

# COUNTERING WILLIE HORTON- STYLE ATTACKS ON THE BORDER AND IMMIGRANTS:

Turning the debate to the core values of safety, accountability, and justice

October 2024

**Vera** ACTION

# SOME BACKGROUND AND FRAMING: WE DON'T WIN ON JUSTICE REFORM WHEN THE POLITICS OF FEAR AND CRIME ARE AGAINST US

Since 2022, Vera Action has commissioned 20+ rounds of public opinion research on how voters view crime and how they vote on this issue at the ballot box. We have done national polling, exit polls after high-profile elections where crime was the top issue, and state-specific polling.

The goal is to counter tough-on-crime rhetoric by **politicians** and the **media**. We want to change the public debate to real solutions and a set of values that matter to everyone—**safety, accountability, and justice**.

The ultimate goal is to put the “Willie Horton” dog whistles to bed.

For more on our research: <https://veraaction.org/messaging-research-and-polling-library/>

# SOME BACKGROUND AND FRAMING: CRIMINALIZING IMMIGRANTS AND THE BORDER IS ANOTHER PAGE IN THE "WILLIE HORTON" PLAYBOOK

IN 2024, THE GOP HAS  
SPENT \$622.7M ON  
IMMIGRATION AND  
\$358.4M ON CRIME

PRESIDENT TRUMP  
WILL STOP THE INVASION

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Pinned  
Marc Molinaro #NY19 @marcmolinaro · Sep 18  
"You have a very open southern border in which fentanyl is pouring into this country, and it's killing our youth."  
...hR... is in part to blame for the problem that we are currently in  
today...  
- Sheriff Akshar

...ILE IS IN PART  
...ME FOR THE  
...POSITION THAT WE ARE  
...COUNTRY IN TODAY

0:18 / 0:30

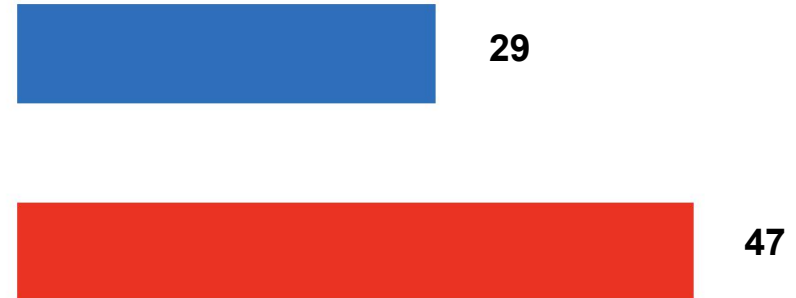
"OVER 10 MILLION *illegal border crossings.*"  
-The Economist 1/24/24

# SOME BACKGROUND AND FRAMING: DEMOCRATS' HISTORIC DISADVANTAGE ON CRIME & SAFETY IS ABOUT VOLUME — NOT POLICY

Who do you **trust** more on  
issues of crime and safety:  
Democrats or Republicans?



Who do you **hear** more on  
issues of crime and safety:  
Democrats or Republicans?



# POLLING ON BORDER AND “MIGRANT CRIME”: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

National YouGov panel of 1,904 likely voters from May 10-May 22, 2024

	Weighted %	N size (Unweighted)
Total	100	1,904
Women	53	1,025
Men	47	879
18 to 34	20	416
35 to 49	23	470
50 to 64	29	531
65+	28	487
White	71	678
Black	12	413
Latina/o/x	11	402
AAPI	4	396
< College	60	1,079
College +	40	825

	Weighted %	N size (Unweighted)
Democrats	38	863
Independents	30	567
Republicans	32	474
City	29	649
Suburb	38	784
Town	12	187
Rural area	20	275
Northeast	20	376
Midwest	22	316
South	36	653
West	23	559

Oversamples:

- 413 Black voters
- 402 Latino voters
- 396 AAPI voters

## **TAKEAWAY # 1.**

**Get off the opposition's narrative turf of “toughness” and turn the debate to safety, stability, and security for all communities.**

# CORE MESSAGE TO COUNTER “OPEN BORDER,” “MIGRANT CRIME” AND OTHER LINES OF ATTACK

“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.”

# THE VALUES OF SAFETY, SECURITY, AND STABILITY BEAT AN “OPEN BORDER/MIGRANT CRIME” ATTACK

Here are statements from two different candidates. Which candidate is more in line with your own views, even if neither is quite right?

**REPUBLICAN:** 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.

46%

**DEMOCRAT:** 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.

54%



## **TAKEAWAY # 2.**

**The opposition's messages are breaking through—but it doesn't work to try to “out-tough” them on their own narrative turf.**

# VOTERS ARE INCREASINGLY HOSTILE AS THEY HEAR RHETORIC CONFLATING THE BORDER AND CRIME

Do you agree or disagree...

Politicians need to take care of Americans first before new migrants



Democrats' open borders, sanctuary city policies, and catch and release policies have led to a migrant crime wave



We have a massive crisis at our border that Democrats are ignoring



■ Somewhat agree ■ Strongly agree

# BUT MEETING THE GOP ATTACK WITH A VALUES-BASED MESSAGE OUTPERFORMS STAYING ON THEIR TURF

**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.

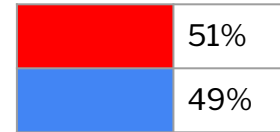
## DEM "TOUGH ON CRIME":

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":

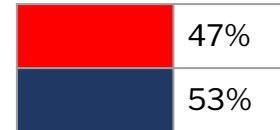
My opponent uses lies and hate for political gain. Bussing migrants across the country is a cruel and political ploy. Let's focus on solutions that live up to our values and make us safer. Let's secure our border and create a pathway to citizenship for immigrants who have lived here for years. Let's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

# BIPARTISAN BORDER BILL NOT THE STRONGEST REASON TO VOTE FOR HARRIS OVER TRUMP

Which of these quotes from Kamala Harris provides the strongest reason to vote against Donald Trump? Even if none of them do, which provides the strongest reason of the two?

Blueprint

[About](#) [Polling](#) [Analysis](#) [Message Testing](#) [Press](#)

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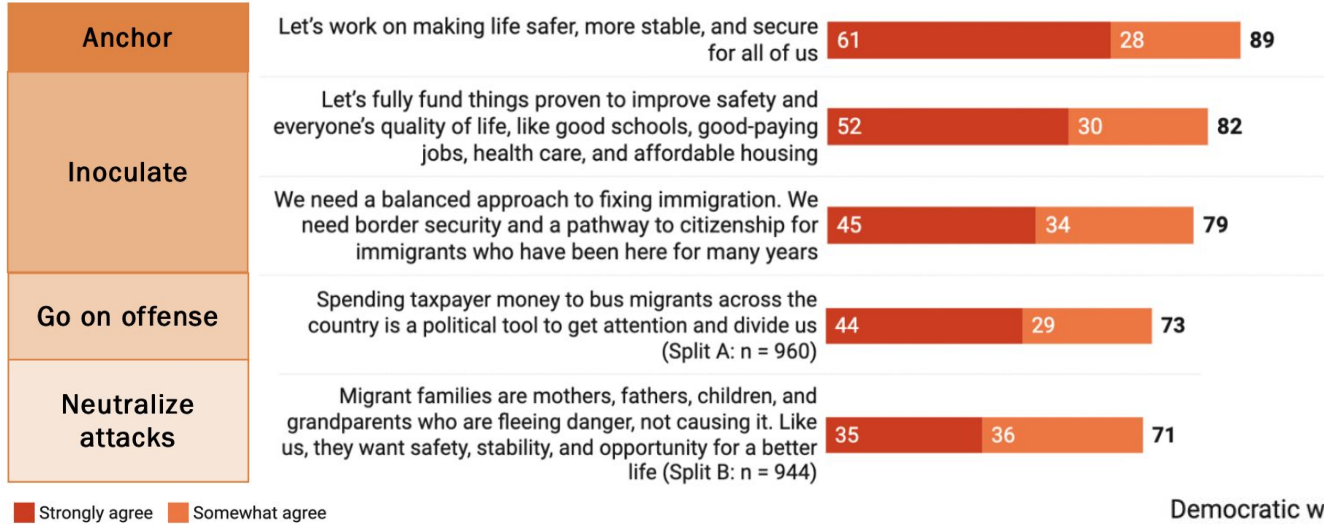
## Debate Snap Poll & Message Test: Harris Gains with Independents and Key Voter Groups

I am not Joe Biden, and I am certainly not Donald Trump. And what I do offer is a new generation of leadership for our country. One that believes in what is possible, one who brings a sense of optimism about what we can do instead of always disparaging the American people.	58%
You've heard tonight two very different visions for our country. One that is focused on the future and the other that is focused on the past. But we're not going back. And I do believe that the American people know we all have so much more in common than what separates us and we can chart a new way forward.	58%
In this debate tonight, you're going to hear from the same old, tired playbook, a bunch of lies, grievances and name-calling. Donald Trump has no plan for you. And when you look at his economic plan, it's all about tax breaks for the richest people. Donald Trump actually has no plan for you, because he is more interested in defending himself than he is in looking out for you.	56%
My opponent has a plan that I call the Trump sales tax, which would be a 20% tax on everyday goods. Economists have said that Trump's sales tax would actually result in about \$4,000 more a year in taxes for middle-class families because of his policies and his ideas about middle-class people paying for tax cuts for billionaires.	55%
Donald Trump hand-selected three members of the United States Supreme Court with the intention that they would undo the protections of Roe V. Wade. And now in over 20 states there are Trump abortion bans which make it criminal for a doctor or nurse to provide health care. In one state it provides prison for life.	55%
I pledge to you when Congress passes a bill to put back in place the protections of Roe V. Wade as president of the United States, I will proudly sign it into law. Trump will sign a national abortion ban. I think the American people believe that the freedom to make decisions about one's own body, should not be made by the government.	53%
The bipartisan border bill would have put more resources to allow us to prosecute transnational criminal organizations for trafficking in guns, drugs and human beings. You know what happened to that bill? Donald Trump got on the phone, called up some folks in Congress, and said kill the bill b he preferred to run on a problem instead of fixing a problem.	52%

### **TAKEAWAY # 3.**

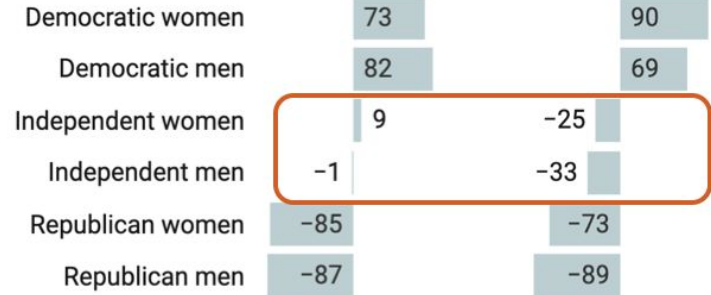
**Call out the opposition's scare tactics for what they are—empty rhetoric intended to divide us—to win overall and *especially* to move Independent voters towards a better frame.**

# WHEN DEMOCRATS CREATE A VALUES CONTRAST, THEY MOVE INDEPENDENT VOTERS BY +30 POINTS



In response to a GOP attack on the border and “migrant crime,” a Democrat who responds by also going “tough” loses by -2 points. If they create a values contrast, not only do they win by +6 points—they move Independent voters by +30 percentage points.

	Values contrast	Cons. Dem
Total	+6	-2



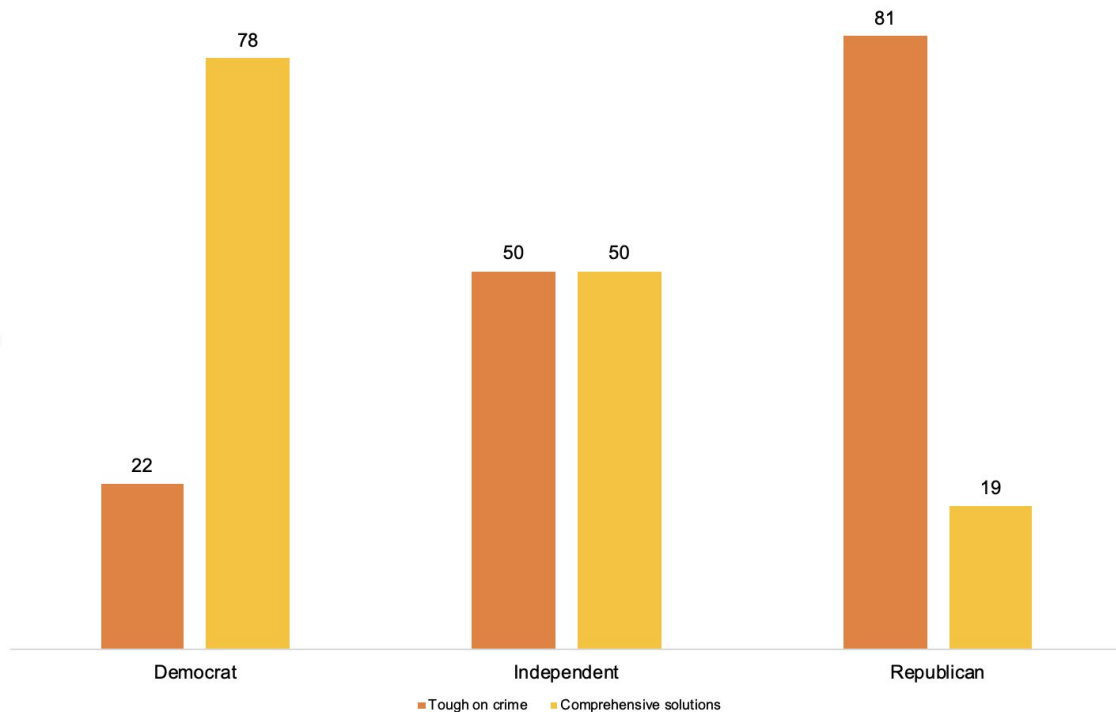
## **TAKEAWAY # 4.**

**While fentanyl and the border is by far the toughest and most fear mongered issue this election cycle, there is a response that wins with Democrats and draws even with Independents.**

# A VALUES CONTRAST WINS OVER DEMOCRATS AND HOLD GROUND WITH INDEPENDENTS ON FENTANYL

**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.**

**Lessons from the NY-03 special election and Tom Suozzi—what if Democrats had defined Suozzi’s approach of “secure border + path to citizenship” as the standard position instead of tacking right?**

# SUOZZI'S EMBRACED PATH TO CITIZENSHIP DURING NY-03 SPECIAL ELECTION—IN CONTRAST TO DEMOCRATS' "ENFORCEMENT ONLY" POSITION TODAY

## ELECTIONS

Some Democrats see an immigration blueprint in NY win. Progressives are worried.

Tom Suozzi's win on Tuesday has Democrats talking up his tough-border-talk playbook, alarming some on the left.



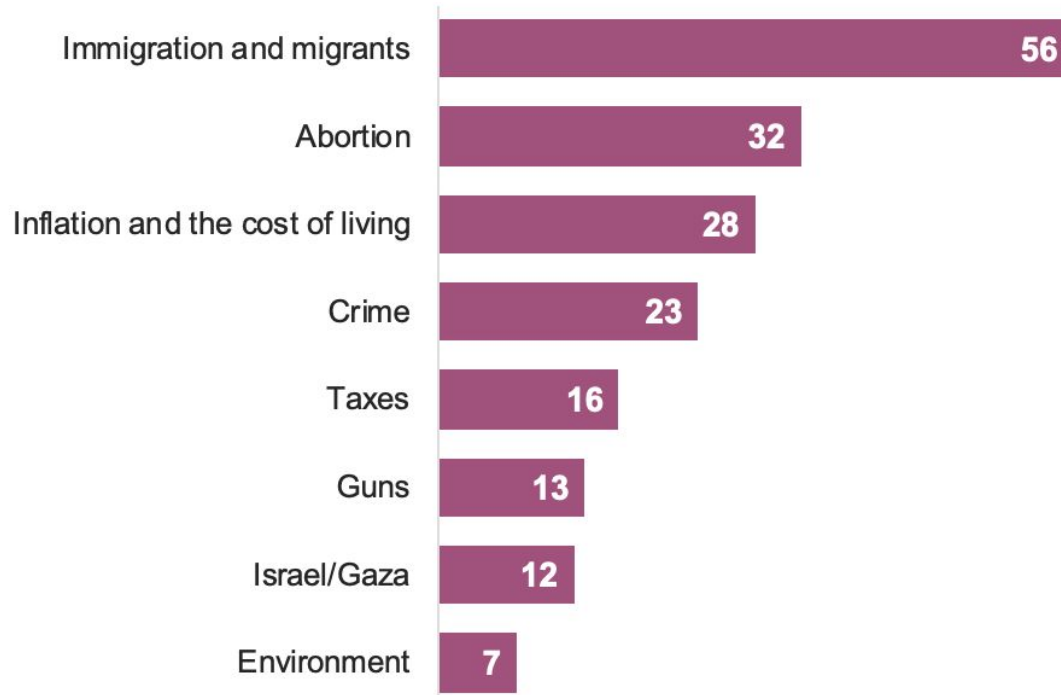
Former Democratic Rep. Tom Suozzi defeated Republican Mazi Hironaka in New York's special election, a race closely watched nationally as the presid



# IN NY-03, IMMIGRATION/CRIME WAS A HIGH PRIORITY

## Voter Issues

*Which TWO of the following issues played the biggest role in deciding how you voted in the special election?*

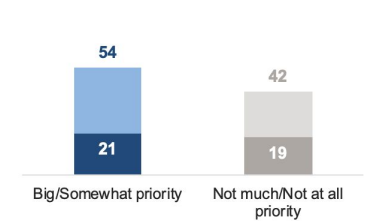


Suozi Voter	
Abortion	55
Immigration/migrants	34
Guns	23
Considered Both	
Immigration/migrants	70
Inflation/Cost of living	32
Abortion	18
Crime	18
Pilip Voter	
Immigration/migrants	84
Inflation/Cost of living	43
Crime	37

# AND NY-03 VOTERS WERE OPEN TO REAL SOLUTIONS

## Suozi Immigration Priority

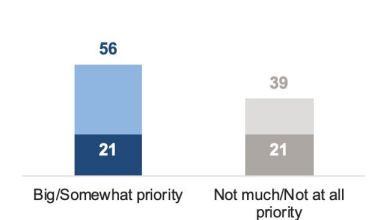
Darker shade = Stronger intensity



	Dem	Ind	Rep
Priority	84	54	21
Not priority	13	42	73

## Suozi Crime Priority

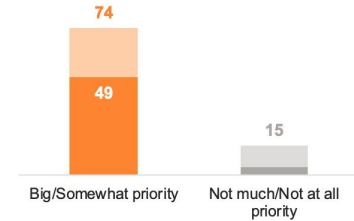
Darker shade = Stronger intensity



	Dem	Ind	Rep
Priority	86	43	30
Not priority	10	51	66

## Pilip Immigration Priority

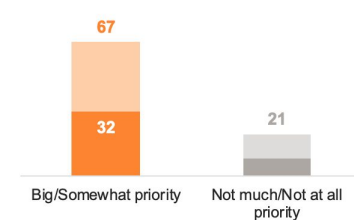
Darker shade = Stronger intensity



	Dem	Ind	Rep
Priority	63	72	89
Not priority	17	17	8

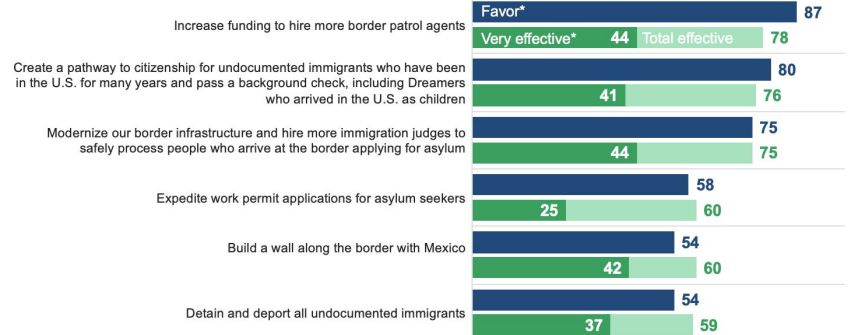
## Pilip Crime Priority

Darker shade = Stronger intensity



	Dem	Ind	Rep
Priority	47	76	85
Not priority	32	11	14

## Immigration Proposals



## Safety/Crime Proposals

Help a lot / Help a lot/Help some



# BY CEDING THE NARRATIVE ON THE BORDER/CRIME, DEMOCRATS ENDED UP IN AN “ENFORCEMENT ONLY” POSITION—AND STILL LAG BEHIND THE GOP ON TRUST



## Registered Voters' Views of Which Candidate Would Better Handle Key Issues

Regardless of which presidential candidate you support, please tell me if you think Kamala Harris or Donald Trump would better handle each of the following issues.

	% Donald Trump	% Kamala Harris	Margin (pct. pts.)
The economy	54	45	9
Immigration	54	45	9
Foreign affairs	52	47	5
Gun policy	49	49	0
Healthcare	44	54	10
Abortion	40	56	16
Climate change	35	61	26

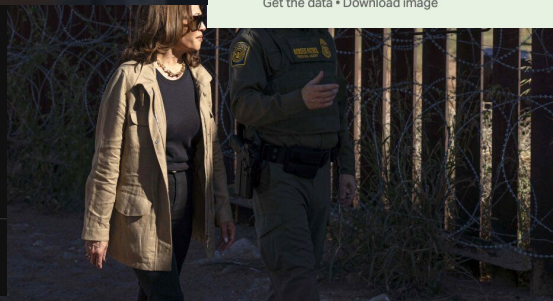
Sept. 16-28, 2024  
Those who said both candidates would handle the issue

Get the data • Download image

POLITICS

## Harris vows to keep Biden's border crackdown: "The United States is a sovereign nation"

By Nidia Cavazos, Camilo Montoya-Galvez  
Updated on: September 28, 2024 / 12:18 PM EDT / CBS News



Watch on YouTube NEWS PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

## A FEW MORE NARRATIVE TIPS

**Lead with the shared values of safety, accountability, and justice—and against border and crime, with safety, security, and stability.**

Acknowledge the importance of safety and that we deserve an honest conversation based in solutions, not scare tactics, about what makes communities safe and stable for all of us.

**Scare tactics and empty rhetoric are the villains that keeps us from real safety and stability.**

Go on the offense to call out the fear-based and divisive rhetoric. Across the political spectrum, people want a set of real solutions and not just exploitation of fear and division.

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

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

**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.

**AN IDEAL MESSAGE IN THIS POLITICAL MOMENT:  
IMMIGRATION REFORM MAKES THE ECONOMY, OUR  
FAMILIES, AND LIFE BETTER FOR ALL OF US**



**CALL OUT THE LIES  
AND EMPHASIZE  
SOLUTIONS THAT MAKE  
LIFE BETTER FOR ALL OF US**

CNN, 9/3/24

**Trump is Still Telling Lies He Told  
Eight Years Ago**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiFT2II6\\_YI&t=15s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiFT2II6_YI&t=15s)



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<https://veraaction.org/messaging-research-and-polling-library/>

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