

To: Interested Parties

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Re: Border security messaging does not benefit Democrats on immigration

Conventional wisdom holds that Democratic congressional candidates should adopt a “border security first” approach to immigration in order to win moderates. Here, we test such a “border security first” approach and a “people first” approach. We find that border security message does not benefit Democrats and may hurt them by demobilizing the Democratic base.

Experiment Summary

In our survey, we included a messaging experiment to determine the effect of supporting ending family separation at the US border compared to supporting expanding border security. For both statements, we also included an identical, position of also passing a pathway to citizenship in the future.

This message experiment posed the following question to our survey’s 1,280 respondents:

*“If the 2020 congressional election were being held today and the candidates were a Republican who supports a border wall and reducing the number of immigrants allowed into the country and a Democrat who supports **[Statement A or Statement B]**, for whom would you vote?”*

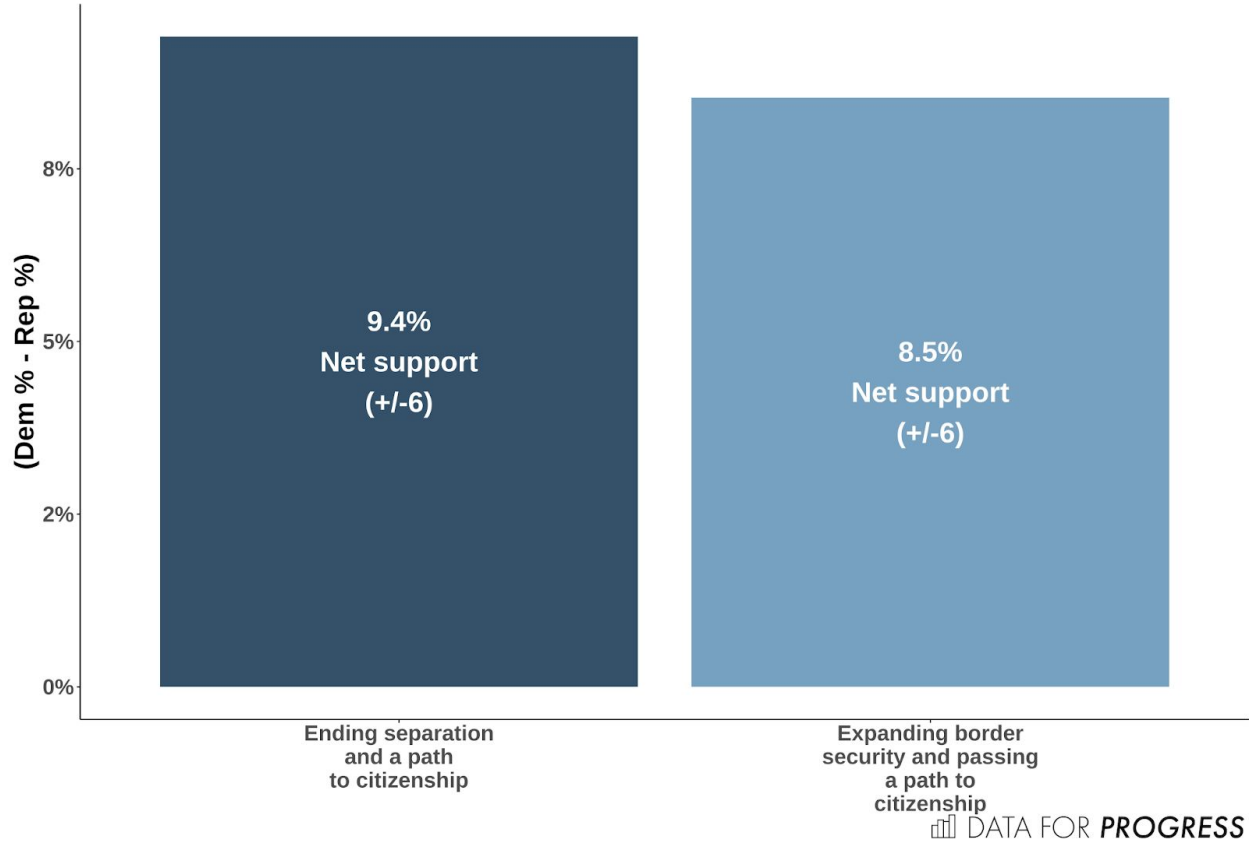
Statement A: *“ending family separation and passing a path to citizenship for those who are currently undocumented”*

Statement B: *“expanding border security funding and passing a path to citizenship for those who are currently undocumented.”*

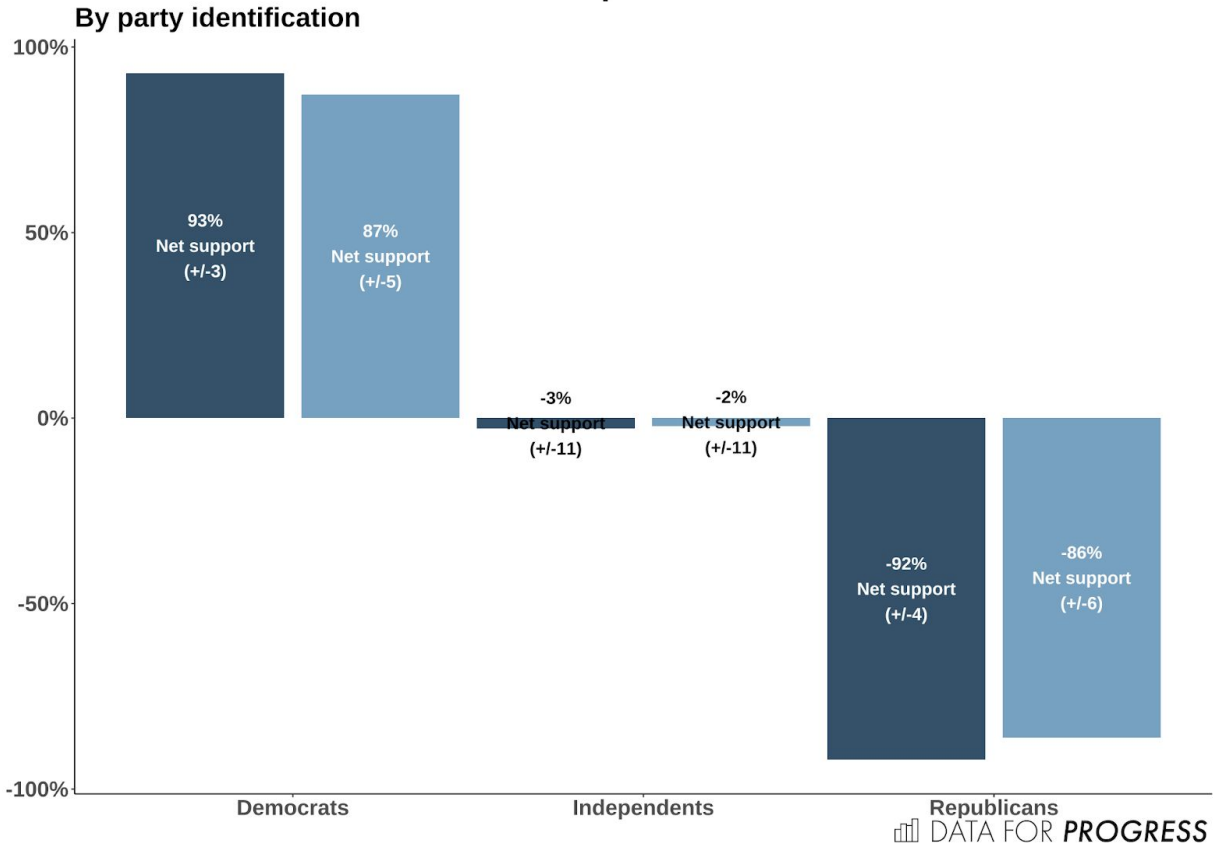
Respondents selected one of three options: 1) The Democrat, 2) The Republican, and 3) Don’t know. The first two response options were in a randomized order with randomization set separately from the split statements.

Across the national sample overall, we did not observe a significant difference in vote choice across the two Democratic statement options. 49.5 percent of respondents in the Statement A group selected the Democrat while 49.1 percent of respondents in the Statement B group selected the Democrat. 41.0 percent of respondents in the Statement A group selected the Republican while 41.4 percent of respondents in the Statement B group selected the Republican. The following chart shows the percent of respondents who said they would vote for the Democrat minus the percent who said they would vote for the Republican.

Democrat - Republican vote intent



Democrat - Republican vote intent



When breaking respondents into three groups of self-reported party identification (Democrats, Republicans, and Independents combined with Other), a slightly significant difference emerges within the Republican Party group. Among those who self-identify as Republicans, 91.5 percent of respondents in the Statement A group selected 'The Republican' response option while 85.6 percent of percent of respondents in the Statement B group chose 'The Republican.' This finding demonstrates a slight difference in the way Republicans responded to the question, with Republicans slightly more receptive (but still overwhelmingly against) a Democrat in favor of border security. However, we see the reverse pattern among Democrats, with the base slightly more energized (by a similar 6 point net difference) by a Democratic candidate in favor of ending family separation. But while these trends are what we might expect, neither difference among partisans is statistically significant. And for independents, there is no difference in the appeal of either candidate.

Democratic candidates should not feel pressure to center conservative messaging in their campaigns. Instead, they can and should openly advocate for a people-centered approach, which could include ending family separation, as tested here, or other policies that improve the lives of immigrants and the American public. Security-centered messaging does not improve their electoral chances and risks dehumanization and feeding into dangerous right-wing narratives about immigration.

On behalf of Data for Progress, YouGov Blue fielded a survey on a sample of 1,280 registered voters using YouGov's online panel. The survey fielded between September 11 and September 12, 2019, and was weighted to be representative of the national population of US voters by age, race/ethnicity, sex, education, US census region, and 2016 Presidential vote choice. The survey included a question asking respondents whether they would vote for "The Republican" or "The Democrat" after reading two policy positions regarding the US-Mexico border. We tested two possible border policy statements the hypothetical Democratic candidate could have supported alongside a standard policy statement supported by the hypothetical Republican candidate. This memo summarizes the results.