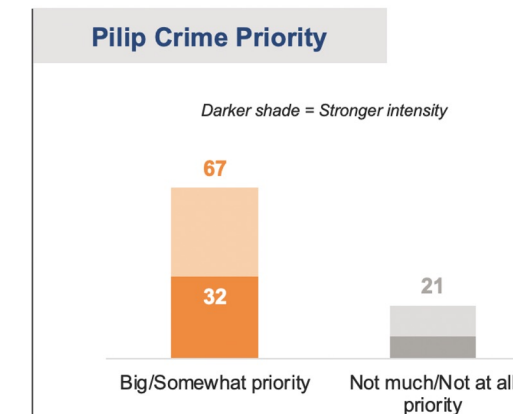
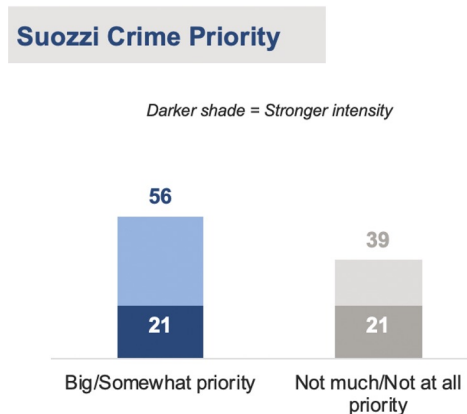
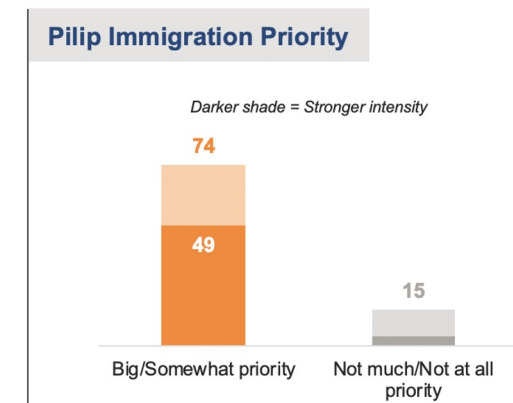
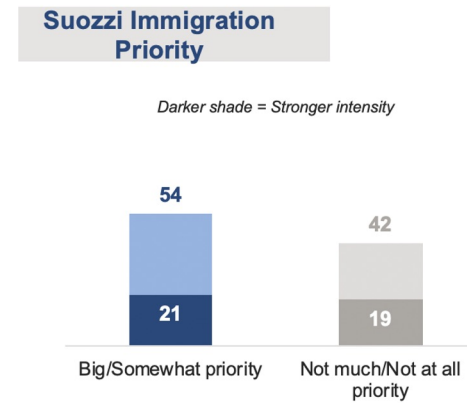
**PROOF WE CAN INOCULATE AND  
WIN BY LEANING INTO SAFETY AND  
OWNING A “SERIOUS” MESSAGE**  
A deeper dive into the NY-03 results



# IN NY-03, IMMIGRATION & CRIME WERE HIGH PRIORITIES AND VOTERS FOUND BOTH CANDIDATES LEANED IN

What were your two top voting issues and how much did each candidate make it a priority?

Suozzi Voter	
Abortion	55
Immigration/migrants	34
Guns	23
Considered Both	
Immigration/migrants	70
Inflation/Cost of living	32
Abortion	18
Crime	18
Pilip Voter	
Immigration/migrants	84
Inflation/Cost of living	43
Crime	37



# DESPITE THE RELENTLESS “SOFT” ATTACKS ON CRIME AND IMMIGRATION, VOTERS FAVORED REAL SOLUTIONS

“Which solutions do you favor and find effective when it comes to immigration and crime?”

## Immigration Proposals



## Crime/Safety Proposals



## **ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF A SAFETY MESSAGE WORKING:**

President Biden's evolution from  
“tough on crime” to “serious about safety”  
over three State of the Union addresses.

## State of the Union 2022

“Let’s not abandon our streets or choose between **safety and equal justice**. Let’s come together and protect our communities, restore trust, and hold law enforcement accountable.

**We should all agree the answer is not to defund the police. It’s to fund the police. Fund them. Fund them.** Fund them with the resources and training — resources and training they need to protect our communities.”

## State of the Union 2023

“We all want the same thing: neighborhoods free of violence, law enforcement who earns the community’s trust.

We know **police officers put their lives on the line** every single night and day. **And we know we ask them, in many cases, to do too much — to be counselors, social workers, psychologists — responding to drug overdoses, mental health crises, and so much more. In one sense, we ask much too much of them.**

But what happened to Tyre in Memphis happens too often. We have to do better. We also need **more first responders and professionals to address the growing mental health, substance abuse challenges.** More resources to reduce violent crime and gun crime. **More community intervention programs. More investments in housing, education, and job training. All this can help prevent violence in the first place.**

And when police officers or police departments **violate the public trust**, they must be held **accountable.**”

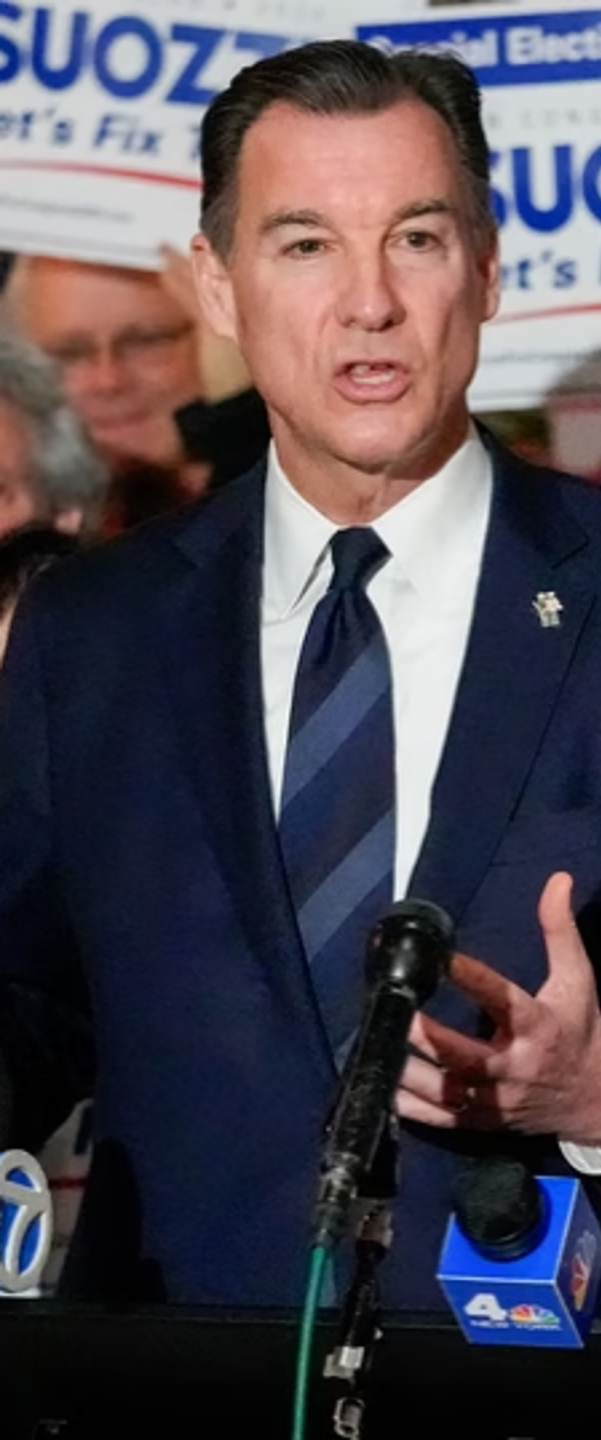
## State of the Union 2024

“To state the obvious, all Americans **deserve the freedom to be safe.** And America is safer today than when I took office. The year before I took office, murder rates went up 30 percent.

It was then, through my American Rescue Plan Act, that we made the largest investment in public safety ever.

Last year, the murder rate saw the sharpest decrease in history. Violent crime fell to one of its lowest levels in more than 50 years. But we have more to do. We have to **help cities invest in more community police officers, more mental health workers, more community violence intervention.**”







## A FEW MORE NARRATIVE TIPS

**1. Lead with the shared values of safety, accountability, and justice.**

Acknowledge the importance of safety and that we deserve an honest conversation based in solutions, not scare tactics, about what makes communities safe. Take back and redefine accountability. Everyone can walk through the safety door to get to accountability and justice.

**1. “Tough on crime” is the villain that keeps us from real safety.**

Across the political spectrum, a majority don't believe 'tough on crime' is working. Name it as the empty scare tactic that it is. If it worked, we would be the safest country in the world.

**1. Rely on empathy, not simply data, to persuade.**

Countering falsely-held beliefs with empathy is more persuasive than contradicting with data. Arguing about crime statistics, for example, with legislators or the public is often not effective. Setting the record straight with journalists and media is, though.

**1. Pivot to solutions.**

There is strong support for community-based solutions. Highlight specific programs and how they work, who they serve, and the impact they have. This is where the data is persuasive.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:



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