

How to Navigate the Sanctuary Cities Debate

In past election cycles, Republicans have repeatedly hit Democrats for supporting sanctuary cities, including some of the most graphic and fearmongering ads in recent history. Similar attacks have already resurfaced in the 2018 midterm elections—with more undoubtedly to come as we near Election Day.

To address this continued challenge, Third Way and the Center for American Progress Action Fund conducted both qualitative and quantitative research to understand how voters in battleground districts and states view issues around sanctuary cities, how these attacks impact their feelings and voting behavior, and what Democrats can do to effectively respond and counter voter concerns. First, we conducted three-day online interviews with 26 likely voters in key battleground states—all voters who were open to pulling the lever for Democrats but were concerned about the issue of immigration. Then we fielded an online survey of 2,849 likely voters in battleground House districts and states with key Senate and gubernatorial races where Trump had won in 2016, from July 27th to August 3rd. What we found was that attacks around sanctuary city policies are potent, but with the right response, they can be overcome.

1. Democrats are a Blank Slate on Immigration.

Despite the fact that Democrats have long fought for comprehensive immigration reform, most voters say they don't know what the party stands for on the issue of immigration. To the extent that voters do have an impression of Democrats, they mostly use phrases like "open borders." When asked whether they approve or disapprove of each party's handling of immigration writ large, both parties are under water by more than 20 points, and voters split 50/50 when asked which party's policies concerned them more. Notably, even after the recent family separation crisis, 51% of voters in these target districts and states say they view Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) favorably, with only 36% saying they have an unfavorable view of the agency. Democrats rate ICE unfavorably by 40 points, but Independent voters are favorable by 16 and Republicans by 62. It's clear on this specific issue that Democratic voters are isolated from where Independent and Republican voters are on ICE.

2. Sanctuary Attacks Pack a Punch.

We tested the sanctuary city attacks that Republicans have been using verbatim, and they were potent. In the poll, Democrats start with a 7 point lead when offered the names of actual House, Senate, or gubernatorial candidates—even in this battleground terrain where Republicans started with a 6 point edge in party identification. But after hearing one attack and looking at one visual/mailed attacking the Democrat candidate on sanctuary cities, that lead disappeared. Forty-eight percent of voters said they would be less likely to vote for the Democrat after seeing the attack. And when asked again about their vote post-attack (but before any rebuttal), the Democratic candidate's 7 point lead flipped to a 4 point deficit. For a single attack, this eleven-point movement is a significant swing. As noted above, this is likely because voters start without much of a notion of what Democrats stand for on immigration, so it is easier for these attacks to stick.

It is important to note that the attack had virtually no effect with white college-educated voters and African-Americans. However, there was dramatic movement among key groups such as white non-college voters (-17), women over 55 (-19) and Independents (-17). This likely explains why the attacks were largely ineffective against Ralph Northam in Virginia, which has a large portion of college-educated voters, but could be especially potent in the key battleground states and districts in 2018.

3. The Attack Can Be Neutralized.

Despite how damaging this sanctuary cities attack can be, there are ways to effectively respond. They require acknowledging voters' underlying concerns, directly addressing them, and then pivoting to other issues where Democrats have a bigger advantage with these voters—like healthcare and the new Republican tax law's giveaways to billionaires. We identified two distinct strategies that work:

Solutions: The single most effective response was to say that the immigration system is broken because both parties have played politics instead of trying to fix the problem, and to support a bipartisan solution that would increase border security and create an earned pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants if they keep out of trouble, work hard, learn English, and pay taxes. This response picked up a net of **10 points for Democrats** and almost completely regained their pre-attack advantage.

Opposing Violent Crime: The other response that tested well was strongly coming out against any policy that would create safe havens for criminals and gangs or threaten the safety and security of our communities, and emphasizing that anyone who commits a violent crime should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Importantly, this opposition did not even need to reference immigration. This rebuttal, which goes to the heart of the concerns voters voiced about sanctuary cities, netted **6 points for Democrats** and was the most effective at actually reducing voters' anxiety about sanctuary cities. It was also particularly successful at gaining back vulnerable voters from states Trump won in 2016.

Do:

- Blame both parties for failing to fix this problem and focus on offering solutions to fix our broken immigration system.
- Voice strong opposition to creating safe havens for violent criminals.

4. Many Commonly Deployed Strategies Were Ineffective.

In addition to identifying two effective approaches, we also gained four significant insights about what *doesn't* work on this issue:

Opposing sanctuary cities is ineffective. Saying "I oppose sanctuary cities" was less persuasive than directly addressing concerns about violent crime, both when it came to regaining Democratic vote margins and reducing voter concerns about this issue. And to make matter worse, this response also spurred strong backlash from the Democratic base—a problem that was not created by either of the effective responses outlined above.

Explaining is losing. Voters are deeply skeptical of factual statements about sanctuary cities, even when presented with significant evidence. And when they *did* believe facts that were presented about the reality of

Don't:

- Say you oppose sanctuary cities.
- Explain why sanctuary policies exist or how they function.
- Pivot to public safety rationales without emphasizing the need for solutions.
- Focus on federalism without framing the issue as DC interfering with local policing.

sanctuary city policies on the ground, it often made them *more* concerned, not less, about the issue. Candidates should simply not be spending time trying to persuade voters that sanctuary city policies are a good idea or change their perception of those jurisdictions.

Pivoting to public safety rationales alone does not work. It is not effective to argue that law enforcement shouldn't waste resources chasing down undocumented immigrants who pose no threat. Similarly, saying it is unrealistic to deport 11 million undocumented immigrants also isn't persuasive to voters who are concerned about this issue. Rather, focusing on *solutions* to our broken immigration system is much more impactful than explaining *why* sanctuary city policies exist.

Supporting local law enforcement only works if you pit it against DC. Federalism is not an effective argument on its own, because most voters don't understand the different roles local law enforcement and federal immigration enforcement officials play in the system. They generally believe that local law enforcement should cooperate with federal officials. Support for local law enforcement was more effective when pitted against "Washington politicians dictating how to keep our communities safe"—but even that formulation was less impactful than the strategies recommended above.

5. Health Care and Taxes are More Favorable Terrain.

It is very difficult to win on immigration with vulnerable voters in the states Trump carried in 2016. Even the most draconian of Republican policies, like family separation and deporting Dreamers, only bring back a small segment of those voters when pitted against a sanctuary cities attack. So while it's crucial to address the concerns raised by these attacks, Democrats should spend as little time as possible engaging in a conversation about the merits of sanctuary cities and instead pivot to other issues like taxes and health care, where Democrats have significant advantages.

The Best Formula

1. **Focus on Solutions:** Our immigration system is broken because both parties in DC are playing politics instead of trying to fix the problem. I support a bipartisan plan to increase border security and create an earned pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants if they keep out of trouble, work hard, learn English, and pay taxes.
2. **Oppose Violent Crime (not Sanctuary Cities):** I strongly oppose creating safe havens for criminals and gangs. I believe that anyone who commits a violent crime should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.
3. **Pivot to Better Terrain:** These Republican attacks are just a way to divide us and distract from what they are doing to give massive tax breaks to billionaires and big corporations that are paid for by taking away regular people's health care and cutting Medicare and Social Security.

Conclusion

Republicans know that sanctuary city attacks work, and that Democratic candidates have often struggled to effectively respond to them. These attacks will likely increase as the election draws near, but they are far from insurmountable. By clearly and concisely addressing voters' concerns, then quickly moving to more favorable terrain outside of immigration policy, Democrats can weather these attacks, win key races, and be better positioned to offer real solutions on immigration—and so many other pressing issues our country faces.