

Midterms Messaging Playbook

Uplifting Safety
in Today's Most
Pressing Issues

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VeraACTION

At the Republican Party’s first-ever midterm convention this September, everyone was talking about crime: [multiple speakers touted](#) the largest one-year drop in violent crime and murder rates since 1936, and the president [vowed](#) to end bail reform and ramp up use of the death penalty. It’s the culmination of a strategy the president [previewed](#) last summer, when he began touting the crime decline with the midterms explicitly in mind. Candidates like [Roy Cooper](#), [David Crowley](#), [Abdul El-Sayed](#), [Jon Ossoff](#), and [James Talarico](#) are already facing well-funded “soft-on-crime” attacks. This cycle, Vera Action’s polling in battleground states consistently shows that candidates who lead with a proactive, solutions-oriented public safety agenda outperform those who either go silent or try to out-tough Republicans on the issue.

Public safety is a kitchen table issue that matters to everyone. While crime and safety may not be [top of mind](#) for voters as in recent cycles, candidates should not make the mistake of ignoring this critical issue. Even as crime rates continue to drop to [historic lows](#), many people [remain worried](#). Rather than wait for public safety to come up in debates, candidates can win on this issue by messaging early and often, including in the context of pressing issues like affordability, corruption, and immigration.

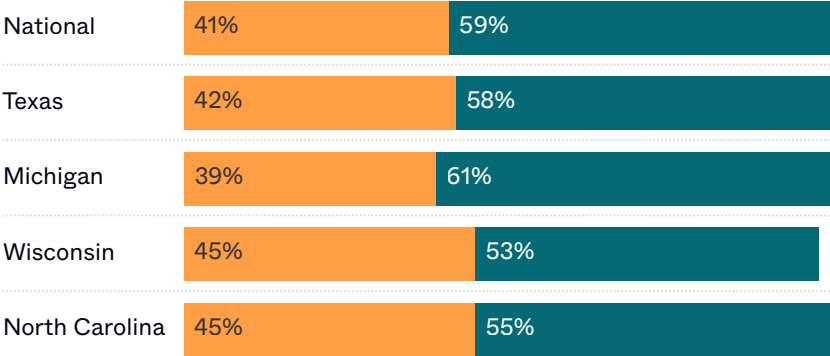
For too long, candidates and electeds have defaulted to the conventional wisdom that getting tough on crime is the only way to address crime concerns and respond to attacks. But this strategy is outdated and ineffective: [extensive data](#) demonstrates voters are seeking messaging that is “[serious about safety](#).”

A “serious” approach, which is [helping drive down crime](#) across the country, also beats a “tough” message in

Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

We should do more to get tough on crime—like having tougher sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people in jail, and providing police with more support and resources

We should fully fund things that are proven to create safe communities—like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing—and help prevent crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and by getting illegal guns off the street



Sources: [January 2026 YouGov national survey](#), [August 2026 YouGov survey](#) of Texas voters, [July 2026 Lake Research Partners survey](#) of Michigan voters, [January 2026 GSG survey](#) of Wisconsin voters, [April 2026 YouGov survey](#) of North Carolina voters (all commissioned by Vera Action)

46%

54%

53%

47%

[TOUGH DEM]: I’m tough on crime. That means more cops on the beat and tough action against violent criminals. We should increase police funding and invest in new technologies like predictive policing, not defunding the police.

[SAFETY DEM]: I’m serious about safety. That means fully funding things that are proven to create safe communities—like good schools, jobs, and affordable housing—and preventing crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and getting illegal guns off the street.

[GOP]: I stand on the side of law and order. That means having longer sentences for people convicted of violent crimes, maintaining strong bail laws to keep dangerous people behind bars, and providing police with more support and resources.

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Source: YouGov [March 2026 national survey](#) commissioned by Vera Action

battleground states like [Texas](#) (+16), [Michigan](#) (+22), [Wisconsin](#) (+7), and [North Carolina](#) (+10). Importantly, this message also [performs better](#) than trying to “out tough” the opposition.

A March 2026 [congressional battleground survey](#) conducted by Global Strategy Group (GSG) shows how voters want leaders with a proactive safety vision who will build safer, stronger communities.

Unlike a “tough” Democratic response, voters trust this message. Solutions-focused Democratic candidates gained +10 on authenticity, +4 on trustworthiness, +4 on being principled, and -14 on “less willing to say whatever it takes to win.”

For decades, Republicans have held an advantage on crime and safety. But [data reveals](#) that the problem may be that voters simply don’t hear from Democrats. In 2022, voters said they heard 4.5 times more from Republicans on public safety, and in the 2024 cycle, Republicans outspent Democrats three-to-one on crime and immigration. In a recent Vera Action [poll](#), the Republican advantage on crime disappeared when voters heard a message about how the crime decline predated President Donald Trump and that the president has cut funding to critical public safety programs.

Safety is not an isolated issue; it is the foundation of a stable, affordable life and a thriving democracy. This messaging guide gives candidates poll-tested ways to talk about public safety across the issues voters care about most. By using these messages early and often, candidates can own the critical issue of safety rather than staying on the defensive. The messages below are grounded in national and battleground polling from GSG, Lake Research Partners, GBAO Strategies, Navigator Research, YouGov, and others, including recent head-to-head message tests.

Policing

Many candidates are uncertain how to message on policing, particularly if they took positions in 2020 that they’ve since walked back—leaving them vulnerable to attack. But there’s a clear path for winning on this issue, even for candidates who called to defund the police in 2020, and this holds true in battleground states. This is because despite it being considered a contentious issue, Americans actually *broadly agree* on policing.

Which of the following statements do you most support, even if none is exactly right?							
Policy	Total	Dem	Ind	Rep	White voters	Black voters	Hispanic voters
Supporting police who put their lives on the line for us every day and holding those who use excessive force or abuse their power accountable	42%	37%	45%	46%	41%	41%	38%
Building strong bonds and trust between police and the community	27%	34%	21%	20%	25%	43%	39%
Taking the burden off police officers to solve every social problem so they can focus on serious crime	18%	24%	26%	11%	20%	10%	10%
Putting more police on the streets	7%	2%	6%	12%	7%	4%	8%
More funding for police	5%	2%	2%	9%	6%	2%	4%
Prioritize promoting detectives and officers from within existing police ranks	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%

Source: YouGov [January 2026 national survey](#) commissioned by Vera Action

In [poll after poll](#), voters say they want effective, accountable policing, including in battleground states like [Michigan](#), [North Carolina](#), and [Wisconsin](#). This preference consistently beats preferences for more funding or more officers and holds across both party and race.

Polling and research show that voters want to send the **right responder** to the right call instead of asking police to solve every problem, **trust** their local police, and hold law enforcement **accountable** when they break the law or abuse their power. A message that combines these components overwhelmingly beats a “soft-on-crime” attack.

Which of the following statements comes closer to your own point of view, even if neither is exactly right?

Everyone deserves to feel safe in their community. Police should be focused on preventing violence, solving serious crimes, and responding when people call for help—not being asked to solve homelessness, mental illness, addiction, or act as immigration agents. We should support officers in the difficult jobs they’re doing, hold them accountable when they break the law, and invest in proven solutions—like trained mental health responders and violence prevention programs—that prevent crime before it happens. That’s how we make communities safer.

64%

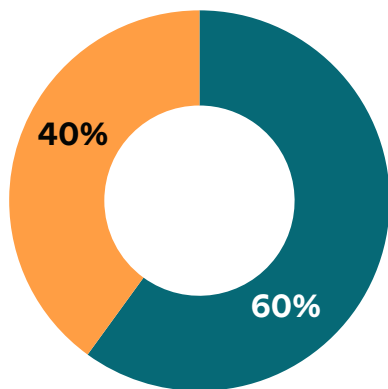
36%

Democrats have vilified and demonized police who put their lives on the line for us every day. Their soft-on-crime, anti-police agenda—from defunding police departments to releasing violent criminals back onto our streets—is why crime skyrocketed in Democrat-run cities. Thanks to President Trump and Republicans, violent crime is now at record lows. The hostile climate the Left created 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.

Source: YouGov [August 2026 national survey](#) commissioned by Vera Action

Instead, any mention of “defund” is an opportunity to present a more compelling message on policing. A recent Vera Action national [poll](#) found a candidate who once called to defund the police—and has since walked it back—winning by 20 points even in the face of attacks, by offering a proactive vision for fully funding safety solutions. Testing shows this approach leads by 26 points in [Michigan](#), 10 points in [Wisconsin](#), and six points in [Texas](#).

Which of the following statements comes closer to your own point of view, even if neither is exactly right?



My opponent is a dangerous radical who supports defunding the police. His soft-on-crime policies would weaken public safety, make it harder for police to do their jobs, and put us all at risk. Thanks to President Trump and the Republicans, crime is finally coming down. We should fully fund law enforcement and give police the resources they need to keep us safe, not defund the police.

I’ve made it very clear that I do not support defunding the police, and I will not defund the police. In 2020, I said “defund” because I wanted to focus resources on other safety solutions, but my position has changed. We can and should fully fund a range of proven safety solutions, from police and violence prevention to crisis response and treatment. That’s the approach that’s helping drive crime to record lows across the country.

Source: YouGov [August 2026 national survey](#) commissioned by Vera Action

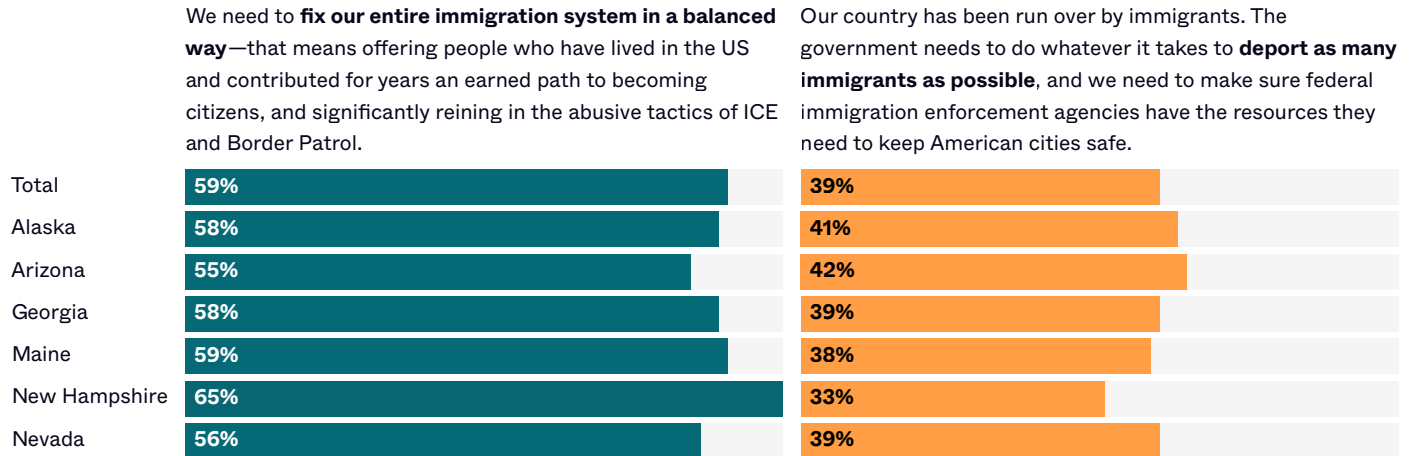
Candidates who never called to “defund” should take a similar approach—leading with a proactive safety vision—instead of attempting to contrast themselves with fellow Democrats. That keeps the focus on a message that wins, rather than fueling negative media cycles that hurt all the party’s candidates.

Immigration

Voters are [fed up](#) with our broken immigration system and this administration’s brutal mass deportation campaign. But instead of presenting a contrasting message focused on real solutions, some candidates are centering their messaging on who deserves to be deported or on immigrants’ criminal status. Leaning into a “criminality” frame cedes ground to the “tough-on-crime” politics voters are [rejecting](#).

Instead, the most effective candidates should share their vision for holding ICE accountable and fixing a broken immigration system.

Which of the following comes closer to your view?



Source: February 2026 [GSG poll](#) commissioned by ACLU of 1,200 likely voters in battleground (BG) states: Alaska (AK), Arizona (AZ), Georgia (GA), Maine (ME), New Hampshire (NH), and Nevada (NV).

Voters are also unhappy with Congress’s record-breaking \$240 billion blank check to immigration enforcement agencies, and [they think](#) it is not making us safer. Candidates can tie this to a “serious-about-safety” approach with a message about reinvesting those billions in things that are actually proven to make us safer.

Next, you will see some statements people have been making lately. For each of those, please say whether you [agree or disagree] with that statement, or if you are unsure.

Congress has recently given ICE a record-breaking \$240 billion as many communities are struggling. Instead of spending billions on something that isn’t making us safer, we could invest it in things like education, housing, healthcare, and effective, accountable law enforcement.

Strongly agree or somewhat agree

60%

ICE has gone too far. It has too much money and too little accountability. We need to hold ICE agents who break the law or abuse their power accountable and focus on building a fair immigration system Americans can be proud of. Instead of separating families, we should invest in things that actually make our communities safer.

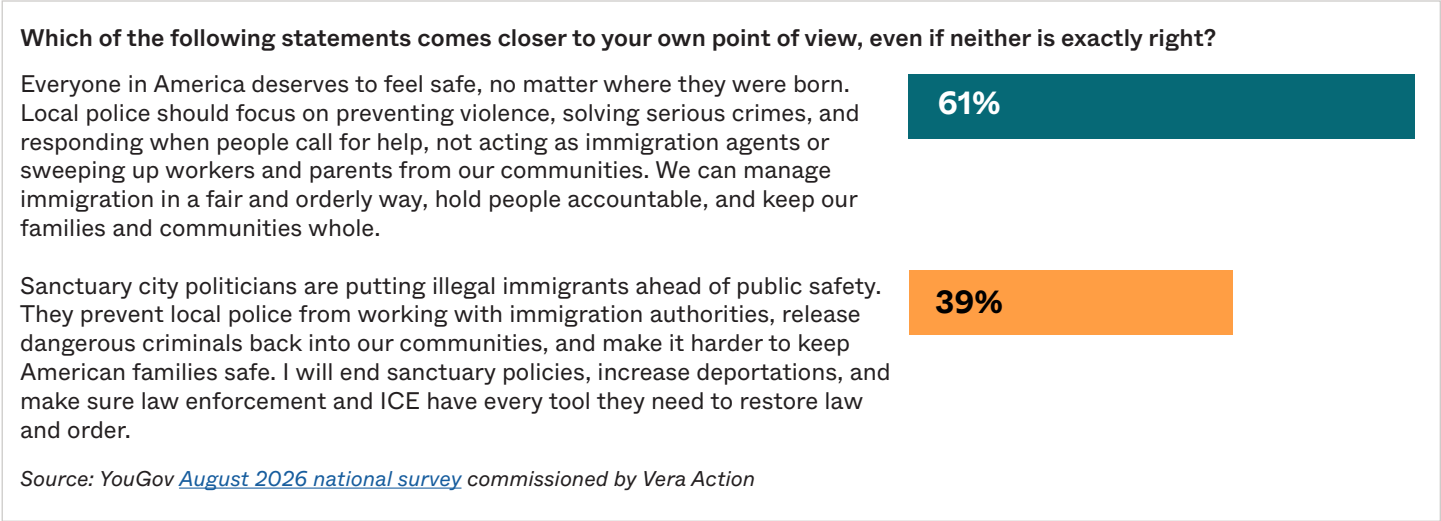
59%

Congress has recently given ICE a record-breaking \$240 billion that they are using to wreak havoc on our communities. As American families are struggling with the rising cost of living, using taxpayer dollars to write a blank check to ICE is an irresponsible waste of valuable resources.

53%

Source: YouGov [August 2026 national survey](#) commissioned by Vera Action

Voters are also skeptical of their local police [working closely](#) with immigration enforcement officials. By and large, they want police focused on preventing violence and solving serious crime, and an immigration system that is fair and orderly, keeps families together, and holds agents accountable.



Responding to Federal Deployments

Even as crime has declined to historic lows, which [many experts](#) credit to investment in state and local community programs that focus on preventing crime, the president has [slashed](#) those funds and instead insisted that he will deliver safety by deploying federal agents and troops. However, voters [don't buy it](#): they oppose the deployments, broadly viewing them as political theater and saying they undermine their trust in local law enforcement.

Opposing federal deployments in general is a popular message. Digging deeper, testing shows that the most effective messages center on reinvesting those immense costs into a “serious-about-safety” approach or the lack of training and accountability for federal forces.

Next, you will see statements some have said recently about these deployments. For each of them, please say how [concerned or unconcerned] that statement makes you feel about National Guard deployments.

	Very or somewhat concerned ▾	Somewhat unconcerned	Very unconcerned	Not sure
Federal agents involved in these operations aren't trained or held accountable the way local police are. When something goes wrong, there's no consequences for the agents involved, which encourages reckless policing	65%	11%	16%	9%
When disasters strike—hurricanes, floods—communities depend on the National Guard to help. These deployments pull troops away from that role, leaving communities less prepared for real emergencies	63%	12%	18%	7%
Taxpayers have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on these deployments, while the administration cut more than a billion dollars from safety programs like violence prevention and mental health programs that were actually helping drive crime down	61%	11%	17%	11%
These deployments have put communities at risk. Federal agents have fatally shot people, and some residents say they're now afraid to send their kids to school or go to the doctor	59%	11%	21%	9%

Source: YouGov [August 2026 national survey](#) commissioned by Vera Action

Affordability

Too often, safety is left out of the affordability conversation. But these issues go hand in hand: the safest neighborhoods are often the ones with the most resources. In a [November 2024 GBAO Strategies exit poll](#), 77 percent of voters said increasing funding for affordable housing, good schools, and living wages would help reduce crime. By including this message, [polls show](#) that candidates can address safety concerns while winning the affordability debate.

Even if neither is exactly right, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

Right now, too many of us are struggling to afford basic necessities like groceries and prescription drugs. But Republicans are doing nothing to lower costs or find solutions to make our communities safer. We need leaders who will prioritize investing in good schools, affordable housing, and preventing crime by increasing treatment for mental health and drug addiction and by getting illegal guns off the street.

57%

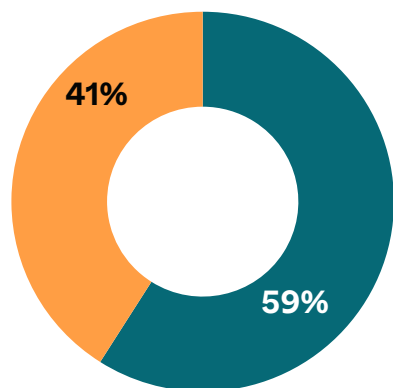
America's greatest comeback is just getting started. But Democrats and the radical left are standing in the way. They are more concerned about liberal elites and pushing woke ideas. After years of out-of-control inflation driven by Democrats' reckless government spending, we are finally putting our house in order by cutting waste and fraud, getting tough on crime, and delivering on the promises made to the American people.

43%

Source: YouGov [May 2025 national survey](#) commissioned by Vera Action

Corruption

New polling shows that an astounding [97 percent of Americans](#) believe there is some corruption in government. This is certain to be front and center in the coming election. But criticizing corruption without tying in popular, affirmative messages on affordability and safety misses a key opportunity. For example, a [recent Navigator poll](#) found more than 8-in-10 voters across the political spectrum believe corruption raises their costs of living—nearly half of whom feel strongly about this connection.



Democrats have let fraud run rampant, from illegal immigrants gaming the system to welfare scammers who stole hundreds of millions meant for low-income families and the elderly. Democrats let fraudsters steal straight out of your pocket and walk away free. Republicans are throwing the book at them, cracking down on illegal immigration, and prosecuting scammers to the fullest extent of the law.

When government works well, we all thrive. But there's too much money in politics and so politicians are only delivering for the rich. That's why big developers are able to keep affordable housing out of reach, and why private prison companies pour millions into donations and lobbying, then collect billions in ICE detention contracts. This corruption makes all our lives harder and less safe.

Source: YouGov [August 2026 national survey](#) commissioned by Vera Action

Democrats have an opportunity to deliver powerful affirmative messages in November.

By running on a proactive vision for safety with polling-backed messages across today's top issues, candidates can inoculate against upcoming tough-on-crime attacks and win voters' confidence heading into 2028.