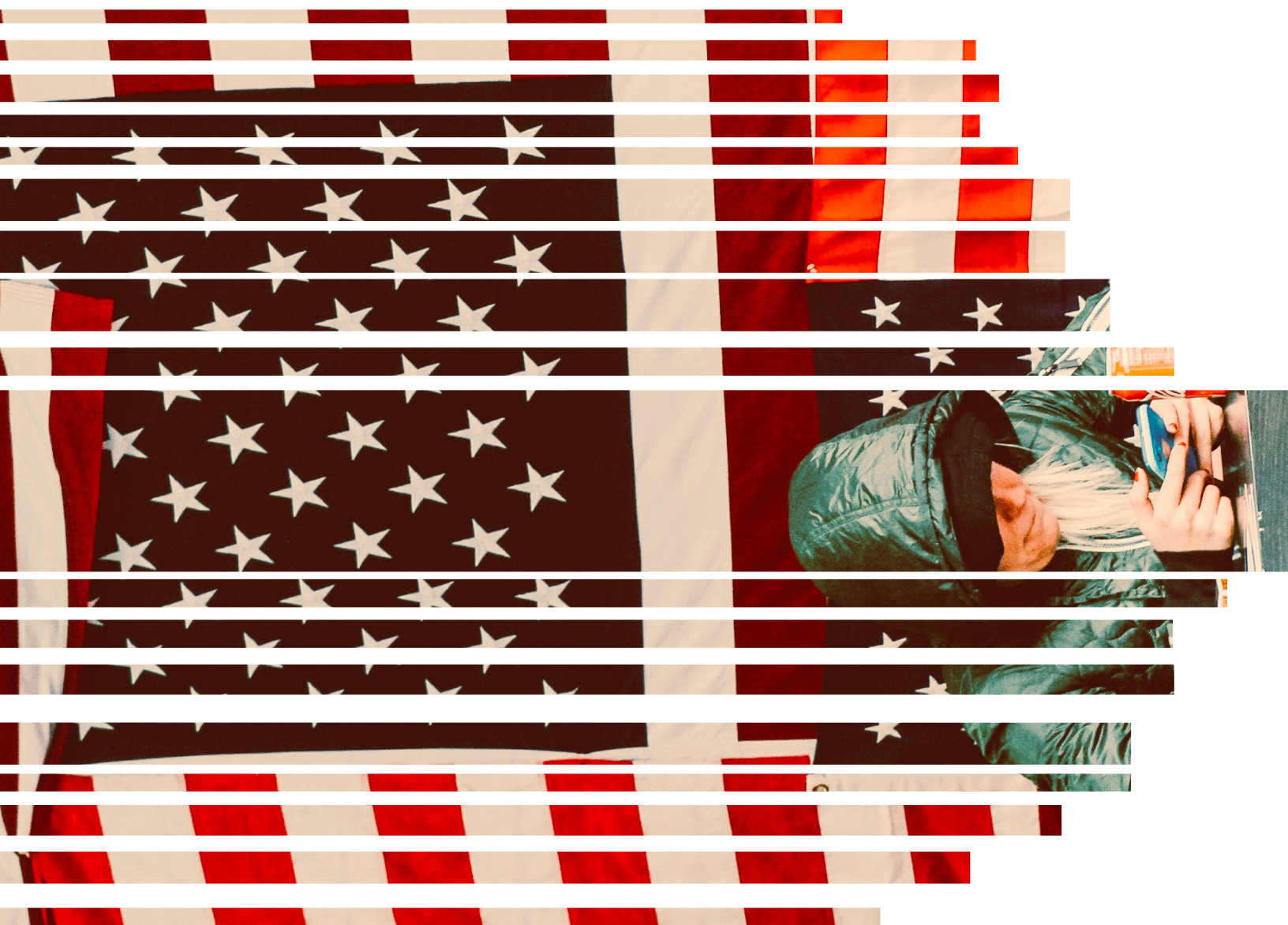


SEP 2021



TRACKING AND DEFEATING

RIGHT-WING ADS + MISINFORMATION ON IMMIGRATION

INTRODUCTION

While Donald Trump is no longer driving the daily news cycle in mainstream media, hostility to immigrants and immigration remains a Republican Party priority. Earlier this year, the GOP admitted that, once again, the “border” and “amnesty” will be deployed as a wedge issue against Democrats and President Biden. As the House breaks for August recess and the Senate continues to deliberate on the infrastructure package, voters across the country can expect further exposure to right-wing and nativist paid ad campaigns, online content and misinformation centered on immigration. **This report tracks the volume of such content and its impact and provides new data underscoring the critical need for Democrats to go on offense on immigration and the key messages to combat right-wing attacks on the issue in the lead up to 2022.**

PRIMARY FINDINGS

▶ **Top Immigration Messages Deployed Against Democrats.** Republicans and their political supporters, such as Fox News, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and the American Action Network, have leaned heavily into three key messages that aim to play at voters’ fears over safety, the economy and public health: (1) “Biden-Harris border crisis”, (2) mass amnesty and (3) COVID-infected migrants and drugs crossing the border.

▶ **Right-wing Paid Ad Campaigns Primarily Center on Immigration.** While paid advertising is predictably down in an off-year for federal elections, according to tracking by America’s Voice, Republicans and their allies have deployed over 700 unique paid ads, displayed 52.6 million times on voters’ social media feeds across different platforms – including 623 unique anti-immigrant Facebook ads pushing the “border crisis” narrative since March, spending upwards of \$592,000. The majority of these messages center on the top three messages targeted at President Biden and Democratic members of Congress in battleground states.

▶ **Misinformation on Immigration Increases Volume and Reach of Attacks.** From Fox News and fringe news outlets to Trump loyalists and online influencers, these mediums and voices have generated over 3 million anti-immigrant mentions and thousands of online articles to misinform the public and amplify themes of attacks led by the Republican Party. Between June 29 and July 27, over 136,000² articles were published on immigration, generating 25.7 million Facebook and Twitter interactions.

▶ **GOP Border Attacks Fail to Dampen Support for Citizenship. Democrats Still Hold Advantage and Can Move Voters Favorably By Going on Offense.** According to the Immigration Hub’s new survey testing political ads with Florida, North Carolina and Pennsylvania voters, conducted by BlueLabs Analytics, a Republican ad that accuses President Biden of creating a border and drug crisis was effective in negatively impacting Biden’s job approval numbers on immigration. However, the ad failed to dampen support for a pathway to citizenship. When voters saw the Immigration Hub’s ad calling out Republicans for politicizing the border and blocking a path to citizenship, voters were moved in favor of Democrats and increased pro-immigrant sentiment. The survey ultimately found that Democrats hold the advantage in fixing America’s immigration system but must also go on offense to move and maintain critical sets of swing voters.

¹ Due to restrictive access policies at Facebook, we supplemented data provided by the Facebook Ad Library with manual research to identify the number of ads and dollars spent.

² Data comes from social listening tool NewsWhip.

TRACKING: TOP MESSAGES

In February 2021, Stephen Miller told *The Washington Post* that Republicans should make the 2022 midterms all about immigration. He said, "From a purely political standpoint, this is a recipe for Democrats to have a historic drubbing in the midterms if we can make it [immigration] even as big an issue or bigger than Obamacare." Republicans were listening. Based on America's Voice and the Immigration Hub's tracking of Republican and right-wing rhetoric, paid ad campaigns and social media content, no other issue has been used more than immigration to attack President Biden, Vice President Harris and federal and state Democratic leaders.

The themes against Democrats have been centered on the following messages:

- **Biden-Harris "border crisis".** Despite major progress at the border following four years of chaotic mismanagement, the "border crisis" message against President Biden and Vice President Harris has been used extensively by Republicans at the federal and state levels (such as Governors Greg Abbott of Texas and Ron De Santis of Florida), Republican PACs and party committees, ultra-conservative news outlets, hate groups, right-wing online influencers and nativists. According to America's Voice tracker, this year, over 646 paid ads employ the "border crisis" narrative, echoing online fodder and the talking points of GOP elected leaders that depicts President Biden as soft on the issue, calls VP Harris the "border czar," and connects the message to exacerbate voter fears over jobs, gas prices, healthcare, crime and other kitchen-table issues. By far, the "border crisis" framing has been the most successful in penetrating the online landscape of misinformation and mainstream news outlets, which have sometimes adopted and advanced the right-wing's "border crisis" narrative.
- **Mass amnesty.** As the Biden administration and Democrats in Congress move legislation forward to create a new path to citizenship for Dreamers, farm workers, TPS-holders and essential workers, Republicans and hate groups such as the FAIR have painted the push for citizenship as "mass amnesty" – an old trope intended to reiterate the rhetoric of "invasion" and lawlessness while misinforming and undermining Democratic efforts to pass citizenship. Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) falsely warned that "amnesty in the Democrat infrastructure bill will lead to an invasion." FAIR has been targeting 22 battleground House members, spending about \$2,000 on Facebook ads on each member, around \$50,000 total, over the last two months. While the expense is minimal at this point, FAIR's message is echoed and duplicated by Republican party committees and right-wing PACs with larger reach.
- **COVID-infected migrants and drugs crossing the border.** Despite COVID infections rising, due to the Delta Variant, especially in red states where GOP leaders have resisted vaccinations and other public health precautions to mitigate the virus, Republicans have begun to accuse migrants of being the cause of the uptick in COVID infections. In July, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) claimed falsely that increases in COVID infections were because Biden and Harris are releasing "illegal immigrants" who are COVID positive into communities. Republicans have also maliciously pointed to the "border crisis" as the cause of drugs coming through the border and of overdose deaths.

TRACKING: RIGHT-WING AD CAMPAIGNS

Since 2017, America's Voice has tracked anti-immigrant ads produced by GOP candidates, committees, and superPACs. The launch of the new ad tracker provides insights into ads and online rhetoric targeted to voters nationally and locally on immigration and race. In the lead up to 2022, **America's Voice has already found over 700 unique paid ads across different platforms that employ anti-immigrant, divisive and xenophobic rhetoric.** In fact, many of the right-wing ads are centered on immigration, with attacks on "critical race theory" a close second. The ad campaigns preview messages that will dominate August recess and the next few months leading up to the midterm cycle in battleground states and congressional districts. The overall numbers may appear small, however, there is currently no way of measuring the full impact and reach of these messages across the social media landscape.

The "Border Crisis" for Republicans is Political Gamesmanship

The image displays two Facebook advertisements side-by-side. The top ad is from the GOP, sponsored by the Republican National Committee. It features a man in a suit and tie, likely a GOP candidate, standing in front of a border wall. The text on the ad reads: "THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S BORDER CRISIS IS NOT JUST A CRISIS CREATED BY TERRIBLE POLICY, IT IS ALSO A CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP." and "HOLD THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION ACCOUNTABLE". The bottom ad is from the American Action Network (AAN), sponsored by the American Action Network. It features a man in a suit and tie, likely a GOP candidate, standing in front of a border wall. The text on the ad reads: "STOP THE BIDEN BORDER CRISIS" and "TELL REP. CARTWRIGHT WE NEED BORDER SECURITY NOW!".


On March 16, 2021, the American Action Network kicked off the first of many Facebook ad campaigns targeting multiple Democratic members of Congress, such as Representative Matt Cartwright (PA-08), on the issue of the southern border. In fact, **over 646 paid ads** from the GOP and other groups employed the misleading "border crisis" narrative, spending upwards of \$592,000 on Facebook ads. Some **70 Facebook ads** use this anti-immigrant rhetoric to redirect the voter to a donation page, many with a pre-checked recurring donation.

While Republicans from coast to coast have used this message frame to target President Biden, members of Congress and governors (such as North Carolina's Roy Cooper), Governor Greg Abbott of Texas has taken the attack from online ads and TV appearances to signing an executive order that would permit law enforcement to racially profile people of color and endanger residents in Texas. The sequence of actions by Abbott embodies the GOP tactics that begin with ad campaigns: test messages with residents, deploy them online and on the air to distract voters from their mismanagement of the pandemic, and move forward controversial policies with little to no legal standing.

Increasingly, these "border crisis" attacks are also using Vice President Kamala Harris as their main foil: the border czar. 37 paid ads invoke the Vice President with xenophobic dog-whistles, echoed by members of Congress, such as Senator Ted Cruz of Texas and Congressman Mike Johnson (LA-04). The gender and racial connotations are also quite evident.

Ashley Hinson
Sponsored • Paid for by Ashley Hinson For Congress

Before VP Harris goes jet-setting across the world, she needs to visit the crisis at our border first. Add your name today if you think her international travel ought to be DEFUNDED and GROUNDED.




GROUND VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS
ADD YOUR NAME

(PAID FOR BY ASHLEY HINSON FOR CONGRESS)

Greg Abbott
Sponsored • Paid for by Texans for Greg Abbott

The Biden Administration's open-border policies have allowed DRUG DEALERS, HUMAN TRAFFICKERS, AND VIOLENT CRIMINALS to pour into this country in record numbers, threatening the SAFETY of the American people. How would YOU grade President Biden's response to the CRISIS at our border? Make your voice heard and FILL OUT the OFFICIAL BIDEN BORDER REPORT CARD>>>



OFFICIAL BIDEN BORDER REPORT CARD

GRADE: A
GRADE: B
GRADE: C
GRADE: D
GRADE: F

GRADE HIS RESPONSE TO THE BORDER CRISIS


(PAID FOR BY TEXANS FOR GREG ABBOTT)

Undermining Citizenship Legislation, Offering No Solutions

Despite “sympathetic” overtures for Dreamers and overwhelming bipartisan support for a new path to citizenship for Dreamers, TPS-holders, farm workers and other immigrant workers, Republicans and their right-wing supporters have been deploying ads attacking Democrats for supporting citizenship legislation under the guise of “mass amnesty.” Key among them is the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an SPLC designated hate group that was founded by a eugenicist and white nationalist John Tanton. FAIR has been targeting 22 battleground House members, spending about \$2,000 on Facebook ads on each member, around \$50,000 total, over the last two months. Overall 23 ads on “mass amnesty” have been deployed so far.

FAIR
Sponsored • Paid for by FEDERATION FOR AMERICAN IMMIGRATION REFORM

President Biden's reckless immigration policies have fueled a crisis at our southern border. Then Rep. Ron Kind responded by voting for two immigration amnesty bills that will make it worse. Congress needs to stop rewarding illegal immigration.



THEY KEEP COMING

Republican Party of Pennsylvania
Sponsored • Paid for by Republican Party of Pennsylvania

BREAKING: Radical liberal John Fetterman has become the Democrat frontrunner for Pennsylvania's open Senate seat.

He's running on a platform that includes granting amnesty to illegal immigrants, releasing criminals from prison, and defunding our police.

Please make a contribution to help us stop a far-Left candidate like Fetterman from winning our open Senate seat and releasing criminals into our communities.



FETTERMAN WANTS TO RELEASE DANGEROUS CRIMINALS IN PENNSYLVANIA

On Monday, July 19, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) invoked the violence-inspiring rhetoric of "invasion" when he falsely warned that "amnesty in the Democrat infrastructure bill will lead to an invasion." The Washington Post and the Boston Globe have made the connection between "invasion" rhetoric from the white nationalist murders from El Paso and Pittsburgh and that of the Republicans. In spite of this deadly recent history, some Republicans have returned to this dehumanizing and incendiary rhetoric. Some have begun to invoke fear of an "invasion" to justify their opposition to popular citizenship proposals, or as they put it "amnesty."

At a press conference on June 26, Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick said "we are being invaded." Rep. Jodey Arrington (TX-19) was on FOX on June 4 claiming, "the federal government has failed to protect against this invasion." And Rep. Bob Good (VA-05) falsely claimed in a press release on July 21, that there is a "raging border invasion." Other Republicans like Rep. Tom Tiffany (WI-07), Rep. Madison Cawthorn (NC-11), and Texas gubernatorial Republican party candidate Don Huffines have been running Facebook ads using "invasion" to build their campaign coffers.

Blame-game: Migrants Scapegoated for Republican Failures

As red states experience an uptick in COVID infections due to the Delta Variant with resistance or indifference to incentivizing constituents to vaccinate (i.e. Florida, Texas, South Dakota) and governors and state officials offer no policy solutions to jobs, housing, and other kitchen-table issues, look to Republicans continue pushing old racist tropes of immigrants bringing in disease and drugs to the neighborhoods of America. This message frame is quickly picking up steam as a way of blunting Democratic congressional efforts to move forward an infrastructure deal that would offer families and communities further investment.

The National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) has been leading the way with Facebook ads trying to create the conspiratorial thinking that non-white undocumented immigrants are a threat to their safety and public health in their communities. Republican leaders like Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) use fear-monger lies about stopping "Joe Biden and Kamala Harris who are releasing illegal immigrants into our community who are COVID positive." And Rep. Mike Johnson (LA-04) absurdly warns about "future bus loads," of migrants he predicts will be "coming to your city and they are coming to cities near all of us."

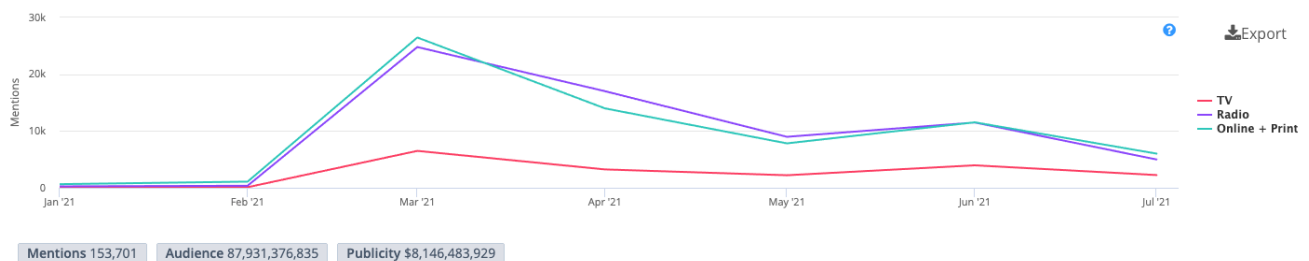
Politicizing America's opioid addiction, Republicans have also falsely pointed to the "border crisis" as the cause for overdose deaths, hoping voters will affix blame to immigrants, not politicians or pharmaceutical corporations for the opioid scourge.



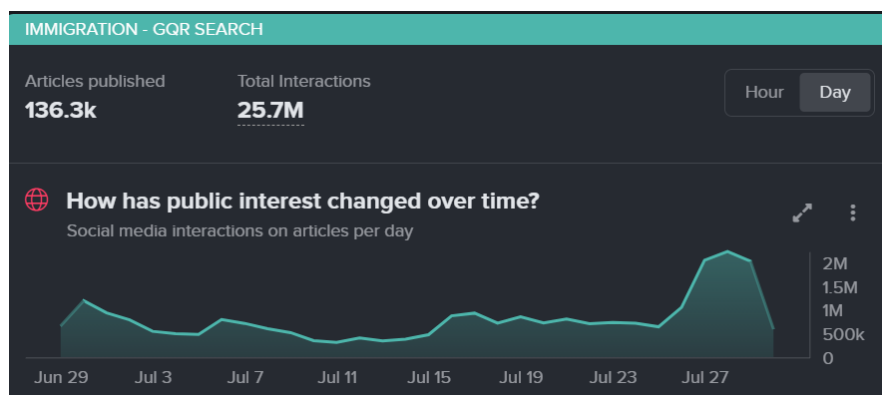
TRACKING: MISINFORMATION ON IMMIGRATION

The rampant spread of misinformation on immigration began in 2016 when Donald Trump ran for presidency. His campaign was amplified and supplemented by white supremacists, hate groups, and other loyalists who found a calling through QAnon and other conspiracy theories. In 2021, the immigration-related misinformation continues to amplify and hyperbolize Republican rhetoric. In partnership with GQR, the Immigration Hub is tracking misinformation and right-wing messages on immigration nationally, and in the key states of Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Florida, and Arizona.³

News media agencies, such as Fox News, and other faux media platforms have led the anti-immigrant attacks that often turn into memes, unsubstantiated fodder in Facebook groups and other false content. Between January and July of this year, the Immigration Hub found, through the Critical Mentions database, that “border crisis” was mentioned over 153,000 times on TV, radio, online and print, not including online engagement and commentary from the public.



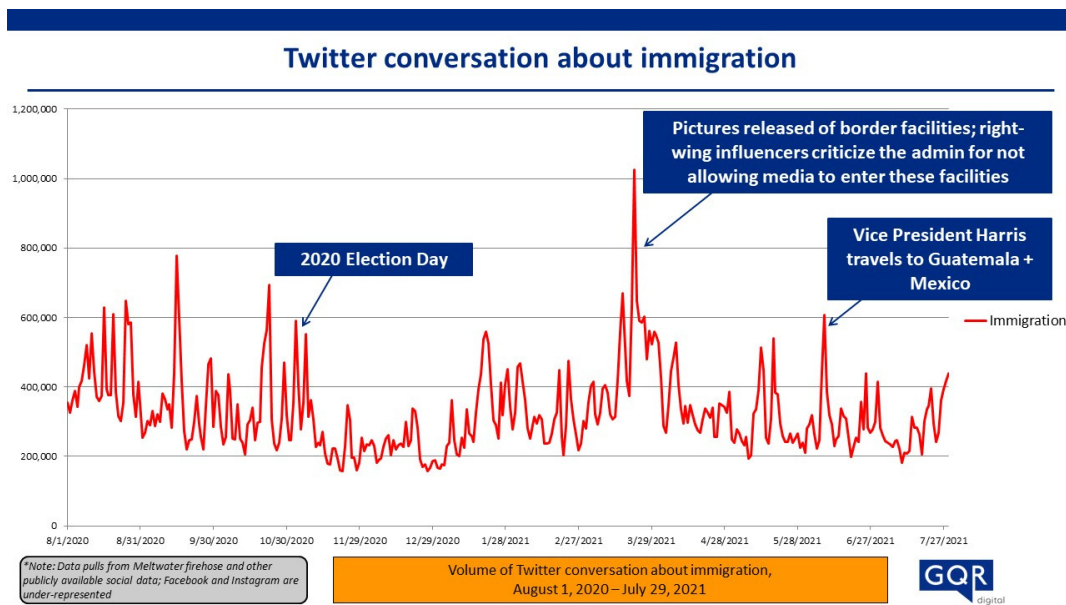
Within the month of June, news agencies have generated over 136,000 articles on immigration, generating over 25.7 million social media interactions. The highest-engagement of these articles come from ultra-conservative outlets. In fact, during the period between July 9 and July 22 of this year, right-wing outlets were responsible for 7 out of the 10 highest-engagement news stories about immigration, such as a The Daily Wire story that accused President Biden (falsely) of allowing “illegal immigration” to reach a “near-historic high”. The highest-engagement article in this period was another The Daily Wire article promoting Greg Abbott’s order to arrest immigrants caught crossing the border. The article also falsely claims that “as Abbott seeks to crack down on illegal immigration into the U.S., President Joe Biden is struggling to contain a flood of illegal immigrants crossing into the country from Mexico.”



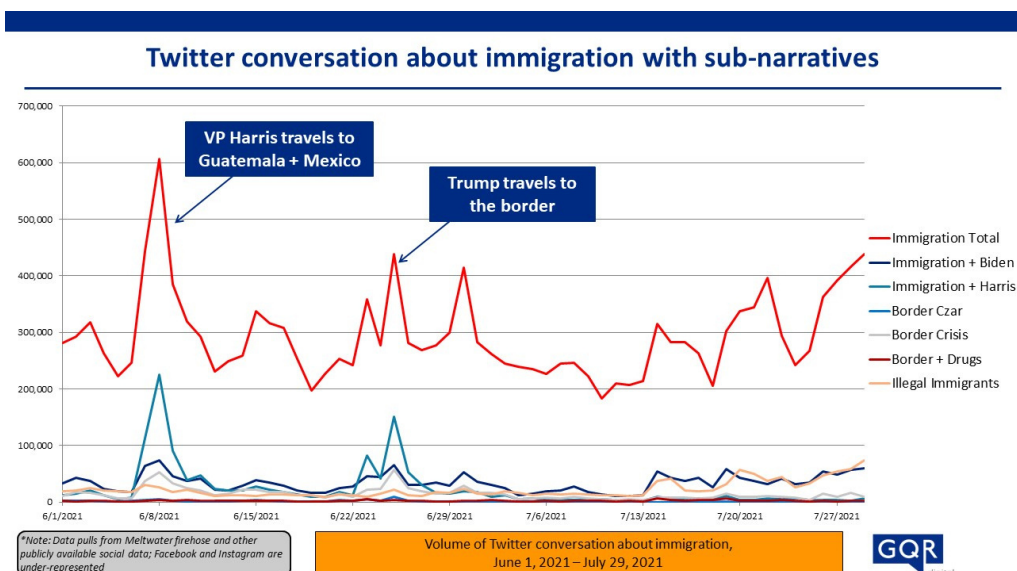
³ GQR's social listening covers both English- and Spanish-language posts, and is based on manual research and data pulled from the social listening tools Meltwater, BuzzSumo, and NewsWhip, which aggregate data from social media platforms and news outlets. Due to restrictive access policies, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube are under-represented in Meltwater data and therefore supplemented with manual research and other tools in our analysis. Unless otherwise noted, quantitative references to “social media mentions” refer to data from Meltwater.

There were over 3 million mentions of immigration on Twitter alone in the past month, with right-wing accounts driving the conversation. According to the Immigration Hub and GQR, between July 9 and July 22, there were more than 1.2 million Twitter mentions related to immigration in the country - a slight uptick from the previous two weeks (953,000 mentions). Conversation spiked in reaction to a Texas Federal court ruling DACA is unlawful, and several top tweets during this period accused immigrants coming in from the southern border as responsible for an increase in COVID-19 cases.

Several top performing tweets include #BidenBorderCrisis, as GOP members including Governor Ron DeSantis and other influencers on the Right continue to perpetuate a narrative that the Biden administration is allowing in an abundance of unauthorized immigrants.



Additionally, as seen on ad campaigns, right-wing outlets and influencers have also amplified and attacked VP Harris's role as the "border czar".



Impact of Immigration Misinformation on Facebook and Other Platforms

Due to the platform's restrictions, it is difficult to track the full scale and reach of social media content on Facebook, Instagram and Youtube. However, engagement through commentary, shares and other interactions to public and private posts can still be measured through manual research and other tools in this analysis. The Immigration Hub and GQR found that the top three anti-immigrant messages are readily promulgated in short (i.e. memes) and long form creatives (i.e. videos).

For instance, ultra-conservative influencers criticized the Biden administration over its Cuba policy during the protests on the island, claiming they are prejudiced against Cuban immigrants attempting to enter through the southern border because they are more likely to vote for Republicans. Dan Bongino was among those sharing this narrative – one of his Facebook videos generated more than 17,000 shares. Important to note that while the engagement numbers may appear lower in scale, their reach and impact can be critical in moving voters against Democrats.

A brief dive into four battleground states – Arizona, Florida, North Carolina and Pennsylvania – provides a portrait of the rightwing's penetration:

- **Arizona:** Political candidates, ultra-conservative political commentators (i.e. Sean Hannity) and Facebook groups primarily focus on Biden's border management and attack Harris's trip to the border. Most recently, Representative Andy Biggs and media outlets have been giving attention to the fentanyl seized at the border. However, there is new data disproving the connection between fentanyl and migration.
- **Florida:** Governor Ron DeSantis visited the border in July with Texas Governor Greg Abbott in response to the "border crisis" and posted multiple high engagement posts on Facebook and Instagram about the "crisis" and fentanyl being seized. Between June 25 and July 8, right-wing influencers and media amplified DeSantis's June 26 announcement that Florida would send 50 law enforcement officers to the border to "help with the crisis," following Gov. Noem's announcement to deploy National Guard members. Florida private and public Facebook groups amplify national narratives about immigration.
- **North Carolina:** The rightwing site 100PercentFedUp published an article on July 23rd, claiming 72 child sexual assault charges have been filed against "illegal aliens" in North Carolina. The article has been shared over 45,000 times and into 11 right-leaning Facebook groups. Users in North Carolina Facebook groups are also praising the protests in Cuba, amplifying the narrative they are protests for freedom, while attacking the administration for not doing enough.
- **Pennsylvania:** Users in private and public right-leaning Pennsylvania Facebook groups criticized Harris for announcing her trip to the border after Trump. These groups have made claims that the Biden administration is "secretly" using the US military to transport "illegal aliens" around the country. PA's Representative Dan Meuser has also been claiming on Facebook that the Biden administration is not accepting refugees from Cuba because they would be more likely to vote Republican.

MEASURING IMPACT & DEFEATING GOP ATTACKS

Between July 19 - July 28, 2021, BlueLabs Analytics – on behalf of the Immigration Hub – surveyed 1,101 registered voters across Florida, North Carolina and Pennsylvania.⁴ The survey tested a Republican ad (*Biden's Border Crisis is Fueling Opioid Crisis*) and two Immigration Hub ads (*GOP Obstruction* – calls out Republicans for politicizing the border and blocking a path to citizenship – and *Immigration Solutions* – amplifies Democratic border solutions and urges passing a path to citizenship). The results found that the GOP's "open borders" is effective in driving down Biden's approval numbers if left in a vacuum, but **going on offense against Republicans and their attempts to score political points by weaponizing immigration is effective in driving support for President Biden and Democrats. Importantly, the GOP attack ad fails to drive down support for a pathway to citizenship.**

Key Results

- **Hub's *GOP Obstruction* ad improves Biden's performance on the job.** Among voters who are persuadable on immigration or moderates, those who viewed the Immigration Hub's *GOP Obstruction* ad were more likely to approve of Biden's performance (58% vs 42%) compared to respondents who saw the GOP ad.
- **Voters can be moved in favor of Democrats in a senate race by going on offense.** 46% of voters (v. 42% in favor of a Republican) who viewed the *GOP Obstruction* ad were more likely to support the Democrat in a generic Senate race, compared to the other two test groups who were split on support. While these overall group differences were within the margin of error, we saw promising differences among white college-educated voters and white women, suggesting there could be an impact on vote choice among key groups.
- **Hub's *GOP Obstruction* ad moves critical voters in favor of President Biden.** Voters under 50, women, and college-educated voters were more likely to approve of Biden's job on immigration after viewing the Hub's *GOP Obstruction* ad.
- **GOP ad fails to dampen voter support for a pathway to citizenship.** Regardless of whether respondents saw an Immigration Hub ad or the GOP ad, about three in five agree that immigration is good for their community (63%), strengthens the U.S. economy (60%), and favor a pathway to citizenship for undocumented workers (61%).
- **Calling out Republicans and socializing immigration solutions moves voters in support of a pathway to citizenship and immigrants.** Both of the Hub's ads were effective at driving up positive sentiment toward immigration, however the GOP ad was effective in convincing voters (56% v. 44%) that immigration has fueled the drug epidemic in the U.S.
- **A plurality of voters trust President Biden and Democrats to fix the immigration system over Republicans.** Overall, more than 40% of voters, regardless of what ad they saw, trust that the president and Democrats can put in place the right solutions to fix the nation's broken immigration system. This was especially the case for those who saw the Hub's *GOP Obstruction* ad.

⁴ BlueLabs administered an online survey to 1,150 registered voters in FL, NC, and PA. The participants were randomly placed into one of three treatment groups. All three groups received the same questionnaire, differentiated only by the creative to which they were exposed. After screening to confirm participants were able to see and hear each video clearly, a final 1,101 respondents continued through the rest of the survey. A total of 366 voters only saw a GOP ad, 363 saw both the GOP ad and the Immigration Hub's *GOP obstruction* ad, and 372 saw the GOP ad and the Hub's *Immigration Solutions* ad.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the report make clear that the Republican Party and their allies will continue to use immigration as a wedge issue and a tool to misinform voters against Democrats and sensible and humane immigration solutions at large. The volume and messages of anti-immigrant ads and misinformation serves as a warning and preview to the 2022 midterm cycle. However, the essential lesson of this report is that Democrats have an opportunity to defeat these tactics and narratives. As evident in the BlueLabs survey – and consistent with previous [research](#) – **Democrats hold the trust-advantage with voters and by going on offense, rhetorically and legislatively, they can win the public debate, move voters in their favor and deliver on path to citizenship – a solution with overwhelming bipartisan support that stands the test of GOP attacks.**