

**AMERICA'S  
VOICE**

# 2022 GOP MESSAGE TRACKING

*Analysis of Republicans'  
Nativist Narrative Leading into  
the General Election*

August, 2022

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Heading into the 2022 general election, Republicans have made their nativist narrative a top messaging priority. While immigration [will not be a top issue](#) for a [majority of all voters](#), it is an important issue for the MAGA base, and Republicans believe immigrant-bashing favors their electoral prospects. To that end, GOP candidates across the country will continue to insert into the debate dangerous anti-immigrant rhetoric that has already led to violence. America's Voice's extensive tracking over the past year provides valuable insights on this part of Republicans' strategy and its potential deadly downstream consequences.

[The America's Voice message tracking project](#) tracks tv and digital ads from campaigns across the country from up and down the ticket and monitors hundreds of campaigns' fundraising emails and hundreds of Twitter accounts of leading Republican candidates and office holders.

Here are the key takeaways from the report:

- 1. Republican candidates will make nativism an issue in the election as a way to rally their base.** Leaders throughout the Party, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, have made consistent and repeated predictions that their border narrative will be a key part of a midterm victory. They have followed it up with sustained attention and investment.
- 2. Republican campaigns, superPACs, and political committees are once again spending heavily on anti-immigrant messaging.** At America's Voice, we have found over 2,130 ads and 400 campaign emails that use nativist dog-whistles this cycle. We tracked an average of around [2,700 tweets](#) from Republican candidates and campaigns a month that move anti-immigrant messages. Negative mentions about immigration in right-wing media hover around [4,000 to 6,000 a month](#).
- 3. Republicans have three main attack lines: open borders, fentanyl, and "invasion." All three are based on lies and disinformation.** We have identified 360 ads that fear-monger about Democrats' alleged "open border" policies. We have identified over 330 ads that deploy dog-whistles around drugs and immigration. And over 140 ads that employ the "invasion" and "replacement" rhetoric.
- 4. Republicans have embraced deadly white nationalist conspiracies as an organizing principle, encouraging mass political violence.** We have identified over 500 pieces of political messaging that echo the "invasion" and "replacement" conspiracy theories that inspired several domestic terrorists to murder dozens of Americans. As we have seen in Buffalo, El Paso, and elsewhere, these dehumanizing lies can have deadly downstream consequences and fuel anti-democratic attacks.
- 5. Republicans' nativist border narrative is vulnerable to attack because it is unpopular and untrue.** From open borders to fentanyl to invasions, the GOP's nativist narrative is filled with lies, oversimplifications, and exaggerations.
- 6. Republicans have no policy solutions on immigration.** There are lots of tweets, photo ops, and tv ads, but very little in the way of actual policy solutions beyond Trump's wall. Instead, they resort to a cruelty and chaos approach, which the Republican base supports but is wildly unpopular with the rest of the country. The lack of a foundation to the GOP's narrative makes it ripe for disruption and an opportunity to neutralize this line of attack.

# INTRODUCTION

America's Voice has an ongoing project to closely track the political messaging around the 2022 midterm elections and identify, collect, and respond to the strategic racism employed by the GOP. The project tracks tv and digital ads from campaigns across the country from up and down

the ticket and monitors hundreds of campaigns' fundraising emails and hundreds of Twitter accounts of leading Republican politicians. As the election turns from the primaries to the general, this report takes stock of the research and provides an analysis of what has been collected. It looks at the major themes providing the topline numbers and relevant context for those messaging themes. While the project and this report are primarily focused on the GOP's nativist messaging, it will highlight some of the other key dog-whistles Republican candidates are weaponizing this cycle. The report ends by outlining the opportunities to disrupt Republicans' nativist border narrative.

America's Voice [message tracking project](#) has cataloged **nearly 4,000 pieces of political communication for this cycle up until August 2022. We found over 2,596 ads and 481 campaign emails that employ dog-whistles, with 2,136 ad and 402 campaign emails using at least one nativist dog-whistle.** The database also has a catalog of 795 non-paid political communications, which are meant to capture examples of the rhetoric, not the numerical frequency of the messages. Republican politicians write an average of approximately 2,700 tweets a month with negative immigration mentions. And while our database catalogs unique ads, it is essential to note that campaigns will repeatedly run the

**4,000**  
political messages  
cataloged

**2,136**  
nativist ads

**402**  
nativist emails

**2,700**  
nativist GOP  
tweets a month

same ad. For example, one ad from the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) that ran from July to September in 2021 was **viewed an estimated 5.7 million times**.

Our tracking looks beyond six-figure ad buys in competitive races towards a more holistic party-wide assessment. This report reflects that approach in an analysis that looks at the national narrative party-wide.

We have found three main lines of attack that characterize Republicans' nativist narrative this cycle: (1) Democrats' support for open borders, (2) migrants are responsible for drugs, crime, and fentanyl, and (3) migrants seeking asylum at the border constitute an actual invasion. While many other themes appear in the ads, these three messages will characterize Republican attacks through November. The anti-immigrant buzzwords

popular in the 2018 midterms like "sanctuary cities" and "caravans" are significantly less prominent than they were in 2018.

These attacks rely on lies and oversimplifications. The borders are not open, nor do Democrats support such ideas. In fact, most of those coming to the border are quickly deported while ports of entry still remain closed to asylum seekers. The one thing the complex issue of fentanyl problem is not, is an immigration issue. The asylum-seeking migrants at the

border are not bringing drugs nor crime. While the idea that there is a real "invasion" at the border is a dehumanizing and militarized lie at odds with on-the-ground reality.

Regardless of the facts on the ground or the salience of the issue for the majority of voters, Republicans will keep returning to their nativist narrative throughout the general election. Public opinion polling shows

## **THREE NATIVIST THEMES FOR THE GOP HEADING INTO THE GENERAL**

**(1) open borders**

**(2) fentanyl**

**(3) invasion**

that Republicans' sustained investment in their border narrative has paid off with their base. While immigration remains a top issue for the Republican base, it is losing salience with the majority of voters. For example, an August 2022 [Pew Research poll](#) found that immigration ranked tenth on the "most important voting issue" question, while an August [Gallup poll](#) found that immigration ranked sixth. In both polls, Republican voters ranked immigration as a major issue at much higher levels. Meanwhile, a new [Monmouth poll](#) found that immigration has decreased by nine points from 2018 in a question that asks what voters think is "most important" for their vote. However, the current trajectory of the party's messaging indicates Republicans will not change their tune before November.

## OPEN BORDERS & #BIDENSBORDERCRISIS

Well before Biden won the nomination in 2020, won the 2020 election or even took office (in 2021), Republicans [were pushing](#) their border narrative for the 2022 midterms. For example, former Acting ICE Director Tom Homan [appeared](#) on *Fox News* in August 2020 blaming Biden for a 40% increase in border crossings - three months before the 2020 election and five months before Biden took office. They settled on the "border crisis" and "open borders" as their overarching taglines. However baseless the attacks, the sustained investment, and attention have been largely successful at setting the conversation in the Republican, anti-immigration frame.

Taking their cues from hate-groups close to the Trump administration,



Ad from Ted Budd (Senate, North Carolina)



Ad from Marco Rubio (Senate, Florida)





Ad from James Lankford (Senate, Oklahoma)

**360**  
open border ads

**87**  
open border  
emails

**113**  
campaigns

Republicans adopted the “Biden Border Crisis” as a coordinating messaging frame. The day Biden was sworn into office, the [anti-immigrant hate group](#) Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) put out a [press release](#) warning of a coming “Biden Border Crisis.” Then Mark Morgan, formerly head of CBP under Trump and now a senior fellow at FAIR, pushed the “crisis” frame on Fox News. The phrase was quickly picked up by Republicans. By early March, the influential Republican Study Committee had sent a [memo](#) to its 153 Republican members in the House “urging its members to highlight the #BidenBorderCrisis during the early months of the Biden admin.” From there, the hashtag has become a daily messaging theme for Republicans across the country. In April, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) [began](#) a near-daily and ongoing campaign using the frame. Meanwhile, [Fox News pushed](#) the same “Biden Border Crisis” frame.

The language of a “border crisis” became the repeated mantra for [numerous](#) border press conferences

and photo ops, which in turn were used for fundraising and ads. **We have found 688 ads and 142 campaign emails that use the “border crisis” language.** Looking at three months in the spring of 2021, when Republicans were trying to cement the tagline for their base voters, **we found that Republicans delivered Facebook ads using the “border crisis” message roughly 52.6 million times to Facebook timelines.**

The “crisis” language was never tied to the actual conditions on the ground and has continued no matter the actual number of asylum-seeking migrants at the border at any given time. Border apprehensions began ticking upwards during Trump’s presidency, exacerbated by policies like “Title 42” that sought to restrict the rights of people seeking asylum.

As we have gotten closer to the midterm election, many of the attack ads have hit Democrat candidates for allegedly supporting “open borders.” **We have found 360 ads and 87 campaign emails that employ the “open borders” attack across 113 different campaigns.**

While one could quibble over the use of “crisis” language, the idea that the Biden administration has “open borders” policies or that congressional



Democrats support such an idea is laughably false. Overall, net migration to the United States is way down, while most of the migrants who cross the border are immediately apprehended and deported. It is also significantly harder to cross the border without detection and apprehension today than it was just a decade ago, with DHS estimating 97% of crossers are intercepted by Border Patrol. And the inflated number of encounters Republicans love to point to are artificially inflated by Title 42 as more than 1 in 3 encounters from FY2021 were individuals who tried crossing the border multiple times. Even with these inflated numbers, the increase in the current number of migrants coming to the border is neither unique nor unprecedented. Those allowed to present their asylum claims show up in court. America also has more agents, money, and technology deployed to secure our southern border than at any time in our history. In fact, over the last 30 years, the Border Patrol budget has increased

tenfold, and the number of agents has increased fivefold. Still, Biden's budget further increased Border Patrol funding which supports hiring additional 300 Border Patrol Agents. Recently, the Biden administration even announced construction on limited sections of the border wall.

Irrespective of these facts, Republicans will continue to attack Democrats this midterm with more ads accusing them of ignoring a "crisis" because of a belief in "open borders."

**688**  
**border crisis ads**

**142**  
**border crisis emails**

## 'THEY BRING DRUGS, THEY BRING CRIME'

Since early 2021, Republicans have been trying to turn fentanyl and the opioid crisis into a nativist attack on Democrats. Now, as the U.S. tops 100,000 overdoses per year, most connected to opioids and many connected to fentanyl, American drug policy is of critical importance. Yet, for Republicans, facts, logic, and solutions are secondary to a political narrative that can make immigrants (and Democrats) into the boogeyman in the minds of their voters. As the Washington Post's Philip Bump put it, the GOP views fentanyl as "a useful political cudgel."



Ad from Dave McCormick (Senate, Pennsylvania)

The issues around fentanyl and the opioid crisis are expansive and multi-dimensional: It is a healthcare issue, an international trade issue, a corporate accountability issue, and a criminal syndicate issue. But, the one thing it is not is an immigration issue. Unfortunately, that is exactly where a cynical GOP puts its emphasis in order to place blame on immigrants and Democrats.



**We have identified 336 ads and 106 emails across 124 campaigns that deploy dog-whistles around drugs and immigration.**

Republicans have used social media, TV appearances, and paid ads to muddle the issues of the international drug trade with issues related to migrants seeking safety at the border. Often, Republicans remove all context and mix fears around hard drugs, crime and public safety with their nativist fear-mongering about new migrants. Republicans intentionally cultivate conflation between the issues, which leaves little room for the viewer to draw a different or more accurate conclusion about what steps need to be taken to address fentanyl.

The facts on the ground are clear: fentanyl is not an immigration issue, and no matter how many times Republican candidates repeat a lie doesn't make it true.

While Republican candidates have proven they won't let the facts get in the way of their political message, here are some quick facts that expose the lie at the heart of the GOP's dog-whistle:

- Overdose deaths from fentanyl are, unfortunately, not new and dramatically rose under the Trump administration, while interdiction has increased under the Biden administration, as a Washington Post fact check [found](#): “Fentanyl seizures have increased, not fallen, under Biden. Overdose deaths jumped sharply under Trump.”
- [99%](#) of all drugs interdicted at the border are brought in through ports of entry by cars, trucks, boats, and planes – not by migrants and asylum seekers. As Aaron Reichlin-Melnick of the Immigration Policy Center points out, “[According to the DEA](#), “[T]he most common method employed [by cartels] involves smuggling illicit drugs through U.S. POEs [ports of entry] in passenger vehicles with concealed compartments or commingled with legitimate goods on tractor-trailers.” His earlier [analysis](#) of U.S. CBP reports found that of 796 pounds of fentanyl seizures captured at the border, all but one pound was captured at an official port of entry or vehicle checkpoint.

**336**

**drug-immigration ads**

**106**

**drug-immigration emails**

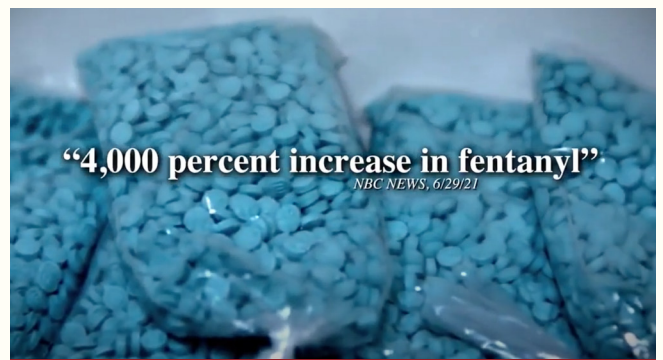
**124**  
**campaigns**

- President Biden made cracking down on drug traffickers a major component of the White House plan to deal with fentanyl and there have been significant seizures of fentanyl at ports of entry. However, a significant amount of the Republicans' narrative hinges on this logical fallacy, as numerous reports have pointed out.
- Notably, the same Republicans who spend the most time ranting about the issue voted against the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which included \$430 million to Customs and Border Protection (CBP) for the construction and modernization of land ports of entry. Again, it's through ports of entry that the cartels ship their deadly product, according to both the DEA and CBP.
- Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva (D-AZ) smartly proposes: "Instead of spending billions of dollars on building a border wall, scapegoating migrants and blustery rhetoric, we must invest in science-backed methods to address this very real public health threat. We should focus on enhanced screening methods for mail and increased resources for our overburdened ports of entries so they can target the concealment of fentanyl."
- As political historian and author of "The Drug Wars In America," Kathleen Frydl wrote in The Hill, "While it is true that the majority of fentanyl bound for the United States comes from Mexico, the organizations that traffic in it do not risk their product on desperate people facing steep odds and a dangerous crossing. Instead, fentanyl comes to the United States via ostensibly legal crossings at designated ports of entry." She recommends using trade policies with China and Mexico to curtail the supply.

Republicans' dangerous and disingenuous strategy may be clear to some, but without an effective counter-narrative, the Republican lies can be quite convincing. Our research shows the Republicans will continue to use this misleading and disingenuous attack throughout the midterms. This is a clarion call for a disruptive intervention to this line of the GOP narrative.



Ad from Greg Abbott (Governor, Texas)



Ad from NRSC & Ron Johnson (Senate, Wisconsin)

# CHAMPIONING WHITE NATIONALIST CONSPIRACIES AND ENCOURAGING POLITICAL VIOLENCE

As the primary season began and Republicans looked to differentiate themselves in races where every candidate was pushing nativist talking points and fear-mongering about a supposed “crisis” at the border, many Republicans were drawn to more extreme rhetoric. In the summer of 2021, Republicans began to more widely adopt a white nationalist conspiracy about ‘white replacement’ and a ‘migrant invasion;’ lies that had previously inspired multiple terrorists to kill dozens of Americans. Nevertheless, Republicans have increasingly employed these lies as one of the most pernicious elements of a larger nativist political narrative to rally a radicalized base, solicit fundraising contributions and subvert American democracy.



Ad from Kari Lake (Governor, Arizona)



Ad from the RGA (Governor, Georgia)



Ad from CLF (House, National )

**We have identified 546 pieces of political messaging that employ lies around ‘white replacement’ and an ‘immigrant invasion’ in the 2022 cycle**, including 334 tweets for the first six months of this year, 121 different paid political ads in this cycle, and 91 campaign emails. We know that Republican candidates are also regularly peddling these dangerous lies on cable appearances, congressional hearings, on other social media platforms, and in podcasts and radio interviews, but we have not quantified those here. The scale of what we have gathered, however, should dismiss any notion that this language is coincidental or only a problem limited to few outliers in the Republican Party.

Moving from the margins of the white nationalist fringe to the centers of power among the GOP, the lie goes: ‘Jews want to replace the political power of

whites with non-whites from the global south by coordinating an invasion of the country and undermine the democratic process with millions of illegitimate votes.'

This racist fiction is absurd, but it has inspired multiple domestic terrorists to take the lives of dozens over the last few years. Versions of this lie were chanted in the streets of [Charlottesville](#) in 2017, posted online before a man murdered 11 in [Pittsburgh](#) in 2018, shared in a racist screed before the murder of 23 in [El Paso](#) in 2019, believed by those who attacked the [Capitol](#) in 2021, and copied by the gunman who killed ten people in [Buffalo](#) in May of this year. All along, Republicans increasingly normalized the ideas espoused by these mass murderers.

Even after the horrific mass murder in Buffalo this May, where the gunman explicitly cited "replacement" and "invasion" conspiracies as the motivation for his attack, Republicans have refused to back off employing these racist lies. Instead, [leading figures](#) in the party have [doubled down](#) or [refused to condemn it](#), and in the case of [Governor Greg Abbott](#), have embraced these dangerous lies as official policy. This all indicates that there is little chance of any restraint from the GOP even as they head towards the general election.

As the Republican Party continues down this dangerous path, they are explicitly encouraging violence by inciting replacement theory. Taking them at their word, they are sending the signal that anyone perceived to be an immigrant, a visa holder, mixed-status, Black, Latino, Asian, or speaking with an accent is a possible enemy combatant. Unfortunately, we fear that some twisted well-armed young man will again heed the militaristic call to action and again take matters into his own hands and inflict racist violence. The threat is real. It has already happened and will happen again because of the GOP's normalization of these lies.

# 546

**white nationalist  
conspiracy content**

# 121

**white nationalist  
conspiracy ads**

# 91

**white nationalist  
conspiracy emails**



In the longer term, these lies lay the groundwork for destabilizing American democracy through the myth of an organized force of illegitimate votes. It fits within a broader campaign to create the pretext to deny the results of unfavorable election outcomes employing a range of voter suppression tactics under the perverse guise of protecting the democratic process the lies seek to undermine.

Read our full in-depth report on this disturbing trend [here](#).

## TRUMP AND HIS WALL

The wall remains the easiest visual signifier of a commitment to nativist politics championed by Donald Trump and thus remains ubiquitous in the ads. The unspecific and short phrase, “finish the wall,” also works well on social media and will continue to be a constant part of GOP messaging moving forward. **We have found 915 ads that feature the wall across 221 different campaigns.** This is despite the fact Trump’s wall was an [unnecessary](#), ineffective, and \$15 billion boondoggle that can be cut through a [\\$15 saw](#).

Despite leading his party to back-to-back electoral defeats in 2018 and 2020, invoking the former president also remains a popular tactic for Republican campaign ads. If Trump continues to hold such a prominent place in the ads that drive political donations and volunteers to local campaigns, those campaigns will reflect his priorities; priorities that will include adherence to the Big Lie and aggressive xenophobic and racist dog-whistling.

915

Trump’s wall ads

221  
campaigns



Ad from Save Missouri Values PAC (Senate, Missouri)



# TRACKING THE OTHER DOG-WHISTLES IN GOP ADS

The main focus of our tracking and this report is trained on the anti-immigrant narratives Republicans are producing for the midterms. However, Republicans are employing a range of other dog-whistles that are equally concerning.

In the case of Critical Race Theory and Defund the Police, Republicans have sought to mutate anti-racist concepts into racist dog-whistles and lie about Democratic Party adherence where none exists. As the practitioners of these dog-whistles continued to develop their coded language, the attacks sound more like ‘parents’ rights’ and ‘the crime crisis,’ but the racist ideas that power these dog-whistles are the same. We have identified hundreds of ads from Republican campaigns this cycle that look to strategically trigger racial anxieties with these dog-whistles. **We have found 334 ads that employ Critical Race Theory or related dog-whistles. And another 163 ads that employ Defund the Police or related dog-whistles.**

Transphobic ads are not new to Republican campaigns, but we have observed a noticeable uptick in the number of ads this year. In May, an



NBC News report found 21 candidates and political committees have so far spent at least \$4.5 million on TV ads that have run in various media markets of 16 states. These attacks use sports and the healthcare of transgender children to inflame bigotry to motivate support for their campaigns. **We have identified 76 ads that employ transphobic or other anti-LGBT+ dog-whistles.**



Republican candidates have also run a number of ads that use christian nationalist dog-whistles (Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene is explicitly running as christian nationalist.) We have also identified racist anti-Asian ads and Republican ads that employ anti-Semitic dog-whistles.

# NATIVISM IS NOT GOP SILVER BULLET

The fact that Republicans are focused on a nativist border policy as a top line of attack in their campaigns does not mean it is a silver bullet for them. Recent history raises serious questions about the efficacy of nativism outside the committed Republican base. Additionally, their narrative here is vulnerable because it is divorced from factual reality, reliant on a failed cruelty agenda, and premised on white nationalist conspiracy theories. If Democrats engage the debate, define the GOP's extremism, and assert values-based solutions, they could undermine Republicans' significant investment on this issue.

Republican strategists have been predicting that their border narrative will deliver them control of Congress since the beginning of the year. However, they made similar predictions and were proven wrong in previous cycles. While their nativism remains a base mobilization and fundraising boon for Republicans, it is a far cry from the slam dunk their consistent investment or Stephen Miller would have you to believe. Here is a quick snapshot of the evidence against the efficacy of the GOP's strategic nativism:

- **2017:** Steve Bannon claimed Virginia gubernatorial candidate Ed Gillespie's embrace of aggressive nativist dog-whistling would be key to his victory. It wasn't. He lost by 9 points. Research also found that Gillespie's xenophobic ads backfired among all groups who saw the ad, including white voters.
- **2018:** The number of immigration-related TV ads — and the amount of money spent on them — increased fivefold from 2016 to 2018. Eighty percent of those TV ads were from Republicans that portrayed immigrants as criminals or threats to public safety and national security. Led by Donald Trump, Republicans' closing message was the looming threat of a "migrant caravan" headed towards the border. However, Republican defeats in 2018 were historic.
- **2019:** Red state Republicans lost the gubernatorial mansion in Kentucky and failed to flip the seat in Louisiana after making xenophobic fear-mongering a cornerstone of their respective campaigns.

- **2020:** While the pandemic and a GOP-led effort to create a backlash to calls for police reform dominated most Republican ads, immigration was still a key component of Republican and right-wing ads. From Sept. 1 to Oct. 15, the Trump campaign spent [\\$9 million](#) deploying anti-immigrant ads on television — his second most popular issue, after ads about China. Other expenditures included a [\\$10 million-plus YouTube](#) campaign featuring Trump's "[Radical, Extreme, Left](#)" ad that connects tax increases with undocumented immigrants. Meanwhile, Biden leaned in on solutions and won. Find deeper dives into 2020 [here](#) and [here](#).
- **2021:** In the [gubernatorial race](#) in Virginia, Glenn Youngkin switched racial dog-whistles and avoided the aggressive nativism consuming the rest of the party. While strategic racism still drove his campaign, Youngkin was largely silent on immigration issues.

Regardless of its recent efficacy, Republicans are making nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment a key part of their midterm message. However, they have yet to put forward policy solutions on immigration beyond a [failed](#) cruelty and chaos approach that is [wildly unpopular](#) with mainstream Americans. Instead, they have relied on dangerous dehumanizing attacks. All of which, demands an effective response, even if immigration is not the number one issue - or even a top issue - for general election voters.