WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden had a question.

“Is it true?” Biden asked Sen. Alex Padilla, referencing the roughly 25% of U.S. students in kindergarten through high school who are Latino. Padilla said the question came as he was waiting with the president in a back room at a library in Culver City, California before an event in February.

It was exactly the kind of opening Padilla was hoping to get with the Democratic president. Biden was weighing his reelection campaign, [*executive actions on immigration*](https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-immigration-border-donald-trump-f0ca943f0f148e165bc6e8ebfd149f14) and what to do about a southern border that has been marked by [*historic numbers of illegal crossings*](https://apnews.com/article/immigration-border-crossings-mexico-biden-18ac91ef502e0c5433f74de6cc629b32) during his tenure.

Padilla wanted to make sure Biden also took into account the [*potential of the country's immigrants*](https://apnews.com/article/immigration-jobs-economy-wages-gdp-trump-biden-fbd1f2ec89e84fdfaf81d005054edad0). “Mr. President, do you know what I call them, those students?" Padilla recalled saying. “It’s the workforce of tomorrow.”

It was just one of the many times Padilla, who at 51 years old is now the [*senior senator of California*](https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-california-kamala-harris-gavin-newsom-alex-padilla-60caab4661f65771f8fa21a585de2638), has taken the opportunity — from face-to-face moments with the president to regular calls with top White House staff and sometimes outspoken criticism — to put his stamp on the Democratic Party's approach to immigration.

The son of Mexican immigrants and first Latino to represent his state in the Senate, Padilla has emerged as a persistent force at a time when Democrats are increasingly focused on border security and the country's posture toward immigrants is uncertain.

Illegal immigration is seen as a [*growing political crisis for Democrats*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-border-security-democrats-ca10e37c4f961700cdd1645e09422ac0) after authorities both at the border and in cities nationwide have struggled to handle recent surges. The party may also be losing favor with Hispanic voters amid disenchantment with Biden. But Padilla, in a series of interviews with The Associated Press, expressed a deep reserve of optimism about his party's ability to win support both from and for immigrant communities.

“Don’t be afraid, don’t be reluctant to talk about immigration. Lean into it,” Padilla said. “Because number one, it’s the morally right thing to do. Number two, it is key to the strength, the security and the future of our country.”

The senator has tried to anchor his fellow Democrats to that stance even as the ***politics*** of immigration grow increasingly toxic. Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, has said immigrants who enter the U.S. illegally are [*“poisoning the blood” of the country*](https://apnews.com/article/border-immigration-trump-biden-rhetoric-2024-election-327c08045edcc200f850d893de6a79d6) and accused Biden of allowing a “bloodbath” at the southern border. Biden, meanwhile, has [*shifted to the right*](https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-immigration-asylum-border-congress-7507034034ba49a8f170777600cad46e) at times in both the policies and language he is willing to use as illegal border crossings become a vulnerability for his reelection bid.

Such was the case when Biden, during his State of the Union address, entered into an unscripted exchange with Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican of Georgia, and referred to a Venezuelan man accused of killing a nursing student in Georgia as an *[“illegal” — a term anathema to immigration rights advocates](https://apnews.com/article/illegal-biden-backlash-laken-riley-41819b01c3942435f0f862789cd1d0f0" \l ":~:text=Politics-,Biden's reference to 'an illegal' rankles some Democrats who argue,he's still preferable to Trump&text=MIAMI (AP) — President Joe,State of the Union speech.)*.

After the speech, Padilla discussed the moment with Rep. Tony Cárdenas in the apartment they share in Washington. Cárdenas said their conversation turned to how they wanted politicians to avoid labeling migrants as “illegals” because it deprived them of dignity.

Padilla told him he would call the White House.

“He’s is the kind of person who steps in and steps up, and, you know, he’s tactical about it,” Cárdenas said.

It's a difficult role to play, especially as Democrats try to shore up what’s seen as a weakness on border security in the battleground states that will determine control of the White House and Congress.

Even in California, Republicans have been emboldened on immigration as they try to reassert statewide relevance, said Mark Meuser, a lawyer who lost elections against Padilla for the Senate in 2022 and California Secretary of State in 2018. He argued top California Democrats like Padilla “are driving hard towards the extreme edges of their party.”

Padilla has urged the president and fellow Democrats to hold firm to the position that border enforcement measures be paired with reforms for immigrants who are already in the country.

During Senate negotiations earlier this year over border policy, Padilla asserted himself as the [*leader of congressional opposition*](https://apnews.com/article/senate-border-immigration-biden-66531bcefb908d5440a52b54c543b006) from the left.

Padilla, along with four other Democratic-aligned senators, eventually [*voted against advancing the package*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-ukraine-aid-border-security-386dcc54b29a5491f8bd87b727a284f8), ensuring its failure as Republicans also rejected it.

“He is a lone voice but it is a courageous voice in the Senate,” said Vanessa Cardenas, who leads the immigration advocacy organization America's Voice.

It’s been a quick ascent for Padilla, who is just beginning his fourth year in Congress. Yet for Padilla, it's the very reason he entered ***politics*** in the first place.

When he graduated in 1994 with an engineering degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it was a dream fulfilled for his parents — his father a short order cook and his mother a house cleaner. But he was soon drawn into ***politics*** as the state’s attention turned to Proposition 187, a 1994 ballot measure that was approved to deny education, health care and other non-emergency services to immigrants who entered the country illegally.

It was branded by supporters as the Save Our State Initiative. Padilla still remembers the ads for the campaign.

“Trying to try to blame a downward economy on the hardest working people that I know was offensive and an outrage,” he said.

Now he sees parallels between California in the 1990s, which approved the ballot measure but then had it invalidated in federal court, and the wider country today: changing demographics, economic uncertainty and political opportunists “scapegoating” immigrants.

Yet it also spurred the state’s Latinos to get involved politically. To Padilla, there's no coincidence that California, the state with the most immigrants, now boasts the nation's largest economy and is a stronghold for Democrats.

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This story was first published on April 27, 2024. It was updated April 30, 2024, to correct Padilla’s age, which is 51, not 52.