G.O.P. AD WARS IN 2020

Divisive, Anti-immigrant, and Racist

AMERICA'S VOICE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Donald Trump launched his Presidential campaign in June of 2015 with attacks on immigrants whom he held up as the source of all that is not right with America. Trump's nativist, anti-immigrant agenda was the central organizing principle for a campaign built on division. Never letting up, xenophobia and racism were a beating heart of Donald Trump's presidency, political persona, and subsequent Republican electoral campaigns in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Trump's relentless strategy of cruelty and chaos toward immigrants the last four years turned historic numbers of voters away from him and contributed to his rejection from office by over 80 million voters who denied him a second term. However, it wasn't just Trump. As this report will show, the highest reaches of the GOP firmly and aggressively embraced Trump's racist tropes. We tracked over a thousand ads in this cycle alone that use this strategic racism to appeal to voters. While it is undeniable that it is a potent message with a chunk of the electorate, we have also repeatedly seen it backfire with a multiracial majority. This is new and important in understanding how to combat this formula.

GOP candidates and their superPAC allies – very often funded by America's biggest corporations and brands – continued down this destructive path, helping to fund racist, xenophobic and anti-immigrant ads designed to generate fear, fuel racism and stimulate violence all in their divide and distract strategy.

America's Voice has closely tracked the paid messaging over the last four years and this report examines the strategies and fallout of GOP ads in the 2020 cycle. Here is what you will find in this report: detailed analysis of the thousands of paid messages in the 2020 cycle across the primaries and general election in the Presidential, Senate, House, and key gubernatorial races; evidence indicating that immigration is losing its edge as a wedge issue and that Trump era anti-immigrant politics backfired, with more Americans than ever supporting a pro-immigrant agenda; Democrats were unified and confidently pro-immigrant in the 2020 elections from the top of the ticket on down; several prominent Senate and House Republican winners tried to distance their campaigns from Trump's xenophobia and anti-immigrant cruelty; and the GOP has fully embraced an electoral strategy of coded racial division, corporate America helped fund it, and Democrats must continue to develop counter strategies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Immigration is losing its edge as a wedge issue.

Coded xenophobic messages were still a central pillar of Donald Trump's and many Republicans' electoral appeal in 2020, but their efficacy appears to be continuing to decline. At the presidential level, we tracked 157 unique ads Trump ran that employed xenophobic messaging. Similarly, xenophobic appeals were a part of nearly every rally Trump held this cycle.

In Arizona, Sen. Martha McSally has the dubious title of losing both Republican-held Senate seats in back-to-back elections, a title she earned after voters rejected the anti-immigrant playbooks she employed in both campaigns. Running in 2018, McSally made xenophobic dog-whistling a major part of her paid messaging but after a decade-long organizing effort in response to persistent anti-Latino attacks, a majority of Arizona voters rejected these appeals. Nevertheless, McSally tried the exact same message in 2020 - and lost again. And the Democratic Senate wins in both of Georgia's runoff elections provide further evidence to the slipping efficacy of strategic racism. Sen. Kelly Loeffler and Sen. David Perdue doubled down on the divide and distract playbook in the runoff elections. The Republicans tried to paint popular ideas like, a pathway to citizenship for our undocumented nieghbors, policing reform, and expanding healthcare coverage as a dystopian reality where expanding benefits would only come at their voters' expense. A convincing argument to some, but it appears that work on the ground led the majority of voters to reject that tired old narrative.

In battleground House races, the immigration issue largely failed as a wedge issue for the GOP to win back the House. In June 2019, all 41 of the House Democrats who flipped congressional seats in 2018 voted in favor of the Dream and Promise Act (H.R.6) that extended permanent legal status to DACA and TPS recipients. Of these 41 frontline Democrats, 31 won reelection and of the 10 losses only two (IA-01 and NM-02) races saw anti-immigrant ads that were unrelated to any specific vote they took in Congress, and one (CA-21) where the Republican David Valadao won back his seat employing pro-immigrant ads. Only two Congressmen (PA-08 and P-17) saw attack ads hitting them for their H.R. 6 vote and both won reelection.

The GOP's leading practitioners of anti-immigrant politics also lost their GOP primaries in 2020. Kris Kobach, Steve King, Jeff Sessions, and Joe Arpaio all lost. National Republican leaders, like Mitch McConnell, abetted the effort to defeat these candidates, apparently believing their radical, far-right associations were an election liability. These losses suggest that those with xenophobia at the core of their campaigns are generally being rejected, a revelation that should not be ignored by those in politics.

2 Trump era anti-immigrant politics backfired, with more Americans than ever supporting a pro-immigrant agenda.

Despite the power of the Presidency and hundreds of millions of dollars spent on anti-immigrant advertising, Trump's xenophobia never got much traction outside the cul-de-sac of his base and it backfired with the majority of Americans.

- Recent Gallup research shows support for immigrants and immigration — questions they have been asking since 1965 — is at its highest level ever.

- Recent Pew research finds 60% believe newcomers strengthen American society while 37% say they threaten traditional customs and values. This is a shift in the pro-immigrant direction of 14 percentage points over the past four years.

- The American Election Eve Poll (AEEP), a massive poll of over 15,000 voters from all backgrounds, finds that Americans are strongly pro-immigrant and support fair and generous immigration policies, including a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. For example, when asked about establishing a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who come forward, are up to date on their taxes, and pass a background check, the breakdown of yes to no, was: Latinos: 90-9%; African Americans: 90-9%; Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: 81-14%; American Indians: 85-15%; and Whites: 81-19%

And the most important statistic: Donald Trump lost.

3 Democrats were unified and confidently pro-immigrant in the 2020 elections from the top of the ticket on down.

When Donald Trump attacked Joe Biden for supporting a pathway to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants, Biden did not dispute the claim. That type of response was consistent from Democrats in this cycle. Despite the continued, albeit decreased, attacks from the GOP, Democrats have been remarkably unified on the issue of immigration in strong contrast to past election cycles, when too many Democrats followed the advice of Rahm Emanuel and viewed immigration as a "third rail" issue. In line with voters' immediate concerns, immigration solutions did not take center stage in Democrats' paid messaging, but they did not run away from the issue either. Half of the frontline Democrats had affirmative immigration positions on their campaign websites. And every single frontline Democrat voted for the Dream and Promise Act (H.R. 6).

This year, as noted above, in the Arizona Senate race, Martha McSally ran another anti-immigrant campaign. Her opponent, Mark Kelly, took a different approach repeatedly taking pro-immigrant positions. He won. In North Carolina, Republicans tried to lay a trap for Governor Roy Cooper with "sanctuary city" legislation. Undaunted, he vetoed their bill and won reelection.

4 Several prominent Senate and House Republican winners tried to distance their campaigns from Trump's xenophobia and anti-immigrant cruelty.

Senators John Cornyn in Texas and Thom Tillis in North Carolina spent this cycle trying to walk the fine line of showing different faces to different voters. Both made xenophobic messaging a part of their early campaigns when threats of a primary challenge lingered, but once they headed to the general they dropped the xenophobic dog-whistles. In fact, both Senators announced support for the Dream Act during their general election campaigns. Cornyn even ran a general election ad (only in Spanish) proclaiming his alleged support for Dreamers. This reversal is telling for what it says about the potential drag anti-immigrant politics can have in a general election.

In California, Republicans in two battleground districts were able to flip back seats the GOP lost in 2018 by turning away from the anti-immigrant hard-line of their party. In the previous election, long-time anti-immigrant hardliner Dana Rohrabacher lost his CA-48 seat to Democrat Harley Rouda. Rohrabacher and allies hit Rouda hard with xenophobic dog-whistles but the voters in that Republican district clearly were looking for a new message. In 2020 Republicans put forward Michelle Steel, an immigrant from South Korea, who did not shy away from her immigrant background. And in CA-21, Republican David Valadao won a rematch and took back the district. In stark contrast to most of the rest of his party, Valadao made pro-immigrant policies central to his electoral pitch in 2020.

5 The GOP has fully embraced an electoral strategy of coded racial division, corporate America helped fund it, and Democrats must continue to develop counter strategies.

Dog-whistle politics is not a new phenomenon, but it appears to be the main, if not only, strategy the GOP at large is willing to employ. In 2018, anti-immigrant attacks dominated with the non-white foreign 'Other' the boogyman of the cycle. In 2020, while anti-immigrant attacks clearly still formed a strong undercurrent of the GOP strategy, dog-whistles on crime and police dominated. Fears of white victimhood, non-white criminality, and imagined dystopian landscapes were the clear closing message for the GOP up and down the ticket. Going forward Republicans will likely not deviate from the overall divide and distract strategy. The dog-whistles may become less audible or the racialized villain might change, but the core dividing message of 'real Americans' under siege from the 'Other' will likely remain. Democrats would do well to develop consistent counter strategies to undermine this strategy to make space for a different unifying narrative of their own.

Corporate America must be equally clear-eyed about its role in the dissemination of these ads. There is currently a reckoning underway by many corporate donors over the role of Republicans in the insurrection on Capitol Hill and their refusal to accept the election results. But their complicity in funding racist, xenophobic and anti-immigrant ads that were paid, in part, by donations to the candidates, political committees, and SuperPACS that ran these incendiary ads. That's a point Senator Brian Schatz made shortly after the 2018 election too.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, America's Voice has documented the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy from Donald Trump as a candidate and as president. Over that time period, many in the Republican party followed Trump's lead and made anti-immigrant rhetoric a central theme in their political campaigns.

During the 2018 and 2020 cycles, America's Voice compiled a comprehensive library of GOP's racist, anti-immigrant ads, while providing messages to counter that rhetoric. This report provides a comprehensive examination of the racist message in 2020 campaign ads from Republican candidates, political committees, and superPACS.

It's critically important for everyone who cares about racial justice and civil rights to have the full picture of the GOP's messaging as it has become their mainstay. This strategy is obviously not new. Republicans have long used dog-whistle messaging to further their political agenda. They have run these negative ads for decades, refining the 'Southern Strategy' in their messaging typified in the most infamous example of George H.W. Bush's grotesque "Willie Horton" ad.

During the Trump era, however, Republicans up-and-down the ballot have adopted this kind of racist messaging - sometimes blatant but often coded. It is not something that will go away after Donald Trump is no longer in office. Democrats and their progressive allies need to understand this and develop strategies to both call it out and counter this dangerous messaging because the use of dog-whistle political ads to fearmonger constituents is not going away on its own. The coded racism in their message is a strategic tool to divide and distract from an unpopular agenda that hurts most Americans. The game must be named and countered with honest solutions requiring unity across racial lines.

> It's critically important for everyone who cares about racial justice and civil rights issues to have the full picture of the GOP's messaging as it has become their mainstay.

To be clear, these messages explicitly avoid the direct mention of race. This intentional practice gives both the candidate and those sympathetic to the message plausible deniability that racial division is the active ingredient. This is crucial because the vast majority of voters today would not support an outright racist message. The code, therefore, acts as a strategic wedge to falsely pit Americans against one another along racial lines. Voters then respond to the message with, often unconscious, racial anxieties to protect themselves from the perceived threat. The candidate, in turn, benefits from the anxiety-driven votes, while sidestepping the difficult task of proposing plans that would raise the quality of life for all of their constituents.

Fortunately, we have seen these types of messages lose efficacy over the last four years. Nevertheless, we have tracked over a thousand messages in this cycle alone that use this strategic racism to appeal to voters. While it is undeniable that it is a potent message with a

chunk of the electorate, we have also repeatedly seen it backfire with a multiracial majority. This is new and important to understanding how to combat this formula.

At America's Voice, we began this work in earnest during the 2017 Gubernatorial race in Virginia. In the Republican primary, Corey Stewart, one of the leading xenophobes in the GOP, ran a very competitive race against establishment favorite Ed Gillespie.

Image from Corey Stewart's Virginia Gubernatorial primary election television ad in 2017.

Image from Corey Stewart's Virginia Gubernatorial primary election television ad in 2017.

During the general election, Gillespie made a deliberate decision to conduct his campaign using the racist rhetoric of Stewart and Donald Trump. On election day, the citizens of Virginia soundly rejected the Trump and Gillespie playbook of division and hate and instead elected the Democrat in the race.

Despite the massive loss in 2017 elections, Trump traveled the country throughout the fall of 2018, spewing anti-immigrant messages. Republicans at all levels followed suit. Their "divide and distract" strategy – polarizing the electorate on charged issues of race and

Image from Ed Gillespie's Virginia Gubernatorial general election television ad in 2017.

Image from Ed Gillespie's Virginia Gubernatorial general election television ad in 2017.

identity as a way of distracting voters from the fact that Republicans are more interested in lining the pockets of their donors than improving healthcare, education, wages, and retirement security – was picked up by superPACs closely aligned with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and then-Speaker Paul Ryan, as well as GOP candidates across the country.

1,092
TOTAL UNIQUE ADS TRACKED

216
TOTAL UNIQUE TRUMP CAMPAIGN ADS TRACKED

120
HOUSE RACES THAT SAW DOG-WHISTLE ADS

43
BATTLEGROUND DISTRICTS THAT SAW DOG-WHISTLE ADS

In 2018, to keep up with the barrage of GOP immigration-themed attack ads, America's Voice launched a website with a searchable database of the worst examples of Republican anti-immigrant ads. We featured spots aired by House, Senate, and gubernatorial candidates, as well as by allied PACs and outside groups, the database offered a window into this ugly and cynical strategy.

It was an onslaught of ugliness throughout the 2018 midterms, but their xenophobia backfired again.

To America's Voice and many in the field, it was crystal clear that racism and xenophobia would again be central, animating themes of Donald Trump's reelection campaign and of his party. Expecting more of the same in 2020, America's Voice launched another website to track xenophobic and racist ads that candidates, campaigns, and PACs ran during the election cycle.

Again in 2020, the ugly race-baiting and fear-mongering didn't just come from Trump and the White House. The entire GOP has adopted or enabled the cynical and ugly focus on immigration this cycle, with leadership-affiliated Super PACs being among the worst offenders, many funded by corporations and national brands.

Our purpose in compiling these ads was to document the attacks and how widespread they were. To be clear, not all Republicans used coded or blatant racist appeals. Some candidates in diverse districts avoided the attacks on immigrants. However, overall the GOP proved again that its primary message was to divide voters using coded racist and xenophobic appeals. This message is a lie that hurts all Americans but its use will likely remain pervasive - and marginally successful - until it is effectively undermined and rejected again.

IMMIGRATION IS LOSING ITS EDGE AS A WEDGE ISSUE

In June 2019, Donald Trump officially launched his reelection bid in Orlando, Florida with his familiar anti-immigrant tirades that had been a staple of his 2016 campaign and a hallmark of his presidency. This came shortly after his announcement that ICE would deport "millions" of undocumented immigrants as part of a harsh enforcement proposal, a plan that never materialized but was core to his effort in lending legitimacy to his pattern of using dog-whistle politics to influence his base. Despite the mounting evidence that aggressive, xenophobic dog-whistling was losing its efficacy as a general election strategy, this was the path Trump and the GOP looked to charge forward with into November 2020.

2020 GOP PRIMARIES

As GOP congressional primary campaigns kicked off in late 2019 and into 2020, it looked like a continuance of the previous three years. Competitive congressional Republican primaries began anti-immigrant ad wars, where candidates looked to prove they were the true nativist in the race. For new candidates in Republican strongholds, an aggressive coded anti-immigrant and racist messaging strategy appears to have worked, sending some new faces of modern xenophobia to Congress. Marjorie Taylor Greene (GA-14), Diana Harshbarger (TN-01), and Madison Cawthorn (NC-11) all benefited from this strategy. Although the loud and aggressive coded xenophobia and racism of these individuals may have helped propel them to seats in Congress in these particular districts, other battleground seats found this level of radicalism to be a drag on their campaigns.

Image from Marjorie Greene's ad in GA-14 GOP primary, aired 05/30/20

Image from Diana Harshbarger's ad in TN-01 GOP primary, aired 05/08/20

Image from Protect Freedom PAC ad in support of Madison Cawthorn in NC-11 GOP primary, aired 05/13/20
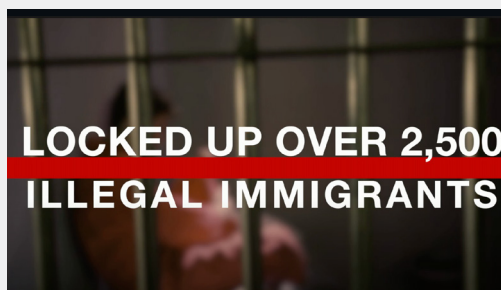

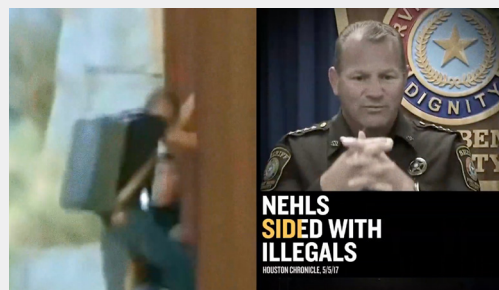Image from Troy Nehles' ad in TX-22 GOP primary, aired 02/05/20

Image from Kathallen Wall's ad in TX-22 GOP primary, aired 02/12/20

Image from Pierce Bush's ad in TX-22 GOP primary, aired 1/22/20

The Worst Offenders Lost Their Primaries

In 2020, some of the most infamous anti-immigrant Republican zealots were rejected by their party's primary voters. National Republican leaders, like Mitch McConnell, abetted the effort to defeat these candidates, apparently believing their radical, far-right associations were an election liability. In Kansas, Republicans rejected Kris Kobach in his bid for the open Senate seat. In Iowa's Fourth Congressional District primary, Republican voters defeated Steve King after nearly two decades in office. In Alabama, Jeff Sessions lost his bid to reclaim his Senate seat after his forced exit as Trump's Attorney General. Finally, in Maricopa County Republicans blocked Joe Arpaio's bid to reclaim his Sheriff's post in Arizona. The Republican candidates that beat Kobach, King, and Sessions are heading to Congress and will be immigration hardliners. However, these losses suggest that those with xenophobia at the core of their campaigns are generally seen as a liability to Republicans, a revelation that should not be ignored by those in politics. They were seen as a liability to their party in this election cycle, even with Trump at the top of the general ticket. Their losses might foreshadow that their anti-immigrant politics are too slowly headed to the dustbin of history.

Anti-immigrant Attacks Failed in the General Election

In congressional battleground races outside of the Republican strongholds, the anti-immigrant bluster of the GOP primaries, for the most part, did not appear to do candidates any favors in the general election. In NJ-03, PA-07, and TX-07, all districts Democrats flipped in 2018, GOP primary candidates included anti-immigrant messaging. Yet, once the respective Republican candidates headed to the general, they were largely silent on the issue in their paid messaging. The Democrats in all three of these races maintained their seats.

In Nevada's Third Congressional district, Republican Dan Rodimer continuously attacked his Republican primary opponent as "amnesty loving." The xenophobic dog-whistles might have helped Rodimer in the primary but he dropped the anti-immigrant attacks in the general and still lost his race to Rep. Suzie Lee. Similarly, after running a primary campaign driven by xenophobic dog-whistle strategy in Texas 23rd CD, Tony Gonzales dropped the anti-immigrant messaging in the general race. Gonzales won this tough battleground distinct, but dropping the xenophobic messaging in the general is notable.

Image from David Richter's attack ad against his GOP primary opponent in NJ-03 campaign, aired 06/11/20
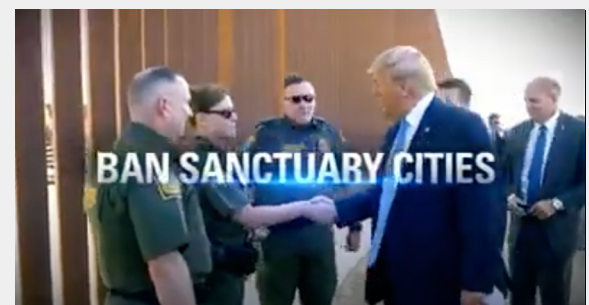

Image from Lisa Scheller's attack ad against his GOP primary opponent in VA-07 campaign, aired 02/27/20
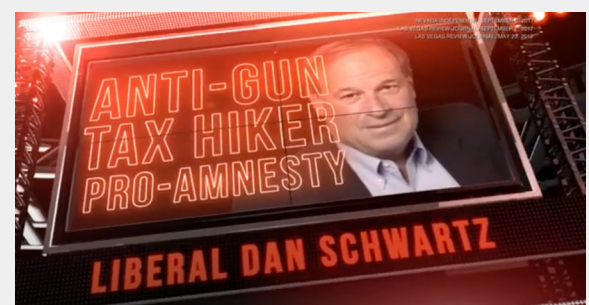

Image from Dan Rodimer's attack ad against his GOP primary opponent in NV-03 campaign, aired 04/25/20

This phenomenon also played out in key Senate races. Sen. John Cornyn in Texas and Sen. Thom Tillis in North Carolina both made xenophobic messaging a part of their early campaigns when threats of a primary challenge lingered, but once they headed to the general, they dropped the xenophobic dog-whistles. In fact, both Senators announced support for the Dream Act during their general election campaigns. Cornyn even ran a general election ad in Spanish proclaiming his alleged support for Dreamers. This reversal is telling insofar as these Senate campaigns in large, diversifying states are likely to see that anti-immigrant politics are more of a liability than an asset.

Image from John Cornyn early primary ad, aired in October 2019

Image from John Cornyn general election ad, aired in September 2020

2020 GENERAL ELECTION KEY RACES

PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Donald Trump spent five years scapegoating and fear-mongering immigrants making it the defining feature of his political brand. In 2020, that strategy was rejected by over 80 million voters. While Trump and his campaign toggled back-and-forth between dog-whistles, anti-immigrant messaging remained a core element throughout their reelection campaign.

America denied Trump a second term and moved towards supporting immigrants over the last four years.

Starting in summer 2019 through the end of the campaign, America's Voice tracked 157 unique ads they ran across their message mediums that employed xenophobic messaging. Besides touting his unnecessary border wall, Trump's ads did not champion the many changes his administration made to our immigration system. Instead, the ads promoted a false association between immigrants and crime or made a scarcity argument, attempting to pit the native-born against their immigrant neighbors.

The exact totals on anti-immigration ads are hard to pin down but in just four days in May, the Trump campaign ran over 6,000 Facebook ads, spending nearly $2 million dollars across their three main pages with the message "[Biden] wants to provide illegal immigrants with TAXPAYER funded health care." During the DNC convention, the Trump campaign spent $10 million-plus on a YouTube ad takeover that attacked Biden for his support for a pathway to citizenship. The campaign had also reserved more than $95 million in TV time in the fall, targeting battleground states with aggressive xenophobic ads attacking refugees and Biden's proposed restoration of admission levels. A *New York Times* report found that immigration was Trump's second-biggest TV ad buy from Sept. 1 to Oct. 15, only behind the topic of "China" - a different but nonetheless xenophobic stalking horse for the Trump campaign.

Image from Trump's attack ad against Biden over refugee admissions primary, aired 09/18/20

Image from Trump's attack ad against Biden over refugee admissions primary, aired 09/18/20

Started running on May 12, 2020
ID: 2832215440226008

About social issues, elections or politics

Donald J. Trump
Sponsored · Paid for by **DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC.**

Joe Biden's proven track record of FAILURE:

He has NEVER viewed China as a threat to American interests.

He wants to provide illegal immigrants with TAXPAYER funded health care.

He wants to cut Social Security and Medicare benefits.

TEXT **TRUMP** TO 88022

JOE BIDEN VOTED FOR GRANTING AMNESTY TO MILLIONS **OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS.**

HTTPS://WWW.DONALDJTRUMP.COM/
JOE BIDEN IS DANGEROUS FOR AMERICA
LEARN MORE>>>

Learn More

Started running on May 12, 2020
ID: 2926198597447268

About social issues, elections or politics

Donald J. Trump
Sponsored · Paid for by **DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC.**

Joe Biden's proven track record of FAILURE:

He has NEVER viewed China as a threat to American interests.

He wants to provide illegal immigrants with TAXPAYER funded health care.

He wants to cut Social Security and Medicare benefits.

JOE BIDEN SUPPORTS
GIVING TAXPAYER-FUNDED
HEALTH CARE TO ILLEGAL
IMMIGRANTS FOR FREE

Arguably more important as a messaging tool for his ground game, Trump featured his xenophobic dog-whistle message at all his rallies. Not one for specific message discipline, Trump's anti-immigrant rants would vary in length and content but they were a consistent part of the performance. In the closing months of the campaign, the messages focused on four themes. First, he touted his unnecessary wall and absurdly claimed Mexico was going to pay for it.[1] He also attacked refugee admissions with dog-whistles with Islamophobic undertones, claiming Biden wanted to turn Michigan into a "refugee camp."[2] Next, he often attempted to make Rep. Ilhan Omar the face of his dog-whistles on immigration, claiming she hated the country and that Biden would allow her to run national security.[3] Finally, his speech included other messages of scarcity in an attempt to pit native-born against foreign-born with essential benefits like healthcare and social security.[4]

Needless to say, the Trump campaign and Administration put their nativist politics front and center for voters. America denied Trump a second term and moved towards supporting immigrants over the last four years. A recent study by Pew research found:

> In 2016 voters were about evenly divided in the share saying that the growing number of newcomers strengthens American society (46%) and the share who said they threaten traditional American customs and values (50%). Today, six-in-ten American voters (60%) say that newcomers strengthen American society and 37% say they threaten traditional customs and values." Pew concludes, while "there continue to be stark differences" in how Americans view immigrants, "voters across the political spectrum have shifted in a more liberal direction.

46% newcomers strengthens American society

2016

50% newcomers threaten traditional American customs and values

60% newcomers strengthens American society

2020

37% newcomers threaten traditional American customs and values

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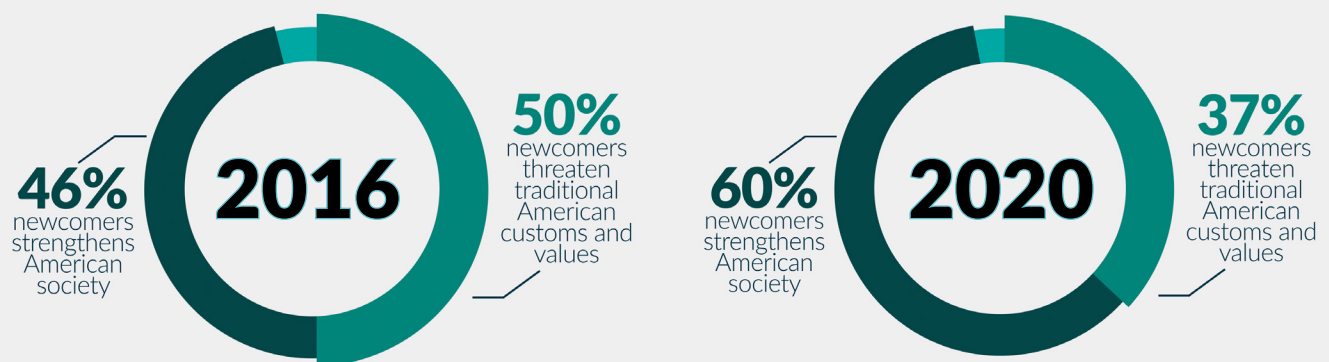
[1] "We're doing 10 miles a day. And by the way, Mexico is paying, they hate to say it. Mexico is paying for it," Donald Trump; Orlando, Florida on 10.12.2020

[2] "A 700% increase in refugees from the most dangerous terrorist spots anywhere in the world, including Syria, Somalia . . . . the Biden plan will turn Michigan into a refugee camp," Donald Trump, Michigan on 10.30.2020

[3] "She hates our country. I mean, you see the way she talks, she hates our country. No, please don't tell her to leave. That happened once before I got in a lot of trouble," Donald Trump, Georgia on 10.16.2020; "Omar is going to run national security. She's going to run. She's going to be guarding our border." Donald Trump, Pennsylvania on 10.31.2020

[4] "[Biden] wants to do, give free healthcare and mass amnesty for all illegal border crosses, bankrupting your Medicare and your social security systems," Donald Trump, Arizona on 10.28.2020

SENATE RACES

In Arizona, Sen. Martha McSally has the dubious title of losing both Republican-held Senate seats in back-to-back elections, a title she earned after voters rejected the anti-immigrant playbooks she employed in both campaigns. Running in 2018, McSally made xenophobic dog-whistling a major part of her paid messaging but after a decade-long organizing effort in response to persistent anti-Latino attacks, a majority of Arizona voters rejected these appeals.

Image from Martha McSally's ad in Arizona Senate campaign, aired 06/18/18

Image from Martha McSally's ad in Arizona Senate campaign, aired 02/18/20

Nevertheless, McSally tried the exact same message in 2020. During that summer, McSally began running Facebook ads with anti-immigrant messages that read "Democrats want to abolish ICE and open our borders to whoever wants to come." She also ran ads with messages like "Democrats want to decriminalize border crossings and give away FREE healthcare to illegal immigrants." In August she launched a TV ad set near the border with men in cowboy hats praising McSally, fear-mongering around crime, and calling for "sealing the border." At the beginning of the year, McSally also attacked Mark Kelly for allegedly supporting "taxpayer-funded healthcare for illegal immigrants." This message that was echoed by Trump at the Feb. 19, rally in Phoenix, where he also accused Kelly of wanting 'open borders.' She closed her campaign with immigration-themed ads: one ad featuring Art Del Cueto, the Vice President of the Border Patrol Union, and another ad, which claimed that Kelly was weak on immigration, claiming that "open borders bring more drugs and crime into our country."

At their only debate, McSally was evasive about whether she was proud of her support for President Trump, but was clear about supporting the President's border wall. In response to questions regarding the economic health of Arizona border communities – given restrictions due to COVID-19, immigration, and border

Image from Martha McSally's ad in Arizona Senate campaign, aired 10/15/20

security – McSally repeatedly praised the President's border wall. As for Dreamers, Sen. McSally again repeated the White House talking points that any such legislation must be paired with tradeoffs on border security.

Kelly was much more direct and clear in his policy proposals. When asked directly about the continuation of the DACA program and whether it must be contingent on additional border security or enforcement, he acknowledged the need for border security but said DACA should not be contingent on such measures, stating "We have 28,000 mostly young people in the state of Arizona who look as American as my two kids and I think they should have a pathway to citizenship right now." The contrast could not have been any clearer, which likely contributed to the voters flipping the second Arizona seat blue. This will be the first time the state has two Democratic senators since the 1950s.

Image from One Nation PAC's attack ad against Gary Peters in Michigan Senate campaign, aired 09/29/20

In Michigan, One Nation super PAC – run by Karl Rove – made xenophobic fear-mongering central to their attack against Democratic Senator Gary Peters. Their ads make a call to action for viewers to pressure Peters to support a bill that would cut off federal funding to local governments for allegedly being a "sanctuary city." This misleading attack features wild dramatizations of someone brandishing a knife and used a photo from 2013 of an MS-13 gang member in prison in El Salvador. Michigan voters received elaborate mailers amplifying the false and xenophobic equation between immigrants and crime, warning about sanctuary cities and and the dangers behind these policies. While Rove's efforts were meant to scare voters away from Peters, these coded racist messages were rejected by voters.
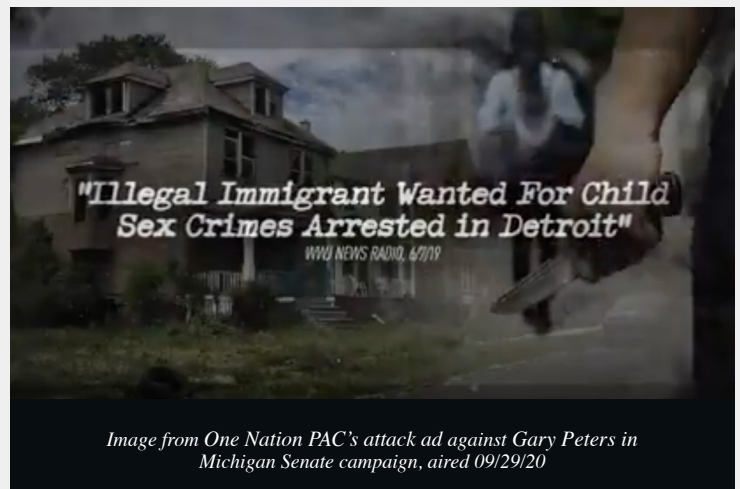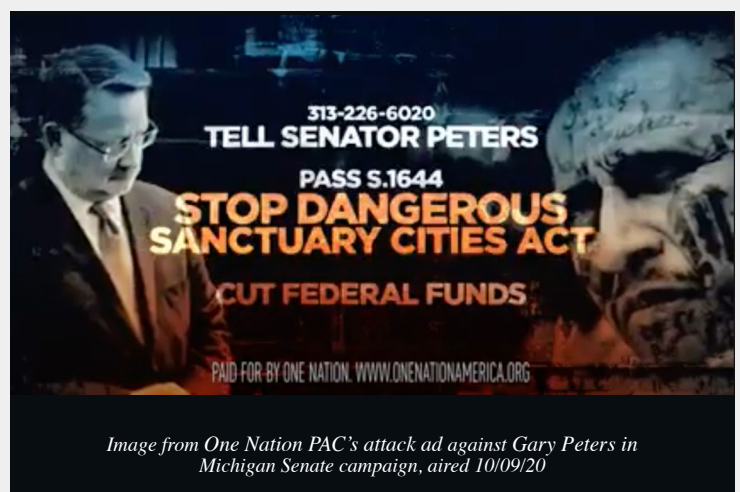
Image from One Nation PAC's attack ad against Gary Peters in Michigan Senate campaign, aired 10/09/20

HOUSE RACES

Looking at the 41 frontline House Democrats who flipped seats in 2018, anti-immigrant attacks were largely ineffective or completely absent in 2020. In June 2019, all 41 of these frontline House Democrats voted in favor of the Dream and Promise Act (H.R.6) that extended permanent legal status to DACA and TPS recipients. Some worried this vote would result in attack ads hitting members for their so-called "amnesty" vote. However, this attack largely did not manifest.

Republican Jim Bognet, an acolyte of anti-immigrant zealot Lou Barletta, who ran against Rep. Matt Cartwright (D) in PA-08 ran two separate TV attack ads on his H.R.6 vote. In both ads, Bognet hit Cartwright on supporting "amnesty for illegals," citing his H.R.6 vote. However, the majority of voters were not swayed by these attacks and voted for Cartwright to remain in Congress. The only other attack ad on H.R.6 came from the Congressional Leadership Fund (CLF), the super PAC tied to House leadership, targeting Rep. Conor Lamb (D) in PA-17. The CLF ad said "Lamb voted to protect illegal immigrant gang members,"

Image from CLF's attack ad against Conor Lamb in PA-17 campaign, aired 10/24//20

Image from Jim Bognet's attack ad against Matt Cartwright in PA-08 campaign, aired 10/27/20

citing Lamb's vote against the motion to recommit H.R.6. Arguably the hardest hit the GOP could make on this vote, but here too voters were insufficiently convinced by the coded xenophobic division and voted for Lamb to remain in Congress.

Democrats Ron Kind (WI-03), Colin Allred (TX-32), Elissa Slotkin (MI-08), and Anthony Brindisi (NY-22), were all hit with ads attacking them for voting to give "stimulus checks to illegal immigrants" under the HEROES Act. Kind, Allred, and Slotkin all went on to win their races with the xenophobic dog-whistling failing to move the needle enough for the

Image from Derrick Van Orden's attack ad against Ron Kind in WI-03campaign, aired 09/22/20

Image from Genevieve Collins' attack ad against Colin Allred s in TX-32 campaign, aired 06/22/20

Image from Paul Junge's attack ad against Elissa Slotkin in MI-08 campaign, aired 10/08/20
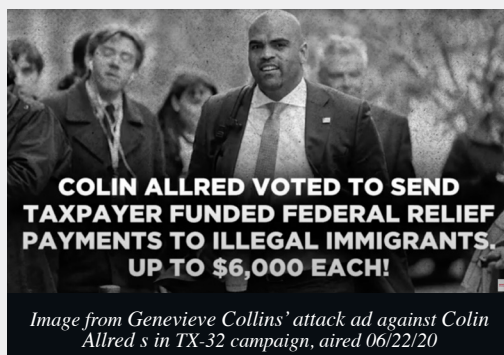
GOP to flip these seats. Slightly complicating the issue is Brindisi whose race came down to dozens of contested votes with Claudia Tenney who won the seat in this Republican-leaning district. In 2018, however, Brindisi was also hit with anti-immigrant messages but defeated Tenney in that wave election year. All to suggest that the xenophobic dog-whistling even in Republicanleaning battlegrounds is not something Democrats should fear when casting votes in Congress.

Lucy McBath (GA-06) was also hit on her HEROES Act vote, but the attacks centered around prisoner releases due to COVID. This strategy also proved ineffective as McBath handily won reelection.

Most battleground districts in this cycle did not see any anti-immigrant attacks on their congressional votes or otherwise. Democrats in eight battleground districts (AZ-01, AZ-02, KS-03, VA-10, MI-11, MN-02, NJ-07, and GA-06) that saw xenophobic attack ads in 2018, did not see similar attacks this cycle after the strategy failed in previous campaigns. Democrats also won in 15 battleground districts (GA-07, MI-08, NJ-03, NY-19, TX-07, TX-32, IL-14, NV-03, NY-18, PA-07, PA-08, PA-17, WI-03, CA-45, ME-02) despite anti-immigrant attack ads in this cycle.

> ## Most battleground districts in this cycle did not see any anti-immigrant attacks on their votes or otherwise.

In California, Republicans in two battleground districts were able to flip back seats the GOP lost in 2018 by turning away from the anti-immigrant hard-line of their party. In the previous election, long-time anti-immigrant hardliner Dana Rohrabacher lost his CA-48 seat to Democrat Harley Rouda. Rohrabacher and allies hit Rouda hard with xenophobic dog-whistles but the voters in that Republican district clearly were looking for a new message. In 2020, Republicans put forward Michelle Steel, an immigrant from South Korea, who did not shy away from her immigrant background. And in CA-21, after losing his seat to Democrat TJ Cox in 2018, Republican David Valadao won a rematch and took back the district. In stark contrast to most of the rest of his party, Valadao made pro-immigrant policies central to his electoral pitch in 2020. In August, Valadao ran an ad touting that he "stood up to his own party to reform immigration and protect Dreamers." Then in September, Valadao ran a TV ad with a testimonial from a DACA recipient, calling himself a "champion for Dreamers." These races further underscore that if Republicans are ever going to retake the House they will likely have to rethink their current immigration strategy.

Despite the continued, albeit decreased, attacks from the GOP, Democrats have been remarkably unified on the issue of immigration. In line with voters' immediate concerns immigration solutions did not take center stage in Democrats' paid messaging but they did not run away from the issue either.[5] Half of the frontline Democrats had affirmative immigration positions on their campaign websites. Naturally, their messages varied with each candidate, but they focused on the need for a pathway to citizenship, support for Dreamers, and a reversal of the intentional cruelty of the Trump Administration's policies. Notably, no Democratic congressional candidate to our knowledge ran the "Republican-lite" version of anti-immigrant politics in this cycle.

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[5] According to the American Election Eve Poll the top issue concerns for voters going into the election in 2020 were the pandemic, the economy, and healthcare costs, with racial justice being the second most important concern for Black voters.

ELECTION EVE POLLING

Donald Trump's aggressive anti-immigrant rhetoric became his signature policy issue throughout his administration and many credit his improbable 2016 victory to these radical stances. However, the aggressive xenophobia sent the American people in the opposite
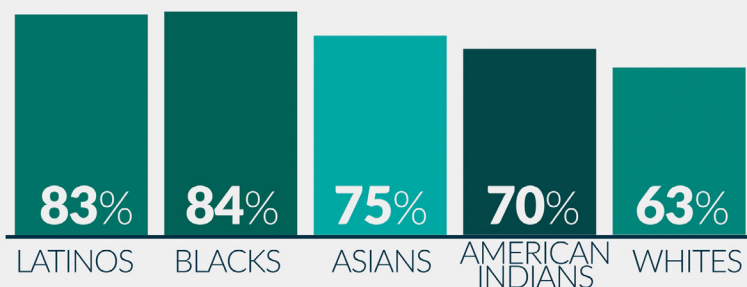
Support for ending the policy of separating immigrant children from their parents at the border.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
87%	90%	81%	79%	78%
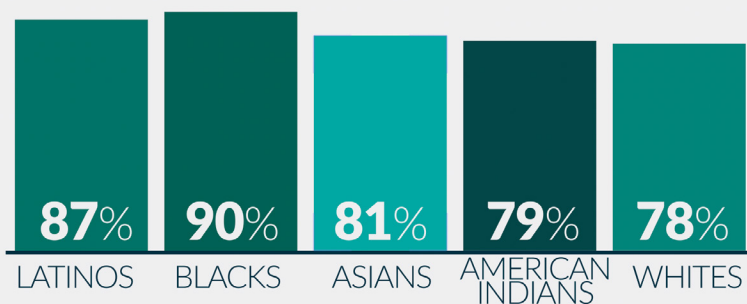
Support for establishing a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who come forward, are up to date on their taxes, and pass a background check.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
90%	90%	81%	85%	81%
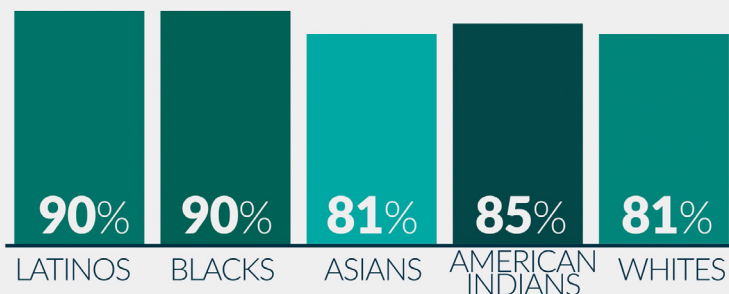
Support for rewarding undocumented immigrants who have risked their lives as essential workers during the pandemic with the opportunity to apply for citizenship in America.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
83%	84%	75%	70%	63%

Agree that the pandemic is affecting everyone and that a response should include everyone, citizens and non-citizens alike.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
95%	97%	92%	91%	89%
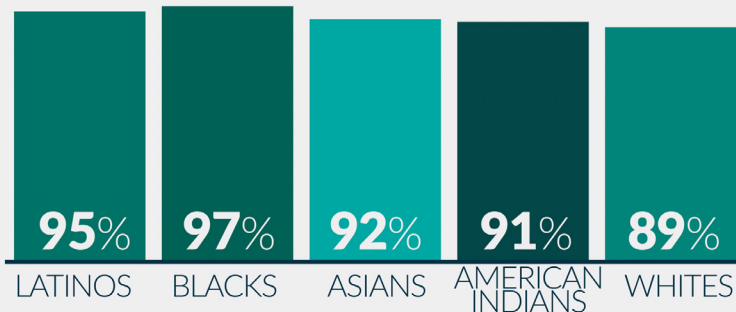
direction. As Trump leaves the White House, voters are more unified in their support for dramatic policy reversal of his signature issue and desire for solutions.

On the Trump Administration's policy of family separation, which became emblematic of their overall strategy on immigration where cruelty was the guiding point, the American people are united in opposition. The American Election Eve Poll found 87% of Latinos, 90% of Black voters, 81% of Asians, 79% of American Indians, and 78% of white voters want to end the policy of separating immigrant children from their parents at the border.

Despite the persistent efforts of Trump and the GOP to use xenophobic dog-whistles in an attempt to scare constituents for their own gain, voters want to create a pathway to citizenship for their neighbors. 90% of Latinos, 90% of Black voters, 81% of Asians, 85% of American Indians, and 81% of white voters support establishing a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who come forward, are up to date on their taxes, and pass a background check.
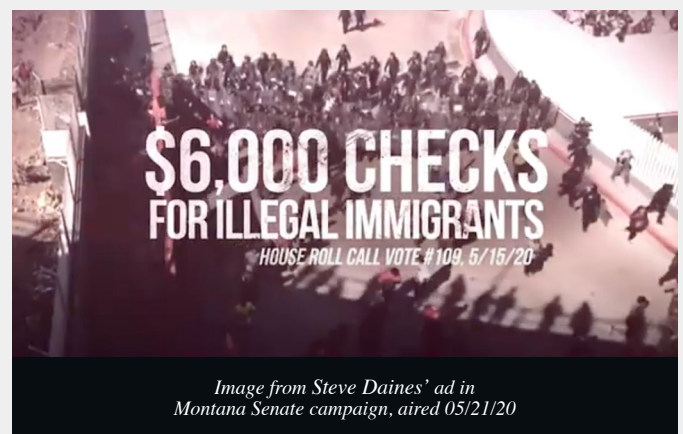
Voters also recognize the contributions of undocumented immigrants who served on the frontlines during the pandemic to help America stay safe, healthy, and fed. 83% of Latinos, 84% of Black voters, 75% of Asians, 70%

of American Indians, and 63% of white voters support rewarding undocumented immigrants who have risked their lives as essential workers during the pandemic with the opportunity to apply for citizenship in America. Furthermore, voters across racial lines overwhelmingly agreed that stoking racial divisions makes us weaker and that we need to unite across racial lines to address the pandemic. 95% of Latinos, 97% of Black voters, 92% of Asians, 91% of American Indians, and 89% of white voters agreed that the pandemic is affecting everyone and that a response should include everyone, citizens and non-citizens alike.

A LINGERING POTENCY

Now, did the xenophobic dog-whistle strategy backfire everywhere it was employed? No. However, the GOP's undeniable strategic racist message did not convince a majority of voters, and that fact remains significant in crafting a post-election understanding. However, anti-immigrant zealotry and coded xenophobic appeals may still be effective in particular races. Looking at the makeup of the pool of likely voters in a particular race may signal the potential success of the dog-whistle strategy, e.g. limited Republican votes as in a primary or where there is a higher percentage of whites and lower levels of post-secondary education as we outline below.

In contrast to the Senate races in Texas and North Carolina where the Republican candidates largely avoided xenophobic dog-whistles in the general election, the Republican Senate candidates in smaller and whiter states of Kansas, Iowa, and Montana leaned into xenophobic messages. In Kansas, voters rejected Kris Kobach, but all three of the top candidates waged an aggressive anti-immigrant ad war. Heading into the general, the GOP nominee Roger Marshall and One Nation – Karl Rove's superPAC – continued to use xenophobic dog-whistles in their ads. While these anti-immigrant appeals were not the only deciding factor in a race Marshall won by 12 points, they clearly have some importance to part of the Republican electorate and could be effective when not

Image from One Nation PAC's in support of Roger Marshall in Kansas Senate campaign, aired 08/07/20

Image from Steve Daines' ad in Montana Senate campaign, aired 05/21/20

Image from SLF's attack ad against Theresa Greenfield in Iowa Senate campaign, aired 09/29/20

exposed as pure xenophobia as they are when coming from a figure like Kobach. Similarly, Sen. Joni Ernst (IA) and Sen. Steve Daines (MT) were not popularly attached to radical xenophobic and racist elements like Kobach, so their coded xenophobia did not mobilize a majority against them.

Sen. Daines made xenophobic dog-whistles a key part of his campaign from the beginning, running hundreds of Facebook ads to build a list of supporters with messages promoting the citizenship question on the census and fear-mongering around sanctuary cities. He also ran a number of TV ads that called for banning immigration and warned of stimulus support for undocumented workers. Montana is a tough state to win statewide for Democrats but Daines' consistent xenophobic messaging did not decisively weigh him down.

Arguably the most concerning of these Senate races is that of Joni Ernst in Iowa. For a large part of the campaign, Ernst and her super PAC allies avoided the descent into xenophobic dog-whistling in their paid messaging. However, when polls suggested that Ernst was looking like her campaign was headed towards a more competitive race, they reached for familiar anti-immigrant fear-mongering. The Ernst campaign, the Senate Leadership Fund and the National Republican Senatorial Committee ran TV ads amplifying the false association between immigrants and crime.

Image from Ashley Hinson's attack ad against Abby Finkenauer in IA-01 campaign, aired 10/04/20

Image from CLF's attack ad against Diane Mitsch Bush in CO-03 campaign, aired 10/23/20

Image from NRCC's attack ad against Hillary Scholten in MI-03 campaign, aired 10/27/20

Image from CLF's attack ad against Candace Valenzuela in TX-24 campaign, aired 10/06/20
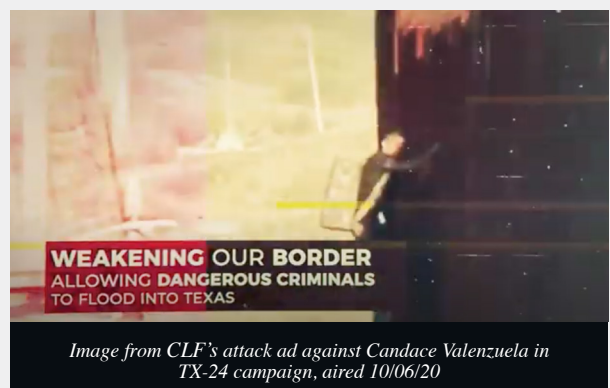
Xenophobic dog-whistles could be effective tools for mobilizing enough voters for the GOP in Republican-leaning districts that are still heavily white and have a lower percentage of those with a college education. IA-01 is roughly 92% white and below the average (33%) in post-secondary education at 27%. Republicans were able to flip this district back from Abby Finkenauer who won in 2018. Finkenauer faced xenophobic dog-whistle attacks in 2020 as well as 2018, but a top of the ticket drag in the form of a 9 point win from Trump

and a 6 point win from Ernst clearly cannot be ignored. Finkenauer only lost by 3 points and though it complicates our narrative this cycle, it is one to watch in 2022 to see if anti-immigrant attacks play out here for a third cycle in a row and what effect that might have on the district.

Races in CO-03 and MI-03 are also concerning counter-examples where xenophobic dog-whistling appears to have been effective. The races here saw some of the most aggressive and sustained anti-immigrant attacks in this general election cycle. However, these were always going to be difficult seats for Democrats to flip, both having an R +6 rating from 2018. Former-Republican Rep. Justin Amash left the MI-03 seat open and immigration attorney Hillary Scholten hoped to turn the district blue. The district includes part of Grand Rapids, but extends well beyond the city and is roughly 85% white and just below the national average in post-secondary education. Scholten wasn't able to overcome the xenophobic attacks and lost by 6 points, just at the partisan advantage in the district.

In CO-03, Democrat Diane Mitsch Bush ran unsuccessfully against QAnon supporter Lauren Boebert who had primaried Rep. Scott Tipton (R). This massive district covers most of the western half of Colorado and is 88% white and just below the national average in post-secondary education. Finding ways to undercut the effectiveness of xenophobic dog-whistles here could help flip these districts in 2022.

A more concerning race for the lingering potency of dog-whistle politics is TX-24. Republican Beth Van Duyne leaned into anti-immigrant messaging in the open seat GOP primary and she – along with the allied super PACs – hit Democrat Candace Valenzuela hard with racist and xenophobic dog-whistles in the general. However, this was also a tight race and the demographics are more common with the multiracial majority. The district is only roughly 69% white and has a higher than the national average in post-secondary education. Granted, like in IA-01, Valenzuela likely suffered from a Presidential win at +6 and a Senate win at +9. However, this race, in particular, should give us pause.

GEORGIA RUNOFFS

"This is the reversal of the old 'Southern Strategy' that sought to divide people," Sen.-elect Raphael Warnock told ABC.

The Democratic Senate wins in Georgia provides further evidence to the slipping efficacy of strategic racism. Both Republican Sen. Kelly Loeffler and Sen. David Perdue doubled down on the divide and distract playbook in the runoff elections. A messaging strategy that relied on convincing the majority of voters to cling to the lie of scarcity and racial anxieties. Failing to deliver much needed cash relief to their constituents during the devastating pandemic, the Republicans instead tried to paint popular ideas like, a pathway to citizenship for our undocumented neighbors, policing reform, and expanding healthcare coverage as a dystopian reality where expanding benefits would only come at their voters' expense. A convincing argument to some, but it appears that work on the ground led the majority of voters to reject that tired old narrative.

From the start, Warnock was clear-eyed about the GOP messaging strategy, dropping a clever inoculation ad warning voters against the incoming lies and division the Republicans were going to throw their way. Later in the runoff, Warnock released another ad calling out Loeffler's game saying, "Loeffler has spent tens of millions of dollars trying to scare you… she is trying to make you afraid of me because she is afraid of you." Importantly the ad continues to illustrate how Loeffler's division helps only herself whereas unity provides the means to improve the lives of all Georgians, "It's possible to work together to improve the lives of Georgians, all Georgians."

> The Democratic Senate wins in Georgia provides further evidence to the slipping efficacy of strategic racism.

Image from Kelly Loeffler's ad in Georgia Senate campaign, aired 09/28/20

Image from Kelly Loeffler's attack ad against Raphael Warnock in Georgia Senate campaign, aired 11/12/20
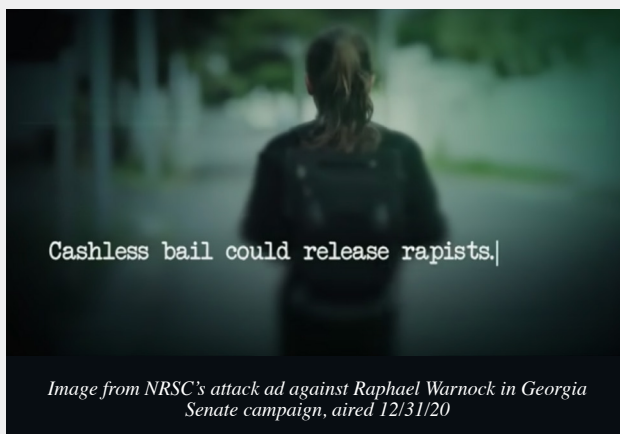

Image from NRSC's attack ad against Raphael Warnock in Georgia Senate campaign, aired 12/31/20

Moving far-right in the November election to avoid any room for Republican Doug Collins, Loeffler went so far as to compare herself to Attila the Hun in a series of ridiculous and xenopbhic ads. Her messaging stoked xenophobic responses to COIVD-19 and fear-mongered over immigrants and crime. In the runoff, Loeffler dredged up the 2008 attack on Barack Obama and Rev. Jeremiah Wright, attempting to stir the same racial anxieties by linking Warnock to Wright as well. Loeffler's allies also made coded racist attacks around crime and Warnock's criticism of aggressive policing tactics.

In addition to her messaging, Loeffler flirted with white nationalism by accepting support from known white supremacists. Just days before the November election, while early ballots were being cast, Loeffler cut an ad with Marjorie Taylor Greene (GA-14), who made national headlines for her racist, anti-Semtic, and QAnon beliefs. Also, as Christopher Mathias at Huffpost reported, Loeffler was repeatedly photographed with known white supremacists who turned out in support of her campaign. This included a photo with a former Ku Klux Klan leader and member of the neo-Nazi National Alliance. Loeffler's willingness to rub shoulders with white nationalists and radical right elements likely was a significant drag on her campaign. Similar to Kris Kobach and Steve King, the blatant white nationalist connections, despite their on the

ground support for certain Republicans, should be of a deep concern for the GOP if not for moral reasons, at least for their general electoral prospects.

For his part, Perdue and his allies attacked Sen.-elect Jon Ossoff with coded anti-semetic, xenophobic, and anti-Arab messsages. During the general election, Purdue launched a Facebook ad elongating Ossoff's nose - an anti-Semitic trope. The National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) ad ran an anti-Arab dog-whistle ad claiming that Ossoff is "terrorist" adjacent because his film company worked with Al-Jazeera. The Senate

Image from SLF's attack ad against Jon Ossoff in Georgia Senate campaign, aired 12/01/20

Image from David Perdue's attack ad against Jon Ossoff in Georgia Senate campaign, aired 11/13/20

Leadership Fund continued that theme with a similar attack in mailers that claimed "Ossoff's ties to terrorism are scary" and the GOP superPAC produced three TV ads with that message, which can be seen here, here, and here; a message that the Senate Leadership Fund (SLF) picked up in the runoff election. The message from these superPACs also included a similarly distorted attack about money from "communist China." Perdue and allies also ran misleading "defund the police" attacks - Ossoff was adamant that he does not support such a position.

During the runoff election, Perdue turned to familiar anti-immigrant attacks on Ossoff. Previously, Perdue had only run scant Facebook ads with such xenophobic attacks, but in the runoff he put attacks on "amensty" and "voting rights for illigal immigrants" at center stage. The NRSC and the SLF also ran ads attacking Ossoff for his support for a pathway to citizenship for our undocumeted neighbors. Ultimately, Perdue's divide and distract messaging did not carry enough weight with the majority of Georgia voters.

Despite yet another loss for dog-whistle messaging it is unlikely Republicans will switch course. This presents America with a choice that Warnock framed perfectly in his election night speech:

> Will we continue to divide, distract and dishonor one another or will we love our neighbors as we love ourselves? Will we play political games while real people suffer or will we win righteous fights together, standing shoulder to shoulder, for the good of Georgia, for the good of our country?

The runoff elections in Georgia provide evidence that a majority of voters want the latter but it will be up to the Democrats to continue to frame the political choice in these terms and deliver on these promises. Warnock's campaign is one to look to as we move toward the next election cycle for the ways that calling out the GOP game provides the space to put forward a Democratic vision.

Multiracial Anti-Racist Majority Emerges

The actions and campaigns of Donald Trump and the Republican Party placed racism and xenophobia on the ballot. It is without a doubt that strategic racism was foundational to their 2020 electoral message in this cycle. However, a multiracial majority driven by voters of color rejected this appeal, with Latinos (70%), Blacks (89%), Asians (68%), and American Indians (60%) overwhelmingly supporting Biden. Voters went to the polls, in part, to address racial inequalities and discrimination throughout our country. Trump turned out a surprising number of voters who were convinced by his message, but an overwhelming number of Americans were tired of his divisiveness.

The American Election Eve Poll found non-white voters felt that discrimination/racial justice was in the top five most important issues in this election. 37% of Blacks said discrimination and racial justice was their top issue going into the polls. With Latinos (62%), Blacks (76%), Asians (58%), and even significant number of white voters (47%) saying that racism and discrimination increased in the last four years. Latinos (70%), Blacks (85%), Asians (72%), and American Indians (69%) said Trump either did not care or was hostile to their community. The exit polling from the *New York Times* also found that racial inequality was a top issue for 20% of all voters when deciding between Biden and Trump - just under the economy as their most pressing factor in the election.

Unsurprisingly, however, was that overwhelming the top issue for voters in this election was the COVID-19 pandemic, but this should not be disassociated from racialized inequities the effects of the virus have had. Without a serious national plan to control the pandemic, non-white communities have disproportionately suffered its consequences. COVID-19 associated deaths have fallen disproportionately on communities of color. "Black, Indigenous and Latino Americans all have a COVID-19 death rate of triple or more White Americans, who experience the lowest age-adjusted rates," writes AMP Research Lab.

The American Election Eve Poll found these communities disproportionately faced the immediate economic consequences as well. 24% of Latinos, 24% of Black voters, 24% of

Support for Joe Biden.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
70%	89%	68%	60%	41%
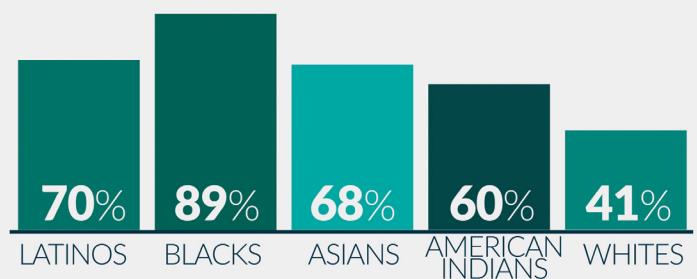
Think that racism and discrimination has **increased** in the last four years.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
62%	76%	58%	40%	47%
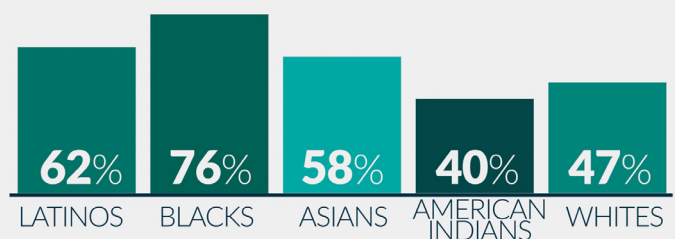
Asians, and 25% of American Indians said they or someone in their household lost a job because of the coronavirus pandemic, while 15% of whites indicated the same. 42% of Latinos, 35% of Black voters, 38% of Asians, and 42% of American Indians said they or someone in their household had hours or pay cut because of the coronavirus pandemic, while 28% of whites indicated the same. 19% of Latinos, 19% of Blacks, 19% of Asians, and 21% of American Indians said they or someone in their household had to temporarily or permanently close their business because of the coronavirus pandemic, while 13% of whites indicated the same. And 25% of Latinos, 26% of Blacks, 25% of Asians, and 27% of American Indians said they or someone in their household were unemployed but looking for work because of the coronavirus pandemic, while 17% of whites indicated the same. Voters of color overwhelmingly held Trump responsible with 67% of Latinos, 84% of Black voters, 67% of Asians, and 62% of American Indians indicating that Trump ignored the early warning signs of coronavirus, increasing its consequences.

In an election where voters slightly favored the sitting President on the economy, he still lost because of his divisiveness, with voters believing Biden would handle the pandemic better. In the inverse of Trump, communities of color disproportionately hit by the coronavirus pandemic thought Biden truly cared about their communities: Latinos (65%), Blacks (81%), Asians (54%), and American Indians (52%).

Trump and the GOP did not appear to do themselves any favors by inciting division and stoking racist and xenophobic fears around COVID-19. In spite of specific warnings from the World Health Organization to "avoid stigmatization" by associating the pandemic with

Said they or someone in their household lost a job because of the coronavirus pandemic.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
24%	24%	24%	25%	15%

Said they or someone in their household had hours or pay cut because of the coronavirus pandemic.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
19%	19%	19%	21%	13%

Said Trump ignored the early warning signs of coronavirus increasing its consequences.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
67%	84%	67%	62%	46%
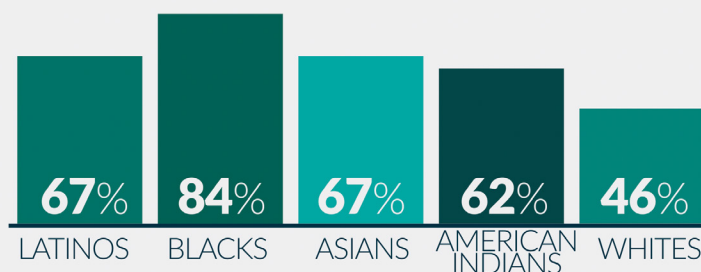
a specific region of the world, Trump and many Republican candidates deliberately did the opposite. Taking their lead from Trump, using the offensive and dangerous slurs to refer to the virus became a staple of GOP paid advertising from the end of March throughout May. Facebook and TV ads from up and down the ticket looked to point a coded racist finger of blame at China. "In May alone, the Trump campaign has spent or reserved about $7 million on television airtime in local markets, fueling negative ads that repeat xenophobic tropes regarding the Chinese origin of the coronavirus," wrote Nick Corasaniti and Maggie Haberman for *The New York Times*.

This xenophobic dog-whistling around the virus could have contributed to the horrific rise in Asian-American hate crimes. Early on, the FBI warned local law enforcement agencies that "hate crime incidents against Asian-Americans likely will surge across the United States," as people falsely associate them with the spread of COVID-19. At the height of the GOP's paid amplification of these xenophobic tropes, Asian-Americans were suffering on average around one hundred attacks every single day. In August, Rep. Judy Chu (D-CA), chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, released a toolkit to encourage her colleagues to avoid inciting anti-Asian sentiment and racism when talking about the COVID-19 pandemic and China. Unfortunately, many Republicans demurred and continued to follow Trump who kept making it an issue at his rallies right up until election day. Trump continually used some version of his line that he used at his rally in Bullhead City, Arizona in October saying, "You know, we have about 30 names, China virus, the Plague, whatever you want to... the plague from China. We have to be accurate."

The response to the xenophobic attacks likely felt and experienced throughout the

Image from Donald Trump's 2020 Presidential campaign TV ad including an image of the former governor of Washington, aired 04/09/20

Facebook ads from 2020 Senate candidates.

Image from Kathaleen Wall's TX-22 campaign ad, aired 04/01/20
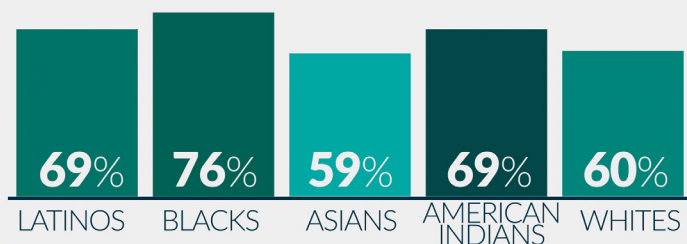

Image from Andy Barr's KY-06 campaign ad, aired 10/26/20
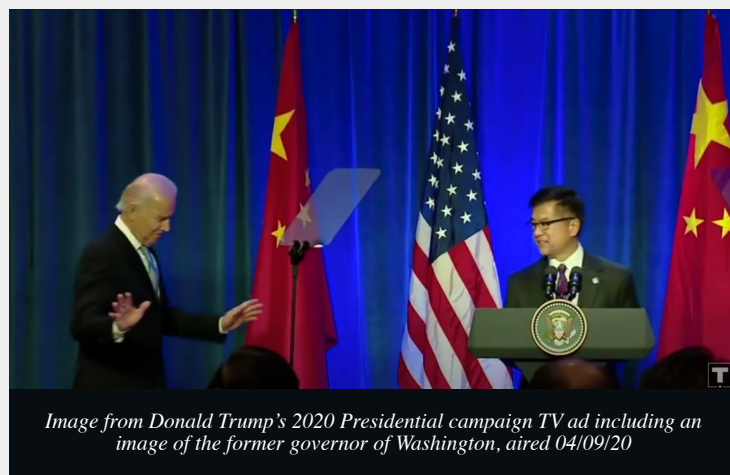
community may have contributed to what was record-setting turnout by Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters. In Georgia, where the state flipped to Biden and both Senate races went to a runoff to determine control of Congress, Asian-American turnout nearly doubled when compared to the 2016 election. This electorate was an essential component of Biden's win with 68 percent of AAPI voters pulling the lever for Biden. Backlash to xenophobic dog-whistles that dominated part of this electoral cycle may have also contributed to the trend of APPI voters moving to become a more solid Democratic voting bloc.

Behind the dog-whistles around the pandemic lies an effort to distract voters from the reality that the President and his party would not deliver the plans to control the pandemic and provide necessary relief. A xenophobic blame game is not a solution to keep people safe, healthy, and employed. Voters wanted real solutions with a majority of Latinos (69%), Blacks (76%), Asians (59%), American Indians (69%), and whites (60%) saying a comprehensive stimulus bill with over 2 trillion dollars is very important.
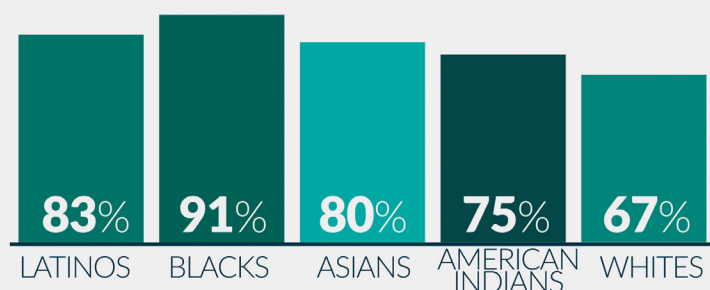
While a decisive repudiation of this coded bigotry alluded us without landslide results, a larger popular vote win in the presidential contest,

Said it was **very important** that the next Congress pass a comprehensive stimulus bill with over 2 trillion dollars in additional funding.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
69%	76%	59%	69%	60%

maintaining the House majority, and winning control of the Senate are strong evidentiary examples of an emerging multiracial, anti-racist majority. Trump was able to stave off a landslide by bringing a surprising number of new voters to him with his dog-whistle politics, but those who were either unconvinced or repelled by that argument make up this new majority. Voters want solutions and are in wide agreement on common-sense policies, from a pathway to citizenship, to a massive stimulus bill or police accountability. The dog-whistle politics of racial division was not enough in this election, and that is significant.

Beyond the important questions around the efficacy of the racist and xenophobic dog-whistles, we should consider the hard edge downstream effects of the continued amplification of these messages to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars. Most will not see beyond the code – as they are designed – but there will likely be others similar to those we have already seen who will take these messages as justification for racialized political violence. Fears of this violence are shared by a strong majority across racial lines. 83% of Latinos, 91% of Blacks, 80% of Asians, 75% of American Indians and even 67% of whites agreed that the rise of white supremacists is a major threat to our country.

The rise of white supremacists is a major threat to our country.

LATINOS	BLACKS	ASIANS	AMERICAN INDIANS	WHITES
83%	91%	80%	75%	67%

Echoing Willie Horton Dog-Whistles

Anti-immigrant attacks clearly still formed a strong undercurrent of the GOP strategy in this cycle, but a dog-whistle replicating Willie Horton style ads dominated. Fears of white victimhood, non-white criminality, and imagined dystopian landscapes were the closing message for GOP candidates up and down the ticket. The ubiquitous deployment of strategic racism was similar from 2018 to 2020, even as the subject and the demonized non-white bodies changed. These dog-whistles operated on the same divide and distract patterns, manipulating, mostly subconsciously, racist ideas without the explicit mention of race to mobilize voters by offering fear and scarcity as solutions. And though similar, the 'defund' attacks may have been more effective than anti-immigrant dog-whistles, albeit with clear questions as to its overall efficacy.


Image from the National Security PAC's "Weekend Passes" ad in support of George H. W. Bush's 1988 Presidential campaign.

Image from Donald Trump's 2020 Presidential campaign ad.

Image from Richard Nixon's 1968 Presidential campaign TV ad.

Image from Donald Trump's 2020 Presidential campaign TV ad.

We tracked 272 unique ads that used racist dog-whistles around crime, riots and defunding the police up and down the ticket, with half of all battleground districts seeing at least one of these dog-whistle ads. While it is clear that a significant number of voters were sympathetic to these messages, they are still supportive of specific fixes when divorced from the dog-whistle rhetoric.
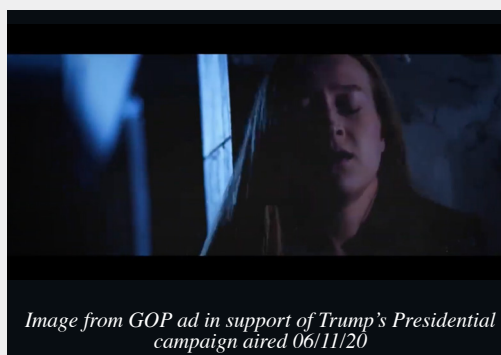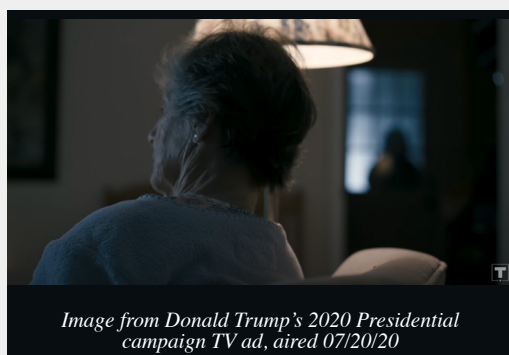
A strong majority of voters also indicated they supported the idea that police need to be held accountable for their actions when they kill or abuse Black people and should get rid of

laws that make it hard to prosecute police officers. 89% of Latinos, 93% of Blacks, 85% of Asians, 81% of American Indians, and even 76% of whites supported these changes. Instead of focusing on unifying solutions to address real problems, Trump and the GOP made part of their closing electoral strategy a manipulation of racist ideas by painting a dystopian landscape overridden by crime. They took the less popular slogan from the racial justice uprisings over the summer of 'defund the police' and graphed on a false and, often deadly, racist association between non-white bodies and crime.

Supported the idea that police need to be held accountable for their actions when they kill or abuse Black people and should get rid of laws that make it hard to prosecute police.

| 89% | 93% | 85% | 81% | 76% |
| LATINOS | BLACKS | ASIANS | AMERICAN INDIANS | WHITES |
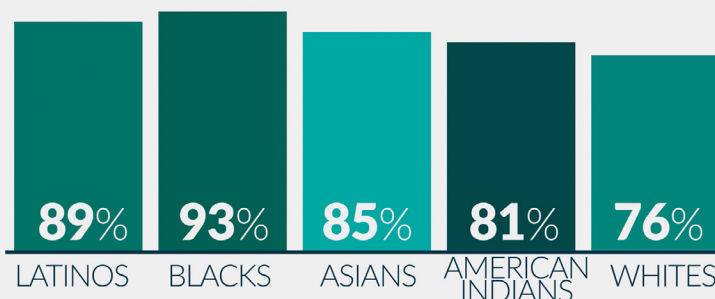
Trump sought to exploit the sporadic incidents of riots and violence after the police murder of George Floyd into a political asset. He quickly co-opted Richard Nixon's dog-whistle "Law and Order," while his campaign began running dramatized ads of a police-less dystopia. One ad featured an older white woman menaced by an unknown shadowy other, while a similar ad from the GOP featured a terrified white woman receiving a disconnected notice when frantically calling the police. Later the campaign switched to showing the same riot scenes over and over, hoping to scare voters with wild distortions of Democratic desires to eliminate and defund local police departments. Allied superPACs, like America First Action, also ran ads in battleground states with this message. One series of ads featured white business owners played up as victims and expressed fear with exaggerations of anti-racist protests. In an almost perfect echo of the infamous Willie Horton ad, a Trump ad attacks Biden for staffers who donated to a Minnesota bail fund, which they claim, "Helped release African-Americans from jail," while subsequently showing mugshots of African-

Image from Donald Trump's 2020 Presidential campaign TV ad, aired 07/20/20

Image from GOP ad in support of Trump's Presidential campaign aired 06/11/20

JOE BIDEN IS TOO WEAK TO PROTECT US

Image from America First Action PAC ad in support of Trump's Presidential campaign, aired 9/21/20

Americans with chyrons reading "rape," "murder," and "stabbing." All of these ads looked to manipulate unconscious racist fears as a political mobilizer.

Trump also made this dog-whistle a central point of all his rallies in the last months of the campaign, convinced that a backlash to the sporadic violence of anti-racist protests were going to be the key to his victory. He tried to rile up his crowds with unfounded rumors of anti-racist mobs descending on suburbs, despite the armed racialized violence this rhetoric

was already inciting. His coded racist message of fear and division still resonated with millions of voters, but a decisive majority were unconvinced by this message that had been quite effective in our recent past.

Every one of the competitive Senate races also saw a version of this dog-whistle. The superPACs aligned with the GOP Senate leadership ran much of these strategic racist ad campaigns. The National Republican Senate Committee (NRSC) ran a cut-and-paste attack ad against every battleground Democratic Senate candidate that looked remarkably similar to Trump's Willie Horton copycat ad. The NRSC's attack ad even featured the same mugshots of African Americans as they read off their alleged violent crimes.

Image from CLF's attack ad against Pat Timmons-Goodson NC-08, aired 10/16/20

Image from CLF's attack ad against Christina Hale IN-05, aired 10/14/20

Image from NRCC's attack ad against Amy Kennedy NJ-02, aired 10/27/20

Image from Scott Taylor's attack ad against his opponent Elaine Luria VA-02, aired 10/29/20

Image from Chele Farley's attack ad against her opponent Sean Maloney NY-18, aired 10/16/20

Image from Tyler Kistner's MN-02 campagin ad

However, the ubiquity and the complexity of these different races in combination with mixed election results makes drawing definitive conclusions about the efficacy of this dog-whistle difficult. The GOP did show a remarkable consistency in their commitment to dog-whistle messaging, while Democratic Senate candidates vigorously denied the charge. The ubiquity of this type of message predicts the likely resurgence of some version of a dog-whistle message in the next cycle. The question is whether or not the Democrats will have a similarly aggressive and consistent response to undermine the likely aggressive and consistent dog-whistle message from the GOP.

In the House, the GOP flipped seats in MN-07, NY-22, and NY-11 where they heavily employed the issue. These dog-whistle attacks were also used in SC-01 and IA-01, but were not similarly the central focus as in the other three races. These dog whistles also appeared to be a part of an effective GOP strategy in 27 defensive battleground races (MN-01,NJ-02, CA-22, FL-15, IN-05, KS-02, KY-06, MI-03, MI-06, MT-AL, NC-08, NE-02, OH-01, PA-01, PA-10,TX-06, TX-10, TX-21, TX-22, TX-23, TX-24, TX-31, VA-05,

Image from Karen Handel's attack ad against her opponent Rep. Lucy McBath in the GA-06 race, aired 08/24/20

Image from NRCC's attack ad against Rep. Lucy McBath in the GA-06 race, aired 09/22/20

Image from Rich McCormick's attack ad against his opponent Carolyn Bourdeaux in the GA-07 race, aired 10/23/20

AR-02, CA-04, CO-03, MO-02, NC-11). This analysis is of course based solely on the attack ads to say nothing of how these campaigns were run or to what effect a different Democratic approach could have had in damping the strength of the dog-whistles employed in these races.

Arguably more significant is the fact that these sorts of Willie Horton style attacks are not as effective as they once were. There are races where these attacks can still work as an effective, albeit harmful, electoral strategy. However, races in GA-07 and GA-06 may be the strongest counterexamples, pointing to the decreasing salience to these sorts of strategic racist attacks. In GA-06, Lucy McBath was hit hard with these dog-whistles even though, like almost all the other Democrats who were hit on the issue, she made her opposition to defunding the police public. McBath was also hit with dog-whistles on crime and safety around her vote for the HEROES Act, but these attacks were not effective. In one of the few districts Democrats flipped in this cycle, Carolyn Boudreaux overcame 'defund' dog-whistle attacks from her opponent and the superPACs. Democrats also held onto 16 battleground seats where these dog-whistles did not produce a win. Finding examples on both sides of the ledger is a far cry from a strategic silver bullet and where the GOP needs to persuade voters to put together a majority, more voters may be turned off by this distraction when clear solutions are available.

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6 "And we should win it, when they let Minneapolis burn." Donald Trump, Newtown, PA on October 3, 2020.
7 "I got rid of the regulation that was going to destroy your suburbs, unless you like crime, which you don't like, right? . . . hey don't want a regulation that is brutal, that's going to build low-income housing next to their house. Okay. They don't want that. A project, we call it a project and they don't want crime in the suburbs. Antifa says, that's the next place they want to head. They're not heading to the suburbs." Donald Trump, Martinsburg, PA October 26, 2020.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR 2020

For a man wedded to personal brand, it is instructive that Donald Trump built his political brand on the amplification of the racist lie and attack on the 14th Amendment known as 'Birtherism.' Shattering any doubt that thinly veiled racism and xenophobia would be the central engine driving his campaign, Trump descended his escalator on June 16, 2015 and launched his infamous attack on Mexican immigrants. He drove this hard-charging aggressive dog-whistle politics all the way through the campaign into the White House. Unsurprisingly, he governed the same. Starting off his presidency with a Muslim ban, Trump made racial division central to his Administration's efforts. On his primary issue of immigration, Trump made cruelty the point.

After seeing Trump's surprise win, most of the GOP fell in line behind the new leader and appeared to believe that replicating the anti-immigrant zealotry was their best path to electoral victory. However, candidates in 2017 were quick to find out that, far from a powerful political asset, xenophobic dog-whistles could backfire.

Virginia gubernatorial candidate, Ed Gillespie, was pulled to the right during a contested primary with long-time

> While millions of Americans responded positively to the GOP's strategy, the multi-racial majority who were looking for real solutions overwhelmed those unconvinced by the mirage of sacristy and division.

xenophobe Corey Stewart. In the general election, Gillespie doubled down on the anti-immigrant attacks rather than move to the center. His campaign tried to use the threat of the international gang MS-13 as the lens to view all Latino immigrants and tried to claim that Democratic candidate Ralph Northam was weak on crime. Gillespie pressed the issue attacking 'sanctuary cities.'

In the lead up to election day, political observers and pundits, including Steve Bannon, believed Gillespie's strategy would work — and would serve as a model for other Republicans. "Corey Stewart is the reason Gillespie is going to win," Stephen K. Bannon, the former White House chief strategist and Trump's campaign czar, said in an interview. "It was the Trump-Stewart talking points that got Gillespie close and even maybe to victory. It was embracing Trump's agenda as personified by Corey's platform." In fact, the strategy backfired among voters of nearly every demographic and Northam won by 9 points. That was a much wider margin than anyone expected. As Matt Barreto from Latino Decisions wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed about the polling conducted by Latino Decisions, which found evidence of the backlash:

"By a 23-point margin (52 to 29), whites in Virginia also said the MS-13 ads turned them away from Mr. Gillespie, as did African-American and Asian-American voters by larger margins. Data speaks louder than punditry, and our regression analysis of survey data paints a clear picture.

Exposure to Mr. Gillespie's MS-13 ads actually helped drive white college-educated voters away from the Republicans. When we analyzed findings for white independents and Republicans, voters who were aware of the MS-13 ads were significantly more likely to vote for Mr. Gillespie's Democratic opponent."

Despite the questions raised about the efficacy of an anti-immigrant messaging strategy in 2017, Republican candidates up and down the ticket fully adopted the playbook in the 2018 midterms. The GOP amplified dangerous rhetoric of fear, lies, and division. This was an attempt to divide and distract voters with dystopian fantasies of sanctuary cities, immigrant crime, and migrant invasions. Their closing message was about a migrant caravan of asylum seekers and telling their base to vote like Trump was on the ballot. This strategy that had horrific and deadly consequences as supporters echoed these messages as justification for political violence.

Image from Defend Arizona PAC's attack ad against Kyrsten Sinema in Arizona Senate campaign, aired 10/10/18

Image from Corey Stewart's attack ad against Tim Kaine in Virginia Senate campaign, aired 10/25/18

Image from Scott Wagner's attack ad against Tom Wolf in Pennsylvania gubernatorial campaign, aired 11/01/18

Image from Wendy Rogers' attack ad against Tom O'Halleran in AZ-01 campaign, aired 10/28/18

However, after a summer of protests against the Trump administration's family separation policy and putting kids in cages, the dog-whistles employed by the campaigns largely backfired. Democrats won historic gains flipping 41 House seats and seeing the highest voter turnout rate for a midterm (50.3%) in a century. Even with Republicans mobilized,

Image from Matt Bevin's Kentucky gubernatorial reelection campaign, aired 09/16/19

Image from Eddie Rispone's Louisiana gubernatorial campaign, aired 08/11/19

Democrats won the popular vote margin by +8.6%. Voters also denied anti-immigrant zealots major offices in the Pennsylvania Senate race with Lou Barletta, the Virginia Senate race with Corey Stewart, and Kansas Governor's race with Kris Kobach. While millions of Americans responded positively to the GOP's strategy, the multi-racial majority who were looking for real solutions overwhelmed those unconvinced by the mirage of sacristy and division.

This coded xenophobic divide and distract strategy again failed for the GOP in 2019 for the gubernatorial candidates in races in red states. Governor Matt Bevin lost his reelection bid and Eddie Rispone failed to unseat Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards in Louisiana. Both Bevin and Rispone leaned heavily on xenophobic dog-whistles and received all-in support from Trump and his campaign. This strategy may have helped mobilize supporters for the uncharacteristically high turnout in both elections, but it just as likely motivated more of those repelled by this strategy ending in GOP losses in these red-states.

CONCLUSION

Xenophobia and racist dog-whistles cannot yet be assigned to the dustbin of history. However, it is clear that these strategies are losing their efficacy. Strategic racism is looking more like a liability than an asset as a general election message in most of the country. After over a half century of it's potent use, its decline however hulting, is a profound and positive development.

Over the last five years Donald Trump blew dog-whistles as loud and often as one might think possible, but his tactless use may have helped speed their decline. The dog-whistles became audible for a greater number and their rejection helped to fuel the ranks of the multiracial majority. However, even as some of the dog-whistles in this

cycle sounded quite audible, most who are sympathetic to the cause do not hear the racism or xenophobia behind the message, which is the point of this kind of ad. The code is essential, not as a secret handshake between knowing parties but as plausible deniability for both those who blow the whistle and those who respond. All this is to say that decoding and actively challenging a dog-whistle strategy might further prespeciate its decline in the near future. While it is concerning that so many people were convinced or accepted the mirage of racial division as a solution, delivering on the real solutions they want may be one of the better ways to dispel the false promise of division.

Immigration is no longer a third rail that a dog-whistle strategy can exploit. A divide and distract strategy that relied on anti-immigrant messaging backfired in the previous three years and in 2020. In addition to many battleground districts that abandoned this strategy. Where these attacks did rear their ugly heads, they were largely ineffective. When the overwhelming majority of voters want solutions but all they hear are coded, xenophobic appeals of divison, it is unsuprising that that the majorty would find such a message uncovincing.

Looking at this election from the perspective of analysis laid out above it is clear that anti-immigrant zealotry is a cul-de-sac that only works with a shrinking minority. Moving forward elected leaders might consider the risk of dog-whistle politics or develop effective strategies to undermine the message to win majorities in most any part of the country. Unfortunately, strategic racism will continue but if you look closely you can see the many cracks of a weakening dam. Removing this line of attack is not only a moral good for the nation but could drive the unity necessary to win the necessary majorities to pass policies that would greatly benefit us all.